

1 SAMUEL – prophet of the Lord

Samuel's mother had been childless for years. She prayed for God's help, on condition that if God gave her a son, she would give him back to the Lord. It is easy to forget a vow like that, made in extremity, but Hannah faithfully kept her word, and young Samuel entered the service of the Tabernacle under Eli, the high priest. The little Levite was a breath of fresh air in the decayed atmosphere of Israel's idolatry. Accepted as a prophet of the Lord, and later a Judge, he began a reformation after the death of Eli that would lift Israel up into the mountain peaks of the reign of David, Israel's greatest king. But first there was trouble.

The Philistines, a tough warrior people living on the western border of Israel, attacked them, and captured the holy Ark, symbol of God's presence. They had superior weapons, and oppressed the people for many years. Eventually the Israelites came to Samuel and asked him to appoint a king over them. Up to now they had God in heaven as their ruler (a type of government known as a theocracy), but now they wanted to be like the other nations around them with a living head they could follow in battle. With God's permission, Samuel anointed Saul, a tall, vigorous man who successfully defeated the Philistines in a number of skirmishes. Unhappily, power went to his head and he became proud and self-centred, more concerned with the adulation of the people than the praise of God. It was a disappointing start to Israel's monarchy. Eventually Samuel had the sad duty of informing Saul that he would be replaced by another, closer to God's heart. This made him intensely jealous, looking out for anyone who might challenge his office.

The choice of Saul's successor was instructive. God sent Samuel to Bethlehem, the city of Ruth's grandson Jesse, telling him to anoint one of Jesse's sons. When the firstborn stood before him, tall and

handsome, Samuel was sure this was the one. But God spoke to the aged prophet – "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

This is an important principle, and even after years of experience of human nature, Samuel had been caught out. In fact, God chose David, Jesse's youngest son, more used to sheep herding than managing men, because his heart was humble, and he had a living faith in God.

David was destined for true greatness, but first had to suffer years of frustration and hardship at the hands of Saul. He came to public attention at the battle of the Valley of Elah, described in 1 Samuel chapter 17. The Philistines had a gigantic champion, Goliath, who challenged any Israelite to come across and fight him single-handed. David, though only a youth, was incensed to hear him shout curses at the God of Israel. Armed only with his sling and staff, he set off across the valley, confident God would give him victory. With a skill honed by years of shepherding he selected the one gap in Goliath's armour, and sank a sling stone deep into his forehead.

David's valour propelled him to the position of head of the army, and he became the star of the day, to the envy of Saul, who now feared him as a rival. After several attempts on his life David was forced to flee, dodging Saul's spies and soldiers with a band of rebels who joined his ranks, and hiding in caves and valleys in the mountains. The story of his escapades, and his undiminished faith in God, occupies the last thirteen chapters of 1 Samuel. It is as gripping as any fiction writer could invent.

At last the day came for God to fulfil His promise. Saul and his sons, including

Jonathan, David's best friend, fell dead in the disastrous Battle of Gilboa, and the way was open for David to return from exile and take the throne.

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