

What's the Point...of 1 Samuel?

Mark Garner

The books of 1 & 2 Samuel tell us about a period of transition and significant changes in Israel. We will read about the life and the calm faith of Samuel, the erratic reign of Saul, and the memorable times of David. In 1 Samuel, we often see how things look different to our Heavenly Father than they look to us, for God looks at the heart rather than at outward appearances.

The Lord Looks At The Heart (Overview Of 1 Samuel)

In 1 Samuel, we see God's hand as he works in individual lives and on a broader scale at the same time. It starts with Samuel's birth, an outpouring of God's grace both to his mother Hannah, who had it in her heart to have her son devote his whole life to God, and also to Israel (1 Sam 1-3). Samuel would replace the well-intentioned yet weak priest Eli, and then guide Israel through its spiritual difficulties. Hannah's prayer also reflects some of the themes in 1 & 2 Samuel.

Next, during a battle Israel puts false hope in the ark as a physical object. The ark is captured by the Philistines, who in turn treat it as a trophy (1 Sam 4-6). When they put it in the temple of one of their false gods, God knocks down their 'god', convincing them to return the ark to Israel, where it stays in Kiriath Jearim for 20 years. This turn of events induces the Israelites to turn back to God. When the Philistines begin an attack, God makes it easy for Israel to chase them away.

Yet the Israelites become restless and tell Samuel that they want a king 'such as all the nations have' (1 Sam 7-15). God reassures Samuel that it is really God himself whom they have rejected. Samuel does as God asks, and Saul is made Israel's first king. At first, Saul does fairly well; he is strong and tall, and at the beginning he is gracious to his detractors. Yet Saul is a man of action alone; he becomes careless and rash, so Samuel tells Saul that God will soon replace him.

God now seeks out someone "after his own heart" (1 Samuel 16-18). God leads Samuel to Jesse's family, and as Samuel looks over Jesse's sons, God reminds him not to look at outward appearances, for the Lord looks at the heart. Samuel is told to anoint the youngest son David; then, when Goliath confronts Israel, Saul sees Goliath as a trained, intimidating warrior, while David sees him as a blasphemer challenging God himself.

Saul and Goliath both saw David as weak and unprepared, yet David knows God and relies on God being with him. Yet after David overcomes Goliath, though he has been anointed king, David has to endure a period of exile (1 Sam 19-31). Saul relentlessly hunts him down, yet David continues walking by faith, and is even gracious to Saul when he has the chance to harm his persecutor. As the book ends, Saul has fallen, though David will still face more problems.

Overall Thoughts

Throughout 1 Samuel, we see several aspects of God's nature. Then, the contrast between Samuel and Saul, and the contrast between David and Saul, illustrate how God looks at our hearts, why this matters to him, and what it means to us and for our walk with our Heavenly Father. We can also identify with many of the things the characters in 1 Samuel face, and the book shows us how well God knows us and how he cares for us and helps us.

What's the Point....of 1 Samuel? **Caleb Dillinger**

The book of 1 Samuel is only different from 2 Samuel in that it is the first half of a 2 part story. Technically, the conclusion of the story shows up in 1 Kings and then 1 and 2 Kings tells a new set of stories in Israel's history. We'll talk about those in future issues of "What's the Point?"

For now, let's address why 21st century American Christians should 1 Samuel. Jesus doesn't show up; rules about worship don't show up; salvation is not addressed. What's the point?

The Old Testament is rich in its depiction of real people who experienced the same problems and joys that we do. Take the beginning of this book - the central character is Hannah, who is in a complicated relationship and desperately desires to have children but has been unable to for a long time. Her prayer to God is so intense a religious leader judges her based off appearances until they have an honest conversation. Difficulties in marriage, childbearing, and bad first impressions - definitely relatable.

The story picks up with that religious leader (Eli) mentoring Hannah's future child (Samuel) - except despite all the righteousness of Eli, his own kids turn out terrible, and Samuel will raise kids who one day turn out terrible. Hmm. Mentorship and religious leadership difficulties - relatable.

Israel to this point has been ruled by God. Now, they reject God and ask to be ruled by human kings. Separation of church and state ring any bells? God's people don't want to be God's people only - they want to be worldly people AND God's people - but they can't. Relatable.

Samuel, the last in the line of judges, anoints a man named Saul to be the first king of Israel. Things start well...then impatience and disobedience turn Saul away from God and God finds favor in another man: David.

David beats the giant Goliath - a story nearly every American with a small inkling of religious background has heard. David then develops a best friend relationship with Saul's son Jonathan, but due to Saul's hatred of God favoring David, their friendship is thrown under duress and one of the most emotional scenes in all the Old Testament is found in 1 Samuel 20.

David lives on the run, breaking rules and siding with Israel's enemies for his own survival until finally Saul is defeated in a battle and dies. That's how the story ends, by the way. Saul's abrupt death. You almost feel compelled to immediately start reading 2 Samuel which picks up just moments later. The history of Israel's first king and the journey to Israel's second king is tragic and intense and captivating.

But there's more to reading 1 Samuel than just fascinating war stories and intriguing politics. Faith is tested by "common" people and leaders alike. God is revealed to be active and working in the lives of humanity. The Bible is not some heartless ancient textbook - it's a revelation of God's love for broken humans. What's the purpose of reading 1 Samuel? To see God and yourself in the story of human history.