

STORIES OF THE KINGS

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(June 2015)

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(1)

We Want a King

A long train of bearded men walked quickly up a hill in Ephraim and through the town of Ramah. Watching their unhappy faces from the porch of his house stood a dignified looking man with graying hair, who knew he was the one they had come to see.

“Samuel,” began one of the Hebrew elders, nervously clearing his throat, “we have come to discuss with you a subject of great – very great – importance that concerns us all. That is, the need for someone to replace you in the future.” The other elders paid close attention, waiting to hear what their God-appointed leader would say.

But the one who had served God his whole life as a Nazarite (you may read about the nazarites in Numbers 6:2) said *nothing*. He would wait for the elders to finish. The men began to shift restlessly as an uncomfortable silence filled the air. Then someone from the middle of the crowd spoke with a whiny, embarrassed voice as he wrung his hands together, “Now it’s not that we don’t appreciate you, Samuel. We know you have been God’s faithful priest and leader for these many years.” Then he said more boldly, “But you are old now! It is time for a new leader to govern us.”

Old? thought Samuel, looking about at the crowd with surprise and disbelief on his face. *They call me old? I am barely past middle age and still strong and in good health.*

“Those sons of yours you made judges down south in Beer-sheba won’t do either,” said a third man. “We’ve heard the reports: Joel and Abijah are dishonest, unfair, and they don’t follow in your ways. They were paid off with money from guilty men and let them go free!”

“That’s right,” said another. “The men they judged should have been punished, but instead your sons said they had done no wrong! They said they were innocent!”

Nodding his head slowly, Samuel replied, “I am aware of the stories.

“They’re not just stories!” shouted yet another man. “We’ve *all* heard they took bribe money!”

Another elder, forcing himself to sound calm, said, “Every one of the nations around has a king. That’s what we want, a king. Then dishonest judges like your sons won’t be a problem anymore.” Why can’t we have a king?” he demanded.

At this point one of the older men raised his hand to quiet the elders. “Men brothers,” he said, “I came here today because I, like you, am an elder and leader in Israel. We know that in the Law of Moses God said He would make a kingdom of His people one day. But if we rush ahead of God, we will be stepping right out of His will. Can we be sure *now* is the time He wants to give us a king?”

A fist shot up in the air as an angry voice exclaimed, “The time to have a king is long past due! The time has come to have a king!”

“That’s right!” insisted another. “Our enemies’ threats get worse every day. The Philistines and the Ammonites may soon be upon us. What will we do then? Who will save us? We need someone wise and strong, someone who can lead us into war and fight our battles. Besides, it’s been more than four hundred years since Moses wrote those words. Four hundred years! Isn’t that long enough to wait?”

“Brothers,” began the older man again, “we must not forget who we are! Out of all the people on the earth, Jehovah made a covenant with our forefathers that He would be our God and that we would be His special people. If we have such a sure promise from Jehovah Himself, shouldn’t we trust Him?”

“Maybe He’s already decided to give us a king!” exclaimed one of the younger men. “Who knows? With the Philistines and Ammonites breathing down our necks, now sure seems like a good time to me! That’s what I want!”

“The Lord knows what is best for us,” replied the older man. “He knows the perfect time and perfect way to make it happen. If we study His Word and pray, and wait for Him to speak through His prophet, He will speak to us. The real matter here is not what we want or what we

think is best,” replied the older man. “The question we must ask ourselves is this: what does *Jehovah* want? What does *Jehovah* think is best? I Samuel 8:1-5

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(2)

Warn Them

Samuel gazed slowly around at the elders, looking from one side of the crowd to the other. "I will bring your request to Jehovah," he said with fatherly concern. "After I have spoken to Him, I will tell you His decision." Then the great prophet of Israel, God's leader on earth, went into his house and shut the door to pray. This had always been his way from the time he was a little boy. His mother and father had taught him that no matter how big or small a matter was, he could talk to the Lord about it. Jehovah would make things clear.

"Oh Lord," he prayed, "The elders say I am old and that my sons do not follow in my ways. They want a king to rule over them like the nations around us. What shall I tell them?"

Jehovah could hear the sorrow and disappointment in the man of God's voice. The elders were saying Samuel was too old to lead the children of Israel anymore, and that his sons were wicked and couldn't be trusted to be judges over them. But the Lord, who sees every person's heart and knows every person's thoughts, knew that Samuel, whose heart and life were only for Jehovah and for His people, was more concerned for God's will to be done than for his own reputation to be defended. "Listen to the people in all they say to you," God told His dear, faithful servant. "But it is not you they have rejected, Samuel; they have rejected Me from being King over them. Listen to them, but warn them what it will be like if a king rules over them."

Returning to his porch, Samuel told the men, "If you have a king as your ruler, you must know that this will be his practice: he will take your sons and force them to march in his army, work in his fields, and harvest his grain. He will take your daughters and force them to be his cooks, bakers, and perfumed-ointment makers. The best of your own fields, vineyards, olive yards, workers, cattle, and donkeys he will take from *you* and keep for *himself*. Not only that, you will have to give him a tenth of what you own, and you yourself will have to serve him. Wouldn't it be better to wait until Jehovah chooses the *right* time for a king, instead of rushing

ahead and going your own way? He may give in to your demand, even though it is not what He wants for you at this time. But if He does, there will be consequences for your stubbornness.”

No one spoke a word. They looked at each other, wondering what to do next. Then one of the older, wiser elders, though he was afraid to go against the others, knew he couldn't stand there and do nothing to help the men realize they were making such a bad decision. Loudly, he declared, “Maybe the man of God is right. Maybe we should listen to him!”

From the back of the crowd an angry voice shouted back, “It's not going to be like that! A king will be *good* for Israel. A king is what we need!”

“Yeah!” hollered the mob. “A king is what we need!”

Samuel could see the men would not believe his words. But he would finish his warning anyway. “When all of this comes about,” he said, “you will cry out to God, but Jehovah will not answer you.”

“That doesn't scare us!” exclaimed the men. “We *will* have a king over us. We too will be like all the nations! Our king will judge us fairly. He will lead us in war and fight our battles. We want a king!”

After all the shouting had quieted down and Samuel had heard everything the people had to say, he told them, “I will bring your request to Jehovah.”

When he had repeated their words in the ears of the Lord, Jehovah replied, “Then listen to their voice and appoint them a king.”

“Jehovah has heard your request,” Samuel told the elders. “He has instructed me to appoint you a king. But as Moses' law said clearly, only Jehovah has the right to choose this king. Since He has not yet told me who that person will be, you will have to be patient and wait. We will *all* have to wait. Until that time, each of you, go back to your own city.”

With his heart full of grief, the man of God turned to go back into his house. He was filled with disappointment that God's own people, the ones He Himself had chosen to be His special people and had rescued from the slave house in Egypt, no longer trusted Him to be their

king. But as Samuel stepped through the door and shut the latch behind him, he was at peace. *Lord, he prayed, this matter is in Your hands. I know that in the end, You will find a way to make even the elders' rebellion accomplish Your purpose.*

I Samuel 8:6-22 3:17-18

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(3)

Three Lost Donkeys

"I'm very sorry to have to inform you, sir, some of the donkeys have disappeared. One of the other workers and I have searched all over the hill but can't find them anywhere. What would you like to be done?"

Kish, a wealthy farmer from the tribe of Benjamin, who lived in the city of Gibeah, had just received this unhappy report from one of his workers. "How many are missing?" he asked.

"Three of them, I regret to say," replied the worker. "Hmmm," said Kish. "In that case, please let Saul know I'd like to speak with him."

Kish's eldest son was quickly brought to him. "I have a job for you, Saul," Kish said. "Three of our donkeys have wandered off and I would like you to go search for them. Hopefully it won't take too long to find them and bring them back."

Saul's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Surely you don't mean for *me* to go, father?" he asked, pointing to his chest in disbelief. "Aren't there more important things that I should be doing than looking for a few lost donkeys?"

"Nevertheless you are the one I want to go," replied Kish. "You're big and strong, and a tough fighter like me. No one would dare try to attack you on the road. Take one of the workers with you. How about the young man that was just in here? He's really sharp. He's a good worker and he never stops until his job is done. He knows these parts too. He might be very helpful."

Saul and the worker collected the things they would need for the journey, packed their bags, and set out on their mission to find the missing donkeys. As they traveled, the people they met seemed to all be asking the same question: "Who was Jehovah going to choose to be the first king of Israel?"

Up and down the low mountains they went until they had passed through the hill country of Ephraim; but the donkeys were not found. Then they went through the land of

Shalishah, and the land of Shaalim, and the land of Benjamin, but *still* the donkeys were not found. Three days later, when they had come to the land of Zuph, Saul said, "We've been searching a lot longer than it was supposed to take. We better go home. Otherwise my father will stop worrying about the donkeys and will start worrying about us instead."

"Let's not give up yet," said the worker, determined to succeed at their mission. "There is a *man of God* who lives in the city near here."

"I've heard of the man of God," Saul replied. "I don't know much about him, though. I don't think I ever met him. Or if I did, I was too young to remember."

"He is a man held in honor," said the worker eagerly. "Whatever he says happens without fail."

"Really?" asked Saul. "That doesn't sound possible."

"It is true!" said the worker. "Let's go there. Perhaps he can show us the way we should go."

"But if we go", said Saul, "we should somehow show our appreciation for his help. We could give him a gift of some sort, but all I can think of is the bread we brought in our sacks, and it is gone. Do we have anything else? "

Just then the worker pulled a shiny silver coin from his pocket and held it in the air. "Here in my hand is a quarter shekel of silver," he replied. "Even though I had to work hard to earn it, I would feel happy to give it to the man of God! I'm sure that even though he trusts in God to take care of all of his needs, he can use it somehow." Then he smiled and added, "I'm sure he will be able to tell us the way we should go."

"Well said!" replied Saul. "Who knows? Maybe the man of God *will* be able to help us. We're not very far from his home, anyway. It shouldn't take much time to find out what he has to say."

The two men trudged on as the road wound its way up the hill. Soon the towering stone wall that surrounded the city loomed up in front of them and they pressed on, hoping to find the man of God soon.

I Samuel 9:1-10

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(4)

The Seer

Saul and his worker wound their way up the hill to the city of Ramah, and had almost reached its gates when the sun's morning rays were still casting their shadows on the city wall. As they continued up the road, they saw several young women come toward them with clay pots balanced on their shoulders, on their way to draw water from the city well.

"Excuse me, please," said Saul, "is the seer here?" That's what people called a prophet in those days, a "seer," because sometimes he could see things that others couldn't. That is, God would tell him things that were going to happen or things that had already happened that other people didn't know about yet.

"Yes, he is," they answered. "He has come here because the people have a sacrifice at the high place today. If you hurry you will find him, before he goes up to the high place to eat. The people he invited to the feast will not eat until he comes because he is the one who blesses the sacrifice. Right after that, they will all eat together."

"Thank you," replied Saul. "You have been most helpful."

Now it so happened that the very day before, Jehovah had said to Samuel, "About this time tomorrow I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him ruler over My people Israel; and he will rescue My people from the enemy Philistines, for I have looked upon My people because I have heard their cry."

Tomorrow? thought Samuel. *That's only a day away. I don't have much time, I'd better get busy.* Immediately he set himself to the task of organizing a banquet to honor the man God had selected to be the first king of Israel. There were many tasks that needed to get done right away—selecting an animal for the sacrifice, reserving a dining hall, and inviting the guests. There was also the food to be purchased, the portion of meat the cook must be told to set aside, and the seating to arrange. The rest of the day, praying as he went, Samuel diligently took care of all the preparations so the feast would be ready at just the right time.

The next morning the seer, with staff in hand, walked down the main street of Ramah toward the high place, as he carefully studied the faces of the people in the market place. Loud voices haggled over items for sale as buyers tried to pay less and get a good bargain, and sellers tried to charge more and make a good profit. Coins could be heard clanking in their purses as merchants collected money for their wares. *It was just about this time yesterday*, thought the seer, *that Jehovah told me I would see the man from Benjamin whom I am supposed to anoint as king. Oh Lord, he prayed, You will have to speak to me very clearly, otherwise with all these people coming and going I might miss the chosen man altogether.*

Then someone walking forward in his direction caught his attention. The man's appearance made him stand out from everyone else in the crowd. *Could that be him?* thought Samuel. *Lord, is this the one?*

It was the man's height that the seer noticed first. *That man is really big!* he thought. *From the shoulders up he's a head taller than any Israelite I've ever seen! And he looks strong too. He would surely make a good warrior. He's from the tribe of Benjamin, after all. A lot of good fighters come from that tribe. Not only that, he is very handsome—probably the most handsome man in all of Israel. Tall, strong, handsome, and maybe a good fighter. If he were king, wouldn't the people be impressed with him!*

When the seer and the stranger had come closer toward each other, Jehovah said to Samuel, "Here is the man of whom I spoke to you. This man shall rule over My people."

I need to get his attention and stop him, thought Samuel, wondering what he should do next. To his surprise, the man walked right up to him and, leaning down, looked him in the eyes and said, "Tell me, please, where is the seer's house?"

Samuel chuckled to himself. How easily God had solved the problem! "I am the seer," he replied kindly. "Go up with me to the high place for you shall eat with me today. And tomorrow, after you have stayed the night at my home, I will send you on your way. But before you go I will tell you all that is in your heart."

A puzzled look crossed Saul's face. *Whatever was the seer talking about? Why would he want me to go with him to the high place, Saul thought, or stay at his home? And how could he possibly know what is in my heart?*

I Samuel 9:1-19

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(5)

The Guest of Honor

Samuel could see the questioning look in Saul's eyes. He would need to convince the man from Benjamin that he was a real seer who could see things. But how could he do it? *I know*, Samuel decided, *I will tell him what the Lord showed me about his missing donkeys.*

He smiled at Saul and said confidently, "And as for your donkeys that have been lost these three days, don't be concerned about them; for they have been found." He held up three fingers and raised his eyebrows to show he knew it was three donkeys, not two or four that were missing.

Saul turned to his worker and whispered, "How could *he* know about the donkeys? Maybe you're right; maybe this seer really does see things other people don't." The young man nodded his head silently and smiled.

Slowly, deliberately, emphasizing his words, Samuel said, "And for whom is the desire of Israel? Is it not for you, and all your father's family?"

Saul stared with shock at what the seer was saying. *The entire nation is desiring a king to be named for Israel*, he thought. *We've been hearing about it all through our journey. But if this is what the seer is talking about, he couldn't possibly mean me. Could he?*

"Sir," explained Saul, "Perhaps I am misunderstanding you. And if I am not, I think you must be mistaken. I am from the tribe of Benjamin, which is one of the smallest and therefore least important of all the tribes of Israel. And my family is the *least* of all the families of Benjamin. Why then are you speaking this way to me?"

Samuel ignored the question and said cheerfully, "The high place is not far from here and it's time to go to the feast. We'd better hurry."

When the three came through the door of the room Samuel had prepared for the feast, Saul and his worker noticed a group of men – it looked to be about thirty standing about the

room watching them as they came in. The table, filled with colorful foods, displayed delicious looking breads and juicy figs and pomegranates. Cheeses and nuts lay in platters, with pitchers of water at either end.

“Hello, Samuel,” said one of the guests who, along with the others, had been particularly chosen by the seer to come to the feast. He waited for the seer to introduce the two strangers, but Samuel just smiled and nodded his head.

“Have you seen those men before?” whispered one of the men.

“Not I,” replied a man close by. “The big one is at least a head taller than any of the rest of us!”

Samuel pretended not to notice. Motioning with his hand, he said to Saul, “You will sit here,” pointing to what was obviously the most important place at the table.

With a questioning look in his eyes, Saul’s worker whispered, “There’s something really strange going on here. The seer has put you in the most honored place of all!”

Everyone remained standing, waiting for the sacrifice to be blessed. “Oh Lord,” Samuel began, “We thank You that we can be here to celebrate this special feast with You and with one another. How blessed we are to be Your people and have *You* as our God. How wonderful it is to be called by Your own name! Bless this food for Your purpose, Lord. May our lives be only for You, and may all our service be according to Your will.”

A chorus of voices filled the room as all present proclaimed, “Amen! Amen!”

After the guests had sat down at the table, expecting the seer to join them, to their surprise he instead walked over to where the cook was standing near the kitchen and said loudly, “Bring the special portion that I gave you. You know, the one I told you to set aside.”

“Oh yes,” replied the cook. “I’ve got it right here.” Bustling over to the table, he brought back a platter with a thick, juicy piece of meat on it.

“That’s the best part of the sacrifice,” whispered one of the guests to the man next to him. “I wonder who it’s for.”

“Maybe Samuel has kept it for himself,” said the other.

“He certainly *deserves* to have the best part,” said the first. “He is the man God chose to be our leader, after all.”

“But I’ve *never* seen him take the best for himself at a feast ever,” replied the second. “It’s just not his way to put himself above others.”

As they watched, Samuel carried the platter over to the tall stranger sitting in the place of honor. “This is the part which I had the cook save special,” he told Saul, smiling. “Take it as your part of the feast because it has been kept for you till just the right time, when you had come and the guests were present with us.”

At these words Saul was totally puzzled. *How could the seer know I was coming?* he wondered. *And why would he save the best portion for me?*

So that day Saul the son of Kish, still puzzling over many unanswered questions, ate with Samuel the seer, the man of God.

I Samuel 9:20-24

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(6)

A Night at the Seer's House

"Come this way," the seer said to Saul and his worker, stepping through the door of his little stone house. He led them up the stairs and then went through another door, which opened to the flat roof where a light breeze was cooling the air. "Saul, your sleeping mat is here," he explained, pointing to a pad with bedding laid out on it. Then he looked at the worker and smiled apologetically. "I am glad to have you here too, young man," he said. "I am sorry I didn't get your bed made up too. I had expected only one of you to be here today. But I have everything downstairs and I will be back in a moment."

"Thank you for your kindness, sir," replied the worker. "It is an honor to be here in your home."

"You are most welcome," Samuel replied warmly. "The honor is mine, I assure you. What could be better than to share a meal and conversation with a few friends?" Hurrying down the narrow steps, he was back soon with another mat and more bedding. "I'll put yours there on the far wall so you can each stretch out and have your own space," he told the worker. Then he leaned toward Saul and said in a quiet voice so the worker wouldn't hear, "I have some things I need to speak to you about."

Saul's eyes grew big. This whole day has been so strange, he thought. What could the man of God want to talk to me about? Surely it's not – surely it couldn't be – no, there's no way he meant that I should king. I can't imagine it. I don't know if I could do it!

Samuel tossed a pillow to the ground near Saul and made himself comfortable. "I know things have been a bit confusing for you today," he told Saul. "Let me try to shed some light on them. Perhaps I should start at the beginning. Before I was born, my mother made a vow to Jehovah and dedicated me to God for my whole life through the Nazarite vow. I am certainly not perfect, but my one goal in life has been to love Him, follow Him, and care for His people. God's people are His treasure. They are His very own inheritance. Not only is that is true, but Jehovah

is our very own inheritance too. He inherits us, and we inherit Him. Isn't that amazing! Our Jehovah is too wonderful! He brought you here today because He has chosen you for a special purpose."

Saul's ears perked up. *Jehovah had a special purpose for him?* he thought. Now he was really curious. He could hardly wait to find out what the seer would say next.

"But right now is not the best time," Samuel added. "Tomorrow, before we part company, I will tell you everything Jehovah said." Then he stood and pulled his pillow a little closer to the wall so he could lean against it. "Jehovah will soon provide a man to represent Him as king over His people. After this king is anointed, I will not lead the children of Israel in the same way I have these many years. Instead my work will be more behind the scenes, so to speak, encouraging and advising where there is need."

"I see," replied Saul. "That will be quite a big change for you, I think, and an even bigger change for Israel."

"Indeed it will be a big change for everyone," Samuel said, nodding his head.

As the two men talked, the sky darkened and glittering white specks began to glisten in the darkness. Soon they filled the blackness from one end to the other with their sparkling light. "The stars are really beautiful tonight," Saul remarked. "There's nothing like sleeping on a roof to help you appreciate them."

"Yes," agreed Samuel. "All those stars are like the sons of Jacob – too many to be counted. But it's getting late and you have a ways to go tomorrow. You had better get some sleep. I'll wake you in the morning."

Several hours later Saul was still awake, staring at the sky as the strange things of the day swirled round and round in his mind. *What was it exactly the seer said to me this morning?* he asked himself. He thought hard, going over everything that had happened one more time. Then the tiredness in his body began to crowd out the questions in his mind, and as the cool breeze gently blew over him, he fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning, after a simple meal around the table, the prophet and the two strangers began walking down the street together, the seer with his long, priestly robe, the tall man wearing a rather expensive tunic, and a third man dressed in the simple clothing of a field worker. When they came to the marketplace, the merchants setting up their wares began to notice them. "I wonder who those men with the seer are," said one merchant as he set out his bottles of olives and olive oil. "I've never seen them before."

"Neither have I," said another merchant, laying out his farming tools. "That man next to the seer is really tall."

"He's taller than any Israelite I've ever seen!" exclaimed a woman who was stacking crates of chickens, one on top of another.

"He's big too," said a merchant as he set out baskets of dried figs, olives, and honey on his stand. "He looks really strong. I wouldn't want to mess with him."

"He is so handsome, Mother!" whispered an older girl who was helping set out thick circles of cheese.

Suddenly several people stared at each other at once as if they had just made a great discovery. "Wouldn't someone like that man make a perfect king!" they exclaimed!

I Samuel 9:25-27

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(7)

Captain Over Jehovah's Inheritance

"Tell your young man to go ahead of us," Samuel whispered in Saul's ear, when they had come to the edge of the city.

Saul turned to his worker. "You go on ahead," he said. "The seer needs to speak with me about something. I'll catch up with you in a minute."

"Okay," the young man replied, quickening his steps to put some distance between them.

"Stay here for a bit," Samuel said, stopping in the road, "so I can make known to you the message from God."

Saul's heart began to thump in his chest and he looked at the ground nervously, wondering what the seer was going to say next. To his shock, when he looked up, the seer had pulled a small bottle of holy oil from inside his coat and was pouring it out over Saul's head! This meant the seer was anointing him to be king of Israel! Samuel smiled and kissed him kindly on the cheek. "Is it not because Jehovah has anointed you to be captain over His inheritance?" he said.

Am I really to be king over God's people? Saul wondered. But how could such a thing be possible? Perhaps the seer got the message wrong. He must be confused. I doubt this is a word from Jehovah, he decided.

Samuel could see that the newly anointed king would have to be convinced that his words could be trusted. So he did something only a seer, a true man of God, could do — he told Saul what was going to take place on his journey back home.

"When you leave here today," he began, "several things will happen on your way home. When you come to Rachel's tomb, two men will be there and they will say to you, 'The donkeys

that you went to look for have been found. Now your father has stopped worrying about the donkeys and he's anxious about you. He is asking, 'What will I do about my son?'"

"Then, when you come to the big oak tree on the plain of Tabor, three men will be going up to God to Bethel. They will greet you and give you two loaves of bread, which you are to receive from them."

"After that you will come to the hill of God, where the Philistines have their fortress. As you get to the town there you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the high place playing the harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre; and they will be prophesying with singing and praise to God. And the Spirit of Jehovah will rush upon you, and you will prophesy too and be turned into another man. When these signs happen, do what seems best to you as the situation calls for it, for the Almighty God is with you."

To Saul's astonishment, as he and his worker traveled on his way, everything happened *exactly* as the seer had said. But the last part of the prophecy of the man of God was the most amazing of all. Near the end of the journey, as they came upon a group of people who were speaking and singing about God with boldness and joy, the Spirit of Jehovah suddenly rushed on Saul and he began to do something he had never done before in his life: he began to prophesy too, praising God and telling everyone around how great and how good God is! Some of Saul's neighbors, passing by, could hardly believe what they were hearing. Not once had they ever heard him speak in such a living way about God before. "What is this that has happened to the son of Kish?" they exclaimed. "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

I Samuel 9:27; 10:1-12

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(8)

The Attack of Jabesh-Gilead

Life did not change much for Saul the son of Kish, the first king of Israel. He still lived in Benjamin, the territory of his family's tribe. He still stayed in his father's house in the city of Gibeah, and he still worked the family farm. But when men came from the city of Jabesh-Gilead with a desperate request for the new king, everything changed.

It was near the end of a long day and Saul was bringing in the oxen from the field when he noticed a crowd of people standing near his house. They seemed very upset. Their eyes were red and tears were streaming down their cheeks. "What is wrong with the people that they are crying so?" he said in concern.

"Sir," said a stranger, "My companion and I have come from across the Jordan River. "Our elders have sent us to beg you to come help our people."

"What is it that has happened?" he asked.

"Our city, Jabesh-Gilead, is under attack from the enemy!" exclaimed the messenger. "The Ammonite army and their wicked king have surrounded us and are threatening to kill us all!"

"He's right," said the second messenger. "Our leaders had hoped we might be able to make peace with them, so they sent a request to their king, Nahash, and said, 'Make a treaty with us and we will be your slaves.'"

"And how did King Nahash respond?" asked Saul.

"He refuses to believe our people would honor the treaty," said the first. "He said, 'On this condition I will make a treaty with you, that all your right eyes be put out first. Then all Israel will be put to shame because of you. And if you try to rebel by shooting your arrows at us or slinging your stones at us, you won't be able to see straight to do so. That is the only way we will make a treaty with you.'"

“Sir,” said the second messenger, “We have been safe till now simply because our city is locked up tight and the Ammonites can’t get in. But when our food and water runs out, the gates and the city wall will no longer save us. We only have seven days before we must give King Nahash our answer.”

As Saul listened to the men speak, suddenly the Spirit of God rushed on him with power and he knew what he must do: he must find a way to rescue the people of Jabesh-Gilead quick!

Runners were sent throughout the land of Israel. “If any man does not come to Bezek to join Saul and Samuel,” they said, “he will be severely punished!”

Leaving their farms, businesses, jobs, and homes, the Hebrews came from everywhere, bringing with them their slings and axes, bows and arrows, farming hoes, and whatever else they could find for weapons. When everyone was finally called together, 330,000 men were counted ready to fight as Saul’s soldiers.

“Return to your elders,” Saul said to the men from Jabesh-Gilead. “Tell them that tomorrow, by the time the sun is hot, you will be rescued from the Ammonites.”

Through the night the men tramped, separated into three companies according to their king’s command. Over the hills, through the valleys, on they went until they had crossed the Jordan River. When they had gone a ways farther, Saul said to one of his newly appointed officers, “How far have we come since we crossed the River?”

“I believe we are not far from the city,” the officer replied. “We should be near Jabesh-Gilead soon.”

The darkness of the long night was about to give way to the first rays of morning when they reached the dry, mountainous area near the outskirts of Jabesh-Gilead. In secret silence the men waited for their captain’s instructions as they hid themselves behind bushes to keep from being seen by the enemy.

Saul studied the camp of the Ammonites. All was quiet. “The Ammonites are still sleeping,” he told his officers. “Prepare your men for battle.”

When everyone was ready, Saul gave the order. “For Jehovah and for Israel!” he cried courageously. “Fight for our brothers! Charge!”

A mass of Hebrew men, racing forward just as the day broke, shouted as they flew into the enemy camp. The surprised Ammonite soldiers began racing from their tents in panic as they threw on their clothes, fastened their sandals, and tried to figure out what was going on. With fierce determination the Hebrews attacked the enemy and with gritted teeth began driving them away from the city. The fighting continued all morning, but by the time the sun was hot overhead, the Ammonite army had completely fallen apart and was so scattered that not even two of them were together, and those remaining were running for their lives back to their own territory.

“We are saved!” cried the people of Jabesh-Gilead. “Praise Jehovah for King Saul!”

“Today Jehovah has rescued Israel!” exclaimed Saul.

And the people shouted, “Praise to Jehovah! Long live the king!”

I Samuel 11:1-11

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(9)

Please, Come Right Away!

The Israelite scouts stood before their king, waiting to give their report on their spying mission to the Philistine camp. Saul looked at them with uneasiness. The fearful look in their eyes was not encouraging. “The Philistines have stationed themselves at Michmash, east of Beth-aven,” one of the men said, his voice trembling. “They are preparing themselves for battle!” he said. The other Hebrew men crowded around them, waiting to hear the details.

“Their men are professional soldiers,” said another scout. “They are highly trained in warfare. Not only that, they have thirty thousand chariots!”

“And six thousand horsemen!” exclaimed the first.

“Tell me about their numbers,” the king replied in a matter-of-fact tone, trying to keep his men from getting too frightened by the bad report. “How many soldiers are there?”

“We saw a multitude of soldiers so great that they looked like sand on the seashore!” cried a third scout.” A gasp of alarm went up through the crowd. “They will be here soon!” he shouted.

Saul tried to hide the terror rising up inside him. The report was worse than he had expected. The eyes of the Hebrew men grew wide with fear as their faces turned pale and their knees began knocking together. “How can so few of us fight against so many of them?” exclaimed one of the men. “It is impossible!”

“We are not trained warriors like they are,” said another man. “And our weapons are nothing compared to theirs. The Philistines have locked up all the iron supplies in the hills for years. Except for the king and his son, we don’t even have any swords or spears with which to fight!”

“Not even Jehovah can save us!” another cried out.

Saul frowned. Straightening up his shoulders as he tried to think of something to say to help his men be brave, he raised his arm in the air and shouted confidently, "Take heart, my brothers. Remember the story of Gideon: with only three hundred men he defeated the entire Midianite army. If God could help them *then*, He can help us *now*. Have faith in God!"

But Saul's words somehow did not seem real. The men knew that his love for God had never been very deep, and his own interests had always seemed more important to him than God's. He had hoped to inspire the men with hope, but his words did not impress anyone, so the Hebrews did not believe their king.

I must get a message to the seer, thought Saul. Maybe he can help the men take courage. Besides, he needs to be here anyway. The Philistines may attack soon, and if he has not come to offer the sacrifice to obtain God's favor, what will we do then? We will be finished!

Going to his tent, the king sat down at his table and began writing an urgent letter to the man of God. "Samuel," he said, "The Philistines have stationed their troops at Michmash and are preparing themselves to attack us. We do not know how soon they plan to attack, but you must come and offer the sacrifice to Jehovah first. Please come right away!"

The king folded the document carefully so no one could read what he had written. Then, after softening the block of wax that lay on his table, he tore off a small piece and pressed it against the letter with his seal, gluing it shut.

"Take this to the seer," he commanded his officer. "Be quick about it and do not let anything distract you. Come immediately with his answer."

"Yes, sir," the man replied.

After the officer had returned with Samuel's reply, he held the letter out to the king, intending to hand it to him. But instead of taking it, Saul just looked at it and said, "This letter is very important. It will determine what we will do next." Turning and walking toward his tent, he called back over his shoulder, "Bring it with you. I want it read to me in private."

I Samuel 13:1-5

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(10)

Wait Till the Appointed Time

Saul's officer held the letter from the seer close to the light of the oil lamp that sat on his simple table, as the king nervously paced back and forth in his tent, waiting to hear the message that had come from the man of God.

"Saul," the letter began, "I have received your letter. The situation does indeed sound very serious. I am unable to come just now, but in seven days I will be there and I will offer up the burnt offering and the peace offerings and pray for Jehovah's blessing. Until then, do not do anything. Wait till the appointed time."

One day passed. Then a second day passed. When a third had gone by, Saul began to notice something very disturbing. He called his chief officer to his tent. "My army seems to be shrinking!" he exclaimed. "Where are all the men who were here two days ago?"

"The men are terrified of the enemy, sir," replied the officer. "Many of them have run off."

"Run off?" Saul groaned, his voice rising. "Where are they running to?"

"In caves and thickets they hide themselves," the officer replied; "among rocks and in cellars and in pits. Wherever they can find a place, they conceal themselves from the enemy's view. Some have fled altogether and have even crossed the Jordan River into the land of Gad and Gilead."

The fourth and fifth days passed, then the sixth, and finally the seventh day arrived. *At last!* thought Saul. *The seer will be here any moment. I will wait for him, just as he said I must do.* But the morning went by and Samuel did not come. The afternoon passed by and Samuel still did not come. Saul went to his tent and began pacing again, back and forth, back and forth, anxiously trying to calm himself. When the evening came he stood in the road and looked hard

in the direction the seer was supposed to come. *Perhaps he is only a short distance away*, Saul told himself. *Perhaps he is just around the bend in the road.*

But Samuel was not down the road. When the king returned to his tent, he motioned to his officer to follow him. Throwing himself down into a chair, he shouted, “The seer should be here by now! He’s not usually late. Of all times, why does he have to be late *now*?! He *promised* me he would be here at the appointed time. It is the seventh day and he has not arrived yet!”

“No, sir,” replied the officer.

“This whole thing is very troublesome,” he cried. “My army is melting away before my eyes and the seer is not here yet! I may be the captain Jehovah chose to lead the people into battle, but if the seer doesn’t show up soon my army will consist of no more than one soldier—myself! And maybe my son, the prince, if he doesn’t take off with the rest of the men. Samuel has left me no choice. I will have to do the job myself. Bring the burnt offering and the peace offerings to me.”

I Samuel 13:1-9

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(11)

Saul Disobeys God and Offers the Sacrifice

The officer stood in front of his leader. "King Saul, please do not do this," he pleaded.

"But what if the Philistines decide to attack us?" demanded Saul. "Samuel did not show up! If the offering is not made before we have to fight, how can we possibly be saved?"

"The day is not over yet," replied the officer. "The seer has promised he will be here. He clearly told you to wait till the appointed time."

"The seer is late and I cannot wait any longer," snarled the king. "My army is getting smaller by the hour! Don't you see that there is no other solution? I will offer the sacrifice myself."

The animal that was being kept for the sacrifice was brought to Saul. He gave it its final checking over. Was it a young male? Yes. In good health? Yes. No cuts, bruises, or any other problem? None. Then suddenly the little voice of his conscience spoke from deep inside him, catching him off-guard. *Don't do it!* said his conscience. *Wait for the seer!*

Saul stopped, pausing to think what he should do. But then a different thought came to him. *Will it really be all that bad if you offer the sacrifice instead of Samuel?* it asked. After all, *you are the king. Shouldn't you have some special rights and do what you want?*

Then another thought came to him: *The seer is not here, and if more of the men leave, the Philistines may attack and win! You don't want to be defeated, do you?*

Don't listen to that! his conscience warned. *Jehovah rules over everything. Trust in Him, not your fears.*

On and on the battle of two different kinds of thoughts raged in Saul's mind. Then finally he made his decision. As the Hebrew men looked on, the king rejected the feeling in his conscience and offered up the sacrifice for the burnt offering himself.

The smoke had just begun to clear when a soldier came running toward Saul and exclaimed, "The seer is around the bend in the road. He's almost here!"

Saul turned to look and there, to his dismay, came the man of God, walking up the road. Nervously the king hurried out to greet him.

"What have you done?" asked Samuel sadly, as he watched the smoke rising up into the sky.

"I waited as long as I could," Saul said in a whiney voice as he threw his hands in the air. "But when I saw that the people were scattering from me and that you had not come at the appointed time, and that the Philistines were assembled at Michmash to fight against us, I said, 'The Philistines are going to attack me at Gilgal and I have not yet asked Jehovah for his favor.' So I decided I could wait no longer and I forced myself to offer up the burnt offering."

But the seer looked at him in disappointment and said, "You have acted foolishly. You have not kept the commandment which Jehovah your God commanded you to do. He would have established your kingdom over Israel forever; but because you disobeyed His words, your kingdom will not continue. Jehovah has searched for a man whose heart matches His own heart, and He has appointed him to be the ruler over His people, for you have not done what He commanded you."

And then, just as suddenly as he had come, the man of God was gone. "Call all the soldiers together and make a count!" the king demanded. "I must know how many men are still with me." After a short time the officer returned to the king to give his report.

"That count didn't take nearly as long it should have," Saul said in surprise. "Are you sure you counted them all?"

"Yes, sir, every one of them," said the officer.

"How many are there?" Saul asked.

"Six hundred," came the reply.

“Six hundred?!” screamed the king. “Six hundred men to fight against so many Philistines! We will have to get out of here and retreat to a safer location.” So he moved his troops to Gibeah of Benjamin and set up his command post under a pomegranate tree in Migron. There he waited, fearing every minute that the enemy would attack. But though he watched and wrung his hands with worry day after day, the Philistines did not attack as he had supposed they would. Instead they stayed camped at Michmash. And Saul remained at Gibeah.

I Samuel 13:8-16

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(12)

Saul's Compromise

King Saul could not stop thinking about Samuel's words, "because you disobeyed God's words, your kingdom will not continue." He worried about this very much for quite some time. But, as one year faded into another, and nothing changed, he began to wonder, *Will the seer's words really come true? Will Jehovah really take my kingdom away?* Five years passed by, then ten, fifteen, and twenty, yet nothing happened. No one tried to throw him out from the country, or force him to give up his throne, and he continued to reign as king, showing himself to be a wise and fearless commander as he helped lead God's people to win the victory over many of their enemies. Little by little the seer's prophecy began to fade from his memory until he had all but forgotten the words told him so long ago in Gilgal.

One day God spoke to Samuel with a message for the king. Immediately he left Ramah to deliver the news to Saul and said to him, "It was I who Jehovah sent to anoint you to be king over His people, over Israel. Now listen to His words to you: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they cruelly set themselves against them when they were coming up from Egypt, attacking the weakest and most helpless ones among them. So go now and fight against the Amalekites. Do not spare them, and destroy everything they have.'"

Two hundred ten thousand Hebrew men came quickly to Telaim, and when they were set in their companies, Saul gave final instructions to his officers. "When we are close to the Amalekite city, we will set an ambush in the river valley and catch them off guard. Then we will strike them down. With this strategy, there's no way they can beat us!"

The Hebrews marched to the south and set the ambush; they completely defeated the Amalekites, just as Jehovah had commanded. However, when they were about to finish what they were supposed to do—to destroy all the treasures of the Amalekites—the more they looked at it the more they liked it. Then they decided that they wanted it for themselves. "Look at all this great stuff!" they exclaimed. "Why destroy it? We could be so rich! We could help our families with it! We could even offer some of it to Jehovah!"

The men are right, thought Saul. *These treasures would make us rich – they could make me rich!* Then he remembered Samuel’s instructions. “You know what Jehovah said!” Saul reminded the men. “We must destroy everything of the Amalekites.” He frowned unhappily as he told them this, and even said with whining disappointment, “We can’t take these things of the Amalekites”.

But then he wondered, *How can I obey Jehovah’s command and still get these riches?* Suddenly he thought of a way. It would require a simple compromise, he would do part of what Jehovah told him to do, but not all of it .

The king told his men, “You all know that Jehovah said we must not take the Amalekites goods. And we will *not* take them, just as He said”. That is, not *all* of them. We will make a compromise. We will only take *some* of them, you see—the *best* of them. The rest we will completely destroy, just as Jehovah has commanded. What harm can there be in that?”

“A compromise?” mocked one of the men to the others. “That’s one of the worst excuses I’ve ever heard the king say.”

“Who cares?” said several men nearby. “The king will be happy, we will be happy, and our families will be happy!”

But God was watching, listening, and taking note of everything being said and done – and God was *not* happy. King Saul’s compromise would bring severe consequences with it, because the king had failed a crucial test: he had disobeyed Jehovah’s word to him again, just as he had done more than twenty years before.

That same night the time had come for the Lord to tell Samuel, “I am sorry I made Saul king because he has turned away from following Me and has not fulfilled My words.”

The Lord’s words hit Samuel hard, because he cared very deeply for God and His people. He was sad that Saul had not obeyed Jehovah’s command, and he was sad that the leader of God’s people had failed both them and God, again. In his anger and disappointment he cried to Jehovah all night. But in the morning, after packing some food and water, he began walking toward Gilgal. He was not as strong and energetic as he had been when Saul first became king,

so he walked a little slower now, his thinning grey hair and stooped shoulders showing the wear of his many years. Yet he kept on, determined to give God's message to the king.

"Hello, Samuel," said a neighbor coming from the other direction. "You look tired. Did you have a hard time sleeping last night?"

"I did," replied Samuel. "I'm on my way to see the king."

"Did you hear he was at Carmel?" asked the neighbor.

"Carmel?" said Samuel. "What was he doing there?"

"He set up a big monument to himself," said the neighbor.

"A monument? Whatever for?" asked Samuel.

"He wanted everyone to know how proud he is about his victory over the Amalekites," said the neighbor.

Samuel shuddered. Something sounded very wrong. "Tell me," he asked, "Did this monument give any praise and thanks to Jehovah?"

"No, I'm sure it didn't," replied the neighbor. "The king's name and his great victories were the only things mentioned. They were written all over it."

Samuel shook his head. Saul had taken all the credit for the victories God gave him. He had stolen God's glory.

"Is Saul still in Carmel?" asked Samuel.

"No," replied the neighbor. "He has gone down to Gilgal."

"Then I'd better be going. Good day." Samuel knew his message would not make the king happy, but the faithful Nazarite, who had served God his whole life, would speak everything God told him to speak. And so he continued on his way.

STORIES OF THE KINGS

(13)

To Obey Is Better Than to Sacrifice

King Saul sat in his royal chair thinking proudly about how grand the treasures he took from the Amalekites would make him and his men look, as he looked carelessly down the road at nothing in particular. Then, to his shock, came the man of God walking toward him! Jumping up, he ran to greet him and said boastfully, “Blessed are you of Jehovah! I have fulfilled Jehovah’s word and done everything He charged me to do.”

“*Everything?*” Samuel asked. “If you did everything Jehovah charged you to do, what then is all this treasure doing here? And why do I hear the bleating of sheep?”

“Oh!” exclaimed the king, suddenly getting nervous. “Oh that! Well, I, uh, I mean, that is, the people did this, not me. I told them Jehovah said to destroy everything, but they insisted we keep some of their goods anyway. But we didn’t keep all of it, only the *best* of it – to give to Jehovah, you understand. The rest of it we have completely destroyed.”

“Stop with your excuses!” replied Samuel, “and I will tell you what Jehovah spoke to me last night.”

Jehovah must have seen me disobey! Saul realized.

“Speak on,” he replied anxiously.

“When you were little and unimportant in your own eyes,” Samuel began, “were you not made the head of the tribes of Israel? And Jehovah sent you on a journey and said, ‘Go and strike down the wicked Amalekites, and fight against them until everything is destroyed.’ Why, then, did you not obey Jehovah’s voice, but instead swooped down upon the enemy’s treasures like a hungry vulture and did evil in Jehovah’s sight?”

“I *did* obey Jehovah’s voice,” Saul insisted, trying his best to look humble and sincere. “And I went on the journey Jehovah sent me on. But the people pleaded with me—it was the

people, it's *their* fault. They wanted to keep the best of the stuff for themselves, so what else could I do? Besides that, the spoil will be a blessing to our families and we can even offer some of it as sacrifices to Jehovah your God in Gilgal. Think about how good that would be."

"Does Jehovah delight in offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying His voice?"

Samuel replied. "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed His words is better than to give him offerings and presents. Because you have rejected the word of Jehovah, He has rejected you from being king."

"You are right," Saul finally admitted, trying to sound sorry for what he had done. "I have sinned because I disobeyed Jehovah's command and your words. But I wasn't *trying* to disobey. I only did it because I was afraid of the people and what they might do if I didn't go along with them; so I obeyed *their* voice instead of *Jehovah's*. Please forgive my sin, I beg you, and go back with me to worship Jehovah. Surely Jehovah knows I meant well and that I am sorry I didn't obey. Surely He will not take my kingdom away."

"I will not go with you," Samuel said sternly, "for you have rejected the word of Jehovah, and He has rejected you from being king over Israel."

Then Saul suddenly remembered he had heard those same words before. Samuel had spoken those very words to him just a short while after he had become king. But after so many years, he began to think that Jehovah didn't really mean it, that somehow it was never going to happen. Samuel's words crashed down on Saul's head like a sledge hammer: He has rejected you from being king over Israel! Saul's heart began beating wildly as he panicked and thought, *The prophecy is coming true! I have to do something to make Jehovah change His mind!*

But Samuel had already turned to leave. "Wait!" Saul screamed, grabbing Samuel's long, priestly robe to stop him. At that moment a corner of the robe tore right off and Saul stood there with the cloth in his hand, horrified at what he had just done to the respected prophet of God.

“Like my robe which you just tore,” Samuel told him, “Jehovah has torn the kingdom of Israel away from you today and has given it to a neighbor of yours, one who shepherds his flock like you should have been shepherding yours – one who is *better* than you.”

Saul starred, horrified at what he was hearing. “Moreover,” Samuel continued, “The God who is the Strength of Israel does not lie or change His mind, for He is not like men, who change their mind.”

Then Samuel returned to his home in Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah. Samuel never saw the king again unto the day of his death. For Saul it was a great loss because the man of God had always been there to encourage and advise him, and had been like a father to him. As for Samuel, the faithful, aging prophet of God, whose whole life had been for God and His people, he still cared for the king. And though he had spoken Jehovah’s words of judgment against Saul, he would be sad for many days, because he could never shut his heart against the one who had been anointed as captain over Jehovah’s people.

Saul’s reign was a difficult period in the history of the children of Israel, but God was still caring for His people, watching over them and working secretly behind the scenes to raise up another man, a better man, to be king of Israel. Unlike Saul, whose heart was only for himself, this one’s heart was for God and God’s people, and he would do all God’s will. Though he was still young, he was being prepared and trained to become the next captain over Jehovah’s inheritance; and he was almost ready.

I Samuel 15:13-35