

PULL UP A CHAIR
1 Samuel 1:1a

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Pull up a chair, lean in to listen. For the next five months, I'm going to tell you a tale beyond all tales, a saga that supersedes them all. Try to be present for every episode, for each sermon. Miss if you must, but catch up on the missed messages on our website so you'll be ready to receive the next story.

The overall meaning of Samuel will be found in the combination of all the characters and their actions, their words and their deeds. Samuel is woven together like a seamless garment, a garment that introduces us to the will and the way of Yahweh, Israel's covenant God. We will encounter barrenness and birth, prayers and answers, a speaking God and an answering boy, priests who are players and thieves, a captured Ark of God and a fainting father, a cry for a tall, handsome king, and a decapitated giant who dies from a single shot from the slingshot of a shepherd boy. In these stories, we will ponder the covenant friendship of two men, Jonathan and David, and find that blood is not always thicker than water.

Herein, a fading king pursues his divinely chosen replacement like a fowler trying to capture a partridge. Oh, we will have romance and rage, and we will even summon the dead to speak from beyond the shadows of the grave.

God is guiding the narrative, the Divine One is doing great deeds. Are you ready to hear the voice of priests and prophets, kings and princes, taunts of a giant, and meet a girl named Abigail and beautiful, but forbidden Bathsheba? Pull up a chair, I say, and hear a story woven, written by the very hand of God.

Commit yourself to serious Bible study on 1 Samuel. Read ahead each week. Then, reflect and remember the next week. God's Word is ready to shape and form; 1 Samuel is ready to transform us.

Today, as we introduce this new sermon series from Samuel, I want to give you some facts and foundations for what we are about to experience. Today is different.

1. Form

1 and 2 Samuel are written, along with 1 and 2 Kings, in Hebrew as a single work on two scrolls. It was divided into the four books we now have when it was translated into Greek in the second century B.C. (*The Septuagint*). Writing Greek took twice as much space as writing in Hebrew, and so four scrolls were now required instead of two. For convenience, the church has maintained the division that was established in the second century B.C.

Now, the Book of Samuel is divided nicely into 1 and 2 Samuel. You see the first book ends with the death of Saul, Israel's first king. And the second book takes up what all the readers have been waiting for – at last, David's reign.

2. Author

Who wrote 1 and 2 Samuel? Technically, the author(s) are anonymous. The Talmud preserves the rabbinic tradition that these books were written by prophets who lived during the events described, especially Samuel himself. Collected and preserved through the ages, passed from generation to generation. To pass down one's God, one must pass down God's stories.

3. When

Our stories will cover 100 years, a century of Israel's most important history. These tales take us from Israel's existence as a loose federation of tribes to a monarchy under a king called David. Every paragraph, every character, points us to David.

The stories found in Samuel cluster around the year 1000 B.C., the millennial midpoint between the call of Abraham in 2000 B.C. and the birth of the Messiah, Jesus, a thousand years after the stories in Samuel occur.

4. Title

"Samuel" is the title in the Hebrew Bible because Samuel is the leading character in the early chapters and has ties to the other prominent players, Saul and David. Samuel is a kingmaker and a king-breaker, and he represents the authority of God.

5. Readers

During the difficult days of captivity to Babylon and beyond to the release of God's people in the Sixth Century B.C., these stories were a source of hope – hope that the God who guided David's life continued to be in their lives as well.

6. Central Character

The text of 1 Samuel is deeply and completely fascinated with David. Wait – now, David will not even take the stage of our story until we get until 1 Samuel 16. The first 15 chapters are just preparation for David. The other chief figures – Samuel and Saul (as important as they are) are only pointing to David. And, of course, David only points to the Christ – who is from the line of David.

7. Purpose

Central in all these stories is their ability show that to be human means that we have to deal with God. One way or another, God will be a part of each of our stories, either in redemption or judgment or sometimes a combination of the two. No character avoids God, not even you.

8. Why story?

Story is the most powerful way to tell truth, to teach, to motivate, to enlighten our minds and to move our hearts. The only rival to story is song. We learn most of what we hold dear through

story or song – one or the other – and, of course, good songs are just another way of telling a story.

When I was just a kid, my MaMa Howard, my mother's mother whom I loved dearly, complained to me one Sunday afternoon, saying, "Our new preacher doesn't preach. All he does is tell tales." I don't know what she was looking for, but she wasn't looking for the story-telling preacher they had just invited to the pulpit. But I thought to myself, "You mean, like Jesus – a Jesus who told parables, who used stories as the vehicles of truth to move the hearts and minds of men? Jesus begins His preaching with "There once was a man who had two sons...." Yes, the story of the Prodigal Son. See 1 Samuel 1a.

9. Your role

Stories do not just tell a tale and leave it there. They invite us into the story, into the narrative. The good story of Samuel gathers us into the story. We feel emotions, we get caught in the drama, we identify with the characters and discover nooks and crannies of life that we had overlooked before. With a good storyteller, doors and windows are wide open. And the Hebrews are the best at telling a story, as you will certainly see in Samuel.

10. Revelation

Within stories, divine revelation shows up unannounced in ordinary garb. Of course, we want to dress it up in Paris silks, the three-piece suits of theology and ethics and charts and graphs. But like David refusing to wear the encumbering armor of Saul, good stories refuse to be placed in our orderly boxes. Stories are messy and moving, using imperfect characters to carry the perfect truth of God.

If you are craving flawless characters who follow a narrow script, 1 Samuel will not do for you. It is messy; therefore, it appeals to imperfect people who learn, most often, from falling down – and with God's help – getting up again, even if we notice their now visible limp.

11. Fact or fiction?

Are these stories we're going to encounter in Samuel – are they stories of fabrication, fiction, or are they real history? Or does one not have to choose between stories or history? Among ancient peoples, no one was more interested in history than the Hebrews. Eugene Peterson calls them "the world's first historians." While their neighbors were gazing at the sky, hoping to find their fate in the stars, while others were spinning myths to account for human predicaments, the Hebrews were simply paying attention to what happened. They watched and recorded events. Appropriately, the word "story" is the center of the word "history" (my insight). History tells the stories of peoples and places.

For the Hebrews, God was active and alive in their stories. Life could only be understood and accounted for by life itself, by a living God. The events we will encounter, the God with whom we must do business, cannot be accounted for by the astronomical, the physiological, geological, or even psychological phenomena. To the Hebrews, God was living, always and everywhere working His will, challenging persons with His call, evoking faith and obedience, shaping a worshiping community, showing his love and compassion, yet judging sin. And all this

happened (as we will see) not in general, but at specific places, with specific people at specific times. Yes, it's story and history together, like a hand and glove.

In these stories of prophets and kings, keen women and battlefields, we discover that God is a person. He is to be worshipped or defied, believed or rejected, loved or hated, in time and place. For this reason, the Hebrews have always taken history as paramount. God met them in the mundane, the ordinary stuff of daily lives. History – persons, places, events – is to them and to us the very medium through which God has called and saved His People, and all people who respond to Him. We can only get closer to God through story – His story – history.

Unlike other peoples, the Hebrews saw no advantage in making up stories, embellishing fancy tales for entertainment. Their stories were for explanation, revelation, and engagement – not just for fancy. We have been taught by educators, newspapers, podcasts, and telecasts to read stories in terms of politics and economics. Or human interests – who's who and what's what in the power dynamics. But unlike our false division, to the Hebrews there is no such thing as secular history. None. Everything and anything that happens happens in a world created and penetrated by God. They don't always talk about God in their story telling, simply because it is obvious to them (and should be to us) that God's mostly invisible and silent presence is directing the whole affair. For Hebrews, the only reason for paying attention to people and events is to stay alert to God.

The stories are told from the point of view that God has revealed Himself, that God has made a covenant with them. God was not, nor has He ever been, a "make-up-your-own-mind" option. Moses was history. Sinai was fact. Covenant was clear.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might." That was the statement around which lives revolved and stories were told.

So, pull up a chair. Lean in to listen. Get ready for romance, faithful friendships, heartbreak, and even a giant.

Once upon a time there was a

Oh, that will have to wait until next week.

A novel by Gail Godwin contains the story of a penetrating conversation about congealing. One character, Ursula, instructs the narrator, Justin: "There are two kinds of people," she once decreed to Justin emphatically. "One kind you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very nice self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas the other kind keeps moving, changing. With these people you can never say, 'X stops here,' or 'Now I know all there is to know about Y.' That doesn't mean they're unstable. Ah, no, far from it. They are fluid. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard, Justin, against congealing. (Gail Godwin, *The Finishing School*, New York: Viking Press, 1988)

The living word of God resists our congealing, in life and in interpretation. That does not mean interpretation is unstable. It means, rather, that we may continue to expect surprises and can never say, “No I know all about the text.”

When we look at the book of 1 Samuel over these next five months, I hope you’ll be willing to learn new things. To see new insights. To hear new voices speaking from the text. I hope you’re willing, if the text calls upon you to do so, to change your life – to morph, to transform, to renew, to remember, to regret, to repent, to move forward – to forgive and be forgiven. To be willing to open your eyes and see new visions, to unstop your ears and hear new sounds as we look at 1 Samuel. I hope you’re ready to expect some surprises. And I hope you’ll realize you can never say, “I totally get that text.” The stories are fresh and new every time we read them, every time we let them penetrate our hearts and mold and make us into the people who hear the voice of God and the voices of His characters. For their stories make up His story, which transforms ours.

Pull up a chair, lean in, “There once was a man...”

Sources used heavily:

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