

The Story: Looks Can Be Deceiving
By Jason Huff
Proverbs 4:20-27, Isaiah 53:1-5, 1 Samuel 9:1-2, 13:4-14

Our final Scripture reading today comes from 1 Samuel 9:1-2 and 13:4-14. Listen now to God's Word. "There was a Benjamite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish son of Abiel, the son of Zeror, the son of Becorath, the son of Aphiah of Benjamin. He had a son named Saul, an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites -- a head taller than any of the others...so all Israel heard the news: "Saul has attacked the Philistine outpost, and now Israel has become a stench to the Philistines." And the people were summoned to join Saul at Gilgal. The Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Micmash, east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. So he said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings." And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him. "What have you done?" asked Samuel. Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering." "You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command.""

When I was a kid home sick on a Sunday, there was one thing I'd always tune in to watch: the Hour of Power. At one point in time, over 20 million people around the world watched Robert Schuller each week. It was never more than Christianity lite, but it looked and sounded great. Famous people like Mikhail Gorbachev, Al Gore, and John Ashcroft would show up. It appeared picture perfect. Yet all was not right with the Hour of Power. Family squabbles left a son estranged and a church divided. In October, the Crystal Cathedral declared bankruptcy, owing creditors some \$86 million dollars.

On the other hand, I grew up living very close to the headquarters of a major missionary organization. The offices were surrounded by simple homes in minor disrepair. When I attended chapel services there, I wasn't wowed by their musical talents or impressed with their speakers. But the people who worked there had a genuine love for God, and they have workers in 90 countries around the globe sharing the gospel. Looks can be deceiving.

Chapter 10 in *The Story* this week constantly reminds us of that principle. It starts not with the inauguration of a king but with the birth of a prophet named Samuel. Samuel's mother Hannah was desperate to have a child. Her husband Elkanah loved her dearly, but his other wife taunted her unmercifully about her barrenness. She prayed to the LORD, promising that if God gave her a son, he would be dedicated to the LORD for all his days. God heard her prayer and granted her request, and she gave birth to Samuel. When he was just a few years old, Hannah took him to live with Eli, the priest of God at Shiloh. Now Eli's own sons ruthlessly abused their power as priests, and Eli did nothing. Yet Samuel hears from God at an early age, and he becomes a godly, well-known prophet known throughout the land of Israel.

Meanwhile, the Israelites fight with the Philistines, losing 4,000 men in a single battle. Rather than asking the LORD what He desired, the Israelites assume that if they took the Ark of the Covenant with them, God would protect them. He didn't. In the battle, 30,000 men die, including Eli's sons. The Ark falls into enemy hands. When Eli hears that his sons were killed, he falls out of his chair and breaks his neck. Things looked hopeless. Then, seven months later, the Philistines wheel the Ark back to the border. Turns out they had suffered plagues and the statue of their god Dagon crumbled into pieces at the foot of the Ark. Nobody in Israel knew what to do with the Ark either, so it stayed in the border town of Kiriath Jearim for twenty years.

Samuel led Israel away from foreign gods and helped them subdue the Philistines. Unfortunately, his sons didn't follow in his ways, and the people of Israel demand a king so they could be like the nations around them. Samuel is distressed by their request – God was supposed to be their king! So he prays, asking what to do. God confirmed that Israel was not rejecting Samuel -- they were rejecting Him as they had always had. God nevertheless allowed Samuel to anoint a king. Samuel gave Israel the facts – a king would take a tenth of everything they owned, make them into his soldiers and slave – but they didn't care. They wanted a king.

God told Samuel to anoint a certain man he would meet from the tribe of Benjamin. That man was Saul. A head taller than any of his contemporaries, Saul looked the part. And when Samuel anointed Saul, God changed Saul's heart. Saul prophesied in worship and was touched by God. Once named king, Saul proved himself in battle and routed the Ammonites. Israel accepted him as their ruler. The only problem is, Saul's heart doesn't stay right with God. When his men get nervous about an upcoming battle, Saul makes sacrifices to God himself rather than waiting for Samuel. This was a huge mistake – only priests were allowed to make sacrifices, and this move cost his lineage the throne. Later Saul sins again, keeping the best spoils of war from the Amalekites rather than destroying them totally as God commanded. Saul says he did it to honor God with sacrifices – but God desires obedience, not sacrifice. These actions lead to David being anointed as God's chosen king over Saul, as we'll see next week.

Now this segment of *The Story* is tricky for us. On the surface, things look much better than the disunity and distrust that was tearing Israel apart in the time of the judges. But when we look a little deeper, we see that Israel still doesn't trust God. And trust is the central point of today's chapter. Hannah and Samuel and Saul illustrate how our trust in God or lack thereof affects how we act. They show us that true trust runs deep even in the midst of difficulty, and true trust is prayerful rather than practical.

In Hannah's story, we see her deep trust in God. She'd been taunted for years because she was barren. She cries out to the LORD in her distress, and her prayer is granted. She has a wonderful son, Samuel. Yet the vow she made to the LORD was that the boy would be dedicated to Him. She has to send Samuel away to keep her promise. I don't know about you, but I can't imagine sending Jackson or Cameron away to see them only once a year, leaving their training in godliness in the hands of a priest who wouldn't discipline his own sons. It would have been so easy for her to start making new deals with God once she got pregnant. She could have seen the wickedness of Eli's sons and figured, "God wouldn't want me to leave Samuel with *him*." But she doesn't do that. She follows through with her promise. She trusts God. God blesses her with more children, and He blesses Samuel with gifts of ministry and prophecy.

Compare that to the way that the Israelites demanded a king. They wanted the easy path. God wanted to be their king, but that meant they'd have to follow God's law. It meant doing the difficult work of real faith. If they couldn't have an idol to bow down to, they wanted a king who they could follow into battle, a king to give them orders and tell them what to do...a king that they could understand on their own terms, a king just like every other nation.

Those two stories show a night and day difference in faith. But Saul's sad tale shows us that looks can be deceiving. Saul's heart was changed by God, the Scripture says. When a band of traveling prophets came near, Saul prophesied alongside them. By all appearances, he wasn't just an earthly king with impressive height and stature but someone on the road to godliness. Yet his actions show his ultimate rejection of God's ways. So what happened? Saul had faith in God, but it proved superficial. When push came to shove, Saul trusted in himself rather than in Yahweh, and that cost him everything.

When I think about living out deep trust today, I am reminded of the path that our Lord Jesus took. Had it been the Father's will, Jesus could have declared Himself king and become an earthly conqueror. It would have been a whole lot easier than an excruciating death on a cross. Yet Jesus walked the road of suffering precisely because He trusted His Father. His resurrection proved His trust was not misplaced. There is no one we can trust more than the Father.

We would love to be able to be good people. We sometimes think that God's goal is for us to be good. There's a grain of truth in that, but not the whole truth. God *really* wants us to be people who have faith in His Son and trust Him deeply as Hannah and Samuel did. If our trust in God is real, then the Spirit will work in our lives and transform them. As we are transformed, our lives will reflect God's goodness in our lives. I think it's interesting that we rarely are told by the Bible that somebody was a "good" person, but the Bible often tells us whether or not someone was a "godly" person.

This week, I want to ask you to reflect on whether you're a good person or a godly person. Is your trust in God like that of the Israelites, who expected God to provide while they followed their own sinful desires? Or is it like Hannah, who proved her faithfulness in entrusting Samuel to the LORD despite the heartache? I encourage you to examine yourself, and if your faith is just a surface faith, ask God to strengthen it and build it in you. God gave Jesus to us so that we could be remade in His likeness. Trust Him to do that work in you today.

If you're willing to talk to God in prayer like I just mentioned, you're already on the path to our second lesson in faith today: true trust in God is prayerful rather than practical. Saul and the Israelites were practical people. It's hard to see why God was upset with them because they were so sensible. The Israelites took the Ark of the Covenant into battle with them because having it with them always worked in the past. Saul offers Samuel's sacrifices for him so he can get on to the more important work of getting into the battle...on God's behalf, of course. Saul saves the best animals from the Amalekites; why destroy something of such value? Besides, Saul was going to sacrifice them to the LORD, right? Very practical...isn't that what counts?

But God says no. Saul and the Israelites' disobedience is rooted in their unwillingness to pray to God or wait on God in any way. Heaven forbid they should talk to God about what God wants! In comparison, Hannah and Samuel turn to the LORD in prayer. Hannah prays as she leaves Samuel with Eli. In what was a distressing moment, Hannah talks with God, and she leaves singing God's praises. When the people pressure Samuel to give them a king, he goes to God in deep distress. Surprisingly enough, God allows Samuel to anoint Saul as their king. But Samuel is blameless in the whole thing, and that's because he turned to God before he acted.

We live in a time ruled by convenience and practicality. As a culture, we love fast food because it's cheap and easy. We spend hundreds on the latest gadget that will save us time or make life easier. We use the social networking thing online because it's easier than scheduling a lunch and carving out time with somebody. But that dedication to practicality is backfiring. Our love of fast food is literally destroying our bodies. Those gadgets often cost us thirty minutes for every ten they save us. And while I may like Facebook, taking a peek into somebody's life is not the same as spending time with them and showing them genuine care and concern.

That attitude of the practical seeps into our spiritual life too. I've seen people in our own church become laissez-faire about prayer. It's an attitude of, "Yeah, we'll pray about something, but first let's try everything we can do on our own. We'll get God on our side if we really need Him." That's a sinful outlook. Nothing can be farther from the relationship God wants with us.

Whether or not we acknowledge Him, God is engaged with every part of our lives. Not a step we take or a breath we breathe happens without his permission. God's idea of what is practical is completely different from our own. Take a look at what we do here every Sunday morning. Worship is incredibly impractical to the eyes of the world. We sing songs. We listen to a guy talk about stuff that's difficult to understand. We pray for one another. As one theologian put it, worship is a royal waste of time. Not only that, but we've expanded the royal waste of time from 60 minutes to 75! But think carefully about that term I've just used. Worship is *royal time*. When we worship, we come before the throne of God and are ushered into His presence. We take time to contemplate His grace and holiness, His mercy and splendor. If indeed we serve the King of all creation, then being in His presence, thinking on Him moment by moment and praying to Him every chance we get – those are the most practical things we could ever do!

As we head into Christmas, I plead with you...set aside some time to get lost in the wonder of it all. Lose yourself in the glorious riches of God and what He has done for you...not just giving you a home or a job or a family, but providing salvation for you at such a great cost to Himself. Explore what it would mean for you to have a prayerful life rather than a practical life. I know how hard that can be. Every week, I want to dive into studying what I'm going to be preaching on and then writing everything down. But without prayer, without regularly turning to God and asking Him, "What do you want Your people to hear this week?", I've got nothing. If we are prayerful rather than practical, we might be amazed at just what God might accomplish through us.

This morning, we've been talking about true trust in God versus the superficial. That discussion leads us to the manger. Saul was an imposing figure, physically a king's king. The passage we heard from Isaiah 53 this morning told us how Jesus appeared when He came to earth. It says, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." But looks can be deceiving. This little child of no account, of no superficial attractiveness, was God incarnate, the savior of all humanity. As the Advent season ends, I encourage you to believe deeply and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation. Our celebration of His birth itself is an act of faith, of trust, of saying "this story is true and will forever change the world." If you've never done so, trust in Him and become a part of God's story this very day. When you do, God will grow in you the simple yet profound trust of Hannah and Samuel.