

Total devotion * 1 Samuel 1-7

September 29, 2019 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning I'm excited to launch into a new series here that will take us into the period of the Old Testament kings. We've been using the autumn months the last few years to trace the story of redemption through Genesis-Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers-Deuteronomy-Joshua-Judges and Ruth and we're going to pick that story up at 1 and 2 Samuel and carry it through into 1 and 2 Kings.

That means that we get to talk about some very famous and very fascinating people – Samuel and Saul and David and Solomon. And although I'm sure many of you will have heard many of these stories before, I'm excited to revisit them with you in light of the whole of the Bible, the whole story of redemption from Genesis to Revelation.

Because ultimately, these books show us that it's good to have a king – it's good to have someone powerful to lead you into battle, it's good to have someone wise defining right and wrong, it's good to have someone faithful helping you to follow God – and that's what a good king should do. Sadly though, no human king could ever accomplish that. Saul started out well, David and Solomon came pretty close and a handful of others did well too, but most of the kings fell terribly short. Israel's experience with kings in Samuel and Kings shows us – it's good to have a king, but no human king will do – so we're going to think about Israel's kings – Saul and David and Solomon – with an eye to seeing how they point to a greater king – a king worth following. That's the title I'm using for this series – a king worth following – because while these Israel's kings were hit and miss, there is a king who is worth following, who is worth trusting in, who is worth serving and His name is Jesus.

As you can see from the outline, this will take us right up to Advent and then we'll switch gears into Christmas mode; I do encourage you to keep this outline with you, with your Bible, so that you can pray and read ahead and prepare your heart in advance to hear from God as He speaks through His Word on Sunday mornings.

That's the plan for the weeks ahead; today though we need to bridge the gap from the period of the Judges to the period of the kings. We talked last year about Joshua and Judges and Ruth – those messages are all up on the website if you want to hear them again – and now we need to get from there to the kings and it just so happens that 1 Samuel 1-7 fill that gap. That's what we're going to talk about today.

1 Samuel 1-7 tells us about Samuel's rise to power because Samuel himself is a kind of bridge that crosses from the judges to the kings. He is technically the last of Israel's judges – you can see that in 1 Samuel 7:15 - but he will also usher in the era of the kings and so he plays a really neat transitional role in the story of redemption. Samuel appeared at a real spiritual low point in Israelite history – everyone was doing religious things but very few people were actually honouring God and Samuel faithfully gathered people's attention away from themselves and focused it on where it should be – on God.

And that's where Samuel's story intersects with ours. These chapters beg us to ask – are we exercising genuine faith or are we going through the motions and paying lip service to God? Are we totally devoted to Him in our lives or does He get the scraps of time that are left over when we've done what we want to do?

That last one is what the people of Israel in the time of the Judges were doing. They did some religious things and claimed to be God's people and yet they rarely let God have any real say in their lives. To echo the famous refrain in the book of Judges, they did what was right in their own eyes and ignored what was right in God's. And as a consequence, some really bad things happened. This was a dark time for the people of Israel.

And even though God's own people were rejecting Him, God was still faithful to them. He was still committed to the promise of blessing that He made through Abraham and so he sent a baby, born under miraculous circumstances, to bring people back to Him.

See there was this Israelite man up in Ephraim named Elkanah and Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had lots of kids and Hannah had none. She was barren. Peninnah made fun of Hannah because it and you get a real insight into the kind of guy Elkanah was because he would say to Hannah – “what, why so downhearted? Aren't I worth more to you than ten sons?” He had a real way with the ladies.

NIV 1 Samuel 1:1 There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah...

2 He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

3 Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD... 8 Elkanah her husband would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" (1Sa 1:1-8 NIV).

To his credit, every year, Elkanah would take his family over to Shiloh to worship the LORD there because that's where God's tabernacle was. They would load up the mini-van and head off to church over in Shiloh.

Now on one occasions, Hannah found herself at her wits end. So she went to the one person who could do something about it – God - and she prayed – chapter 1, verse 11 – “O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.” (1Sa 1:11 NIV).

She's praying – “oh Lord, if you would only give me, a barren woman, the privilege of bearing a child, then I will give him back to you, to be fully devoted to you all his life.” That's a real heart felt prayer, isn't it?

But this was not an era of heartfelt prayer in Israel, and you can tell, because the priest on duty, Eli, watches Hannah pouring out her heart before God and just assumes that she's drunk! That's how uncommon actual devotion was in those days. And so Eli goes over to her and says 'enough with the wine lady, now go sober up - and she's like – 'I'm praying – with all my heart.' I can't imagine how awkward that conversation would have been – but it looks like Eli's priestly training kicked in and so he told her - 'may God give you what you have asked for.'

And God DID give her what she had asked for. Nine months later, the barren woman Hannah had son. And she named him Samuel, which is a play on words, which means 'I asked the LORD for Him.' She

asked and He delivered. Well, I guess she asked, AND delivered, and sure enough, when he was old enough, Samuel went to live and serve at the temple, and Hannah made him a new little robe every year and gave him everything he needed. And before long, Samuel was ministering before the LORD.

Now Samuel wasn't the only one ministering before the LORD there at Shiloh; Eli was a priest and his sons Hophni and Phinehas were priests too. And while Samuel is the pinnacle of devotion and holiness, Hophni and Phinehas are the bottom of the barrel. I remember thinking last year when we going through the book of Judges— it's really strange that the priests are almost never mentioned in the book of Judges – I mean – they're supposed to be the ones leading the people to follow God, but you never hear about them in Judges. Well, here's why. The priests were actually leading people away from God.

1 Samuel 2:12 straight up says that Eli's sons were wicked men who had no regard for the LORD. Verse 17 says 17 This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt. (1Sa 2:17 NIV).

They had this racket set up where they would strongarm the people into giving them the best cuts of meat before they would make the people's sacrifices for them. I mean, the priests ultimately ate what was given in sacrifices, AFTER they'd been offered, but Hophni and Phinehas liked to get the meat first and grill it THEIR way and THEN they would give God His. And apparently according to 2:22, they were sleeping with the women who served at the tabernacle. Great priests eh? (sarcastic). No wonder the spiritual health of Israel was so poor.

12 Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD. (1Sa 2:12 NIV).

22 Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. (1Sa 2:22 NIV).

On the other hand though, 2:26 - 26 And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men. (1Sa 2:26 NIV). The author of 1 Samuel clearly wants us to see the contrast between the two 'sons' as it were – Eli's actual sons – Hophni and Phinehas – and Eli's adopted son – Samuel. Hophni and Phinehas embody half-hearted, self-serving faith, where Samuel is shown to be totally devoted to God.

And God worked through that total devotion – I used to love this story in Sunday school; chapter 3, verse 1 ish – Samuel's laying in the tabernacle and he hears God calling; he thinks it's Eli and goes out to see how he can help. Eli's like 'I didn't call you; go back to bed.' That happens two more times – same routine - and then Eli finally realizes that it's God who is calling Samuel. And God has not been in the habit of saying much lately, because people don't seem too interested, but now, in the midst of this spiritual darkness, God is speaking to his adopted son. (NIV 1 Samuel 3:1 The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. (1Sa 3:1 NIV).) And Samuel becomes well known as a prophet and servant of God. 1 Samuel 3:19-21 says –

19 The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground.

20 And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

21 The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word (1Sa 3:19-21 NIV).

Now that's a really important detail. Samuel is at Shiloh and everybody knows that YHWH is speaking through Samuel at Shiloh. Remember that.

Chapter 4 opens with this battle between Israel and the Philistines and Israel loses, losing about four thousand men in the fight. So chapter 4, verse 3 - 3 When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines?..." (1Sa 4:3 NIV). That's a good question to ask. "Why did God not help us?" Well, here's an idea – why don't you go over to Shiloh and ask God yourself. Because God is speaking through Samuel, remember?

Well, apparently they didn't. They said "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies." (1Sa 4:3 NIV).

What are they doing? They're trusting in a religious symbol to save them, instead of trusting in the actual God. Robert Alter writes that the elders think of the Ark magically or fetishistically as a vehicle of power that they can manipulate for military ends (22). They think – 'this box, that represents God's presence will save us' – not 'our God will save us.' It's so much work to actually love and obey God, so why don't we just co-opt His symbols and that will give us power over our enemies, right? I mean, that's the point of view that Hophni and Phinehas would have and wouldn't you know it, Hophni and Phinehas escort the ark out of town, leaving Samuel going – 'what are you guys thinking?!' This is not faith – it's superstition!

But they throw up a cheer because they think 'ha ha now we've got the upper hand' and the Philistines hear the cheer and start shaking in their boots and say 'ok boys, we've got a real challenge – no surrender no defeat' – and they go out and crush the Israelites. Thirty thousand dead according to 4 verse 10.

10 So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. (1Sa 4:10 NIV).

And not only that, Hophni and Phinehas die. And not only that, the Philistines take the Ark.

Not only that, when Eli hears the news, he falls off his chair Humpty Dumpty style and breaks his neck and Phinehas's widow dies giving birth to a child, who she names 'the glory is gone' with her dying breath.

In terms of the downward spiral of Judges, I think this is probably the low point.

For God though, it's anything but. The Philistines take the ark into captivity, but God can take care of Himself. The Philistines take the ark into their temple and set it beside their 'god' Dagon, as if to say 'ha ha look how we've conquered you.' And yet they come in the next morning and there's Dagon, face down as if in worship to the ark of YHWH. So they set their god back up on his feet (some god eh?) and they turn out the lights and come in the next morning to Dagon on the ground with his head and hands broken off. YHWH humiliated the Philistine god then turned to the Philistines themselves.

He sent devastation and tumours and wrath against His so-called captors, until finally they decide to send the Ark back seven months later with golden tumours to serve as guilt offerings. And they load the Ark up on a cart with two milking cows to see if this was God or all just coincidence. But sure enough,

the cows pull the cart straight away from their calves and directly into Israelite territory. God brought His Ark home. God has essentially rescued Himself. (1Sa 5:1-3 NIV).

And it's interesting to think that this whole debacle probably could have been avoided if the people hadn't treated YHWH like a god they could manipulate and instead listened to Him, through His servant Samuel. He was there in Shiloh - Remember him? He was there and everybody knew that God was speaking through him and yet they chose to ignore God's anointed servant. He just kind of disappears for two chapters. But I think Peter Leithart is right in explaining why – 'Samuel's absence from these chapters is deliberate and makes a theological and literary point. 1 Samuel 4-6 show what happens when the prophet of Israel was not leading the people" (paraphrase Leithart, 22).

"The absence of Samuel from these chapters is deliberate and makes a theological and literary point. 1 Samuel 4-6 shows what happened when the prophet of Israel was not leading the people" (Leithart, 22).

But after this sound drubbing at the hands of the Philistines, the Israelites are ready to reconsider their priorities. They're ready to reconsider how they relate to God. And Samuel is more than ready to minister truth to them. And he does, for twenty years. That's how long the hangover lasted from Hophi and Phinehas style priesthood – and eventually – they came to embrace Samuel's style. They were ready to trade half-hearted faith for total devotion.

And so here's what Samuel told them:

3 And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."

Just imagine – all this time, they knew how good God was. They knew how God had been good to their ancestors; they knew how God had been good to them. And they still had other gods in their homes and in their hearts. And so Samuel says – if you are going to give up this half-hearted faith and truly love God, then you need to get rid of all that distracts you from God, commit yourself to Him alone, get to work for the benefit of His kingdom. That's total devotion. That's the kind of devotion that God deserves.

So, verse 4 - 4 So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only. (1Sa 7:3-4 NIV).

Happy ending, right? Hooray! Everything's hunky dory again.

But wouldn't you know it? The Philistines hear that the Israelites are all gathered together for their 'return to God' ceremony and they decide 'ha, ha, now is time to attack!' And so they get their army together and surround the Israelite camp and get ready to wipe them out. And when the Israelite heard of it, they freaked out.

7 When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, the rulers of the Philistines came up to attack them. And when the Israelites heard of it, they were afraid because of the Philistines (1Sa 7:7 NIV).

But you know what? They got it right this time. They didn't superstitiously drag the Ark out onto the battlefield. They didn't put their faith in a symbol of God; they relied on God Himself.

And in the last twenty years, God had given them eyes to see spiritual realities. They realized that God had raised up one last deliverer in Samuel. This is still the time of the Judges. Scholars think that Samson and Eli lived around the same time. Israel's been around the cycle. They've ignored God under guys like Hophni and Phinehas. God set the Philistines loose on them and they were overrun. But then God has mercy on them and they've returned to God and God has raised up a deliverer – a judge – to save them from their enemies. Samuel.

15 Samuel continued as judge over Israel all the days of his life.

16 From year to year he went on a circuit from Bethel to Gilgal to Mizpah, judging Israel in all those places.

17 But he always went back to Ramah, where his home was, and there he also judged Israel. And he built an altar there to the LORD (1Sa 7:15-17 NIV).

But this is a new kind of deliverer. This is not a deliverer who will pursue his own interests, like Samson. This is not a person who will triumph through brute strength, like Samson. This is a deliverer who will help the people to rely on God's strength. And when they're trusting in Him, their trust is well placed.

The people cry out to Samuel to have him pray for them and what does it say? But that day the LORD thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines and threw them into such a panic that they were routed before the Israelites. (1Sa 7:10 NIV). The Israelites rushed out to defeat them and triumphed over their enemies. They took back territory that they had lost and the Philistines did not dare to set their foot on Israel's land again, at least as long as Samuel lived. And verse 15 – Samuel continued to judge Israel all the days of his life, serving not only as deliverer, but as spiritual leader of the people. That's 1 Samuel 1-7.

Now, what's the point of it all?

Well, I think I would put it like this – half-hearted faith is no faith at all; God deserves total devotion.

Let me unpack that. Israel engaged in some half-hearted faith. On one hand – they really split their devotion between YHWH and other gods. They acted as though they were trusting God but at the same time, they had idols of other gods in the homes and in their hearts. Saying that they were faithful to God in this circumstance would be like saying that a man with a mistress was being faithful to his wife. He was not faithful. Half-hearted faith is not actually faith.

And what's more – when they DID relate to YHWH, they did it on their own terms, they did it superstitiously. I'm sure Hophni and Phinehas justified their actions in their own minds – 'God is all about love isn't He; so why shouldn't I love these ladies?' And the elders were like 'if we bring this relic of God into battle, then we're sure to win.' They weren't actually being faithful to YHWH, were they? They were being faithful to who they wanted Him to be. They were trying to remake God in their image, but that's not how it works, is it? We're the ones who are made in His image, and He deserves devotion for who He is. Not half-hearted devotion, total devotion. Not superstitious faith, but real faith.

I think these first seven chapters of first Samuel present a powerful contrast – between people who have the appearance of godliness, who go to church, who do religious things, but who ultimately honour

themselves and not God – between them, and a person like Samuel who truly understands themselves to be a servant of God, set apart for His will.

And I think these first seven chapters of first Samuel beg us to ask – which ones are we? Half-hearted faith people? Or total devotion people? Do we have the appearance of faith, or are we actually faithful? Because God DOES deserve total devotion.

When we were all doing right in our own eyes, God did what He did in Samuel's time. We were just like the Israelites, following our own paths, ignoring our God, trapped in spiritual darkness when God in His infinite mercy decided to act. He sent another baby, born under miraculous circumstances, who would be totally devoted to God, who would bring the people back to God. Just like Samuel, this boy grew in wisdom and stature with God and with man – Luke practically straight up quotes it to help us see the parallel –

52 And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (Luk 2:52 NIV).

26 And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men. (1Sa 2:26 NIV).

And just like Samuel, God raised Him up to be a deliverer – not just from Philistines though – He delivered us from the grasp of sin. Jesus delivered us from sin. Not because we were good enough. But because He was.

That deserves more than half-hearted faith. That deserves total devotion.

That kind of sacrificial love calls us to get rid of all that distracts us from God, commit ourselves to Him alone, get to work for the benefit of His kingdom. That's total devotion. That's the kind of devotion that God deserves.

Is that the kind of devotion that you give?

You know what? That's the kind of devotion that I want to give but I have to admit that I sometimes fall short. But that's not going to stop me from trying, because I know God's love for me. And I know that God will help us. And so as we close, I want to set up the song that we're going to sing in response to God's Word.

This is chapter 7, verse 12 – after God had routed the Philistines, Samuel took a stone and set it up as a remind of God's faithfulness and he called it 'Ebenezer' – that means – stone of my helper. And he said - "Thus far has the LORD helped us" knowing that God would continue to help from there.

Back in the 1750's a hymnwriter wrote that into a song but I guess we've decided that nobody knows what Ebenezer means and so we've changed the words – many hymnals have changed the words – but I think that this is a very powerful picture. Thus far God has led us and we will by His good pleasure safely arrive at home. So let's pray and then pray these words in song in response to God's grace.