

CHAPTER 10, STANDING TALL, FALLING HARD

TIMELESS TRUTH: OBEDIENCE MATTERS.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Blessing. This was meant to be the distinguishing mark of the people of God. God's covenant with Israel required obedience and promised ultimate blessing. Yet, the period of the judges is anything but a time of obedience and blessing in Israel. More fitting descriptions are: Barrenness. Blindness. Battles. Bereavement. Blessing was hard to come by in those days. God's people had abandoned God Himself, and "everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25). Few remembered God's commands. Even fewer obeyed.

But God always has a few. One was a woman named Hannah. She had long endured the grief of childlessness accompanied by the taunts of her husband's other wife. On one of her visits to worship at God's house in Shiloh, Eli, the priest, mistook her devotion for drunkenness. She had poured out her heart first in desperate prayer and then to Eli and vowed that she would dedicate her son to the LORD. Eli assured her that her prayer would be heard. God did give Hannah a son and she kept her word. She named the boy Samuel and took him to serve in the tabernacle under the High Priest, Eli.

God spoke to Samuel one night when he was still a boy. God told Samuel that Eli and his sons would be judged and his priestly line would soon end. And as it always does, God's word came true, this time through the Philistines. Israel lost their first battle with the Philistines at Aphek and blamed their loss on the absence of the ark of covenant. Their own absence of obedience went unnoticed. They faced the Philistine army again, this time with the ark as their good luck charm and lost both the battle and the ark. Eli had grown old and blind, and the devastating news of Israel's defeat, the death of his sons and the loss of the ark of covenant left Eli dead on the spot.

Samuel took Eli's place, but Israel was dissatisfied and asked for a king. Samuel knew better and expressed his opposition. God knew He'd been rejected. Israel knew only that they wanted to be like their pagan neighbors, the very people they were *not* to emulate. God warned that their demand for a king would be costly; that he would exploit them to the point of slavery. The people ignored God's warnings and still insisted on having an earthly king to fight their battles. Saul was anointed by Samuel and began well. He was affirmed by miraculous signs from God. He fought the Ammonites and gave God credit for their victory. Samuel reminded the people that God had not rejected them, even though they had turned away from Him. He encouraged them again to follow God and serve him from the heart and God affirmed Samuel's words with unheard of thunder and rain during harvest.

Saul's honeymoon as king was short-lived. During another battle with the Philistines, Saul got nervous; Samuel was late. So, Saul took his authority too far and took matters—and offerings—into his own hands, violating the role God had reserved for the priests. Samuel confronted Saul; he backpedaled, made excuses, and tried to justify his sin, but wound up losing a dynasty. Saul's path of half-hearted obedience and fear-based leadership grew longer by the year and more twisted with every step.

God rejected Saul as king. Saul's reign was Israel's opportunity to see that monarchy is no better than anarchy when a man after God's own heart is not on the throne. God had already chosen such a man, an unlikely shepherd boy who would one day become Saul's successor. His throne would endure and would point God's people again to the Shepherd King who was yet to come.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Share about a time when you had to admit you were wrong. Was this easy or hard?

1. Eli's encouragement helped Hannah move from deep sadness to hope. Share about a time when someone deeply encouraged you.
2. What can we learn about prayer from Hannah and Samuel?
3. Compare the three fathers in the story: Elkanah, Eli and Samuel. What were their best and worst traits? Which of these traits do you wish you had more of?
4. Samuel was probably about 12 years old when God called him to be a prophet to Eli and all of Israel. He was required to speak the truth in love to his mentor and friend. Have you ever been in this position?
5. The Israelites and the Philistines both treated the Ark of the Covenant more like a good-luck charm than the sacred presence of the LORD. How might people today try to manipulate God for similar gain?
6. Samuel is hurt when he sees that the Israelites want a king like other nations, instead of recognizing God as their king. Do you ever struggle with a desire to be like the culture around you, instead of letting God rule your life?
7. You are on the search committee for the first king of Israel. What would you look for in your applicants? What were Saul's actual qualifications?
8. How do you think Samuel would have described the "state of the union" at the end of his time as judge? Where do you see God's grace in his statement after the battle with the Ammonites?
9. Imagine you have a friend like Saul, who keeps taking matters into his own hands and ignoring what God's word teaches him. What advice would you give him?
10. Chapter 10 opens with the beautiful story of Elkanah's love and leadership of his family. The chapter closes with the story of Saul's poor leadership of Israel and his self-love. Compare and contrast the leadership styles of these two men. In what ways is your leadership style similar to either one? In what areas can you improve?

CLOSING PRAYER