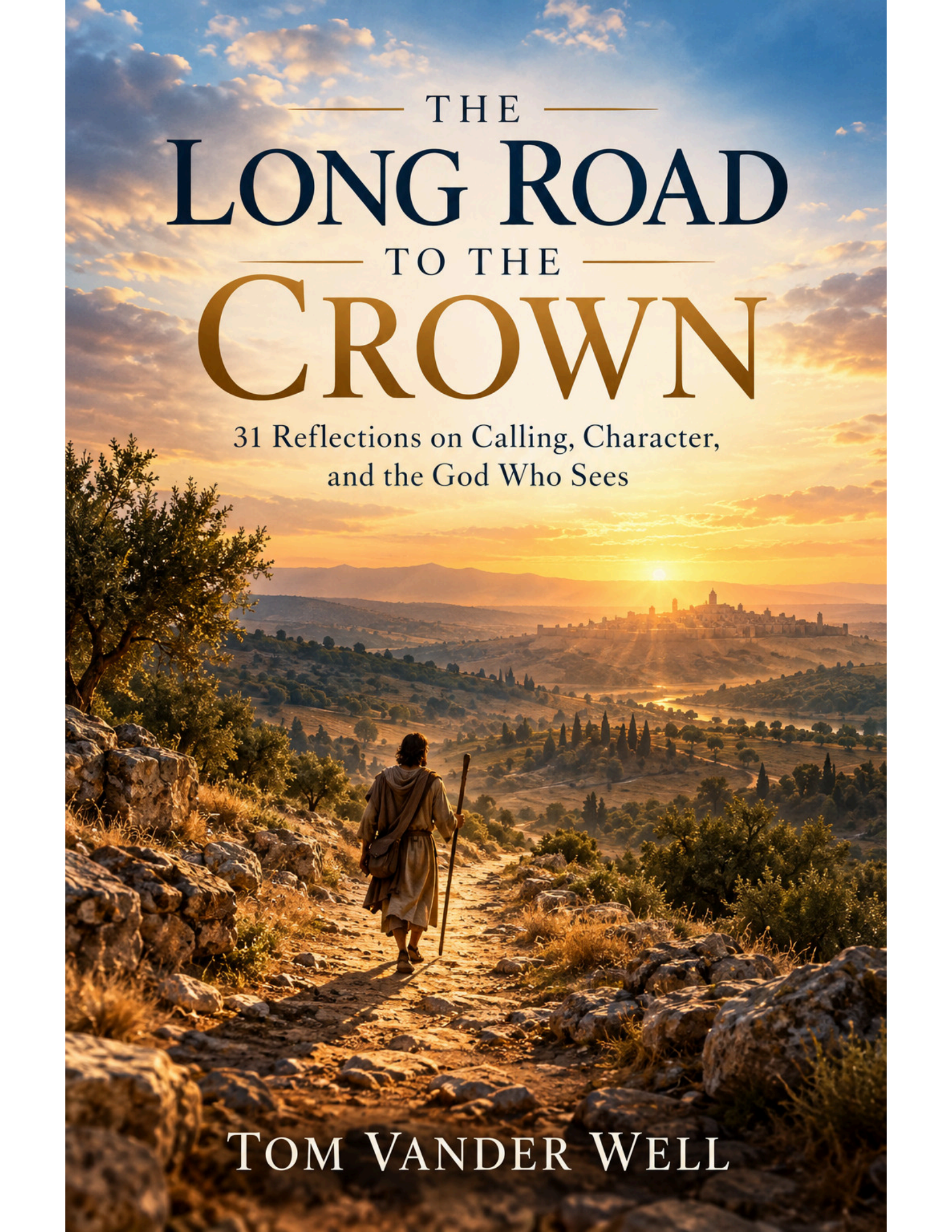


The background of the cover is a photograph of a person in a light-colored robe and sandals, carrying a staff and a bag, walking away from the viewer on a rocky, dirt path. The path leads towards a distant town or city built on a hill, silhouetted against a bright sunset. The sky is filled with soft, golden clouds, and the overall scene is bathed in the warm light of the setting sun. The title text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

THE LONG ROAD TO THE CROWN

31 Reflections on Calling, Character,
and the God Who Sees

TOM VANDER WELL

Introduction

A chapter a day. A step at a time. A life unfolding along the way.

The book of 1 Samuel begins with a woman praying through tears and ends with a nation grieving a fallen king. Between those scenes, we encounter a prophet learning to listen, a king learning how fear can govern the heart, and a shepherd whose road to the throne winds through danger, friendship, betrayal, and waiting.

These thirty-one reflections were first published as part of my chapter-a-day journey. They are not a commentary written from a distance. They are observations made along the road of my own life journey, where ancient Scripture intersects daily with the realities of family, work, memory, disappointment, and hope.

Read slowly. Please read the biblical chapter itself – allow God’s Spirit to speak to you personally through this living Word. Then read the reflection as one traveler’s account of what he noticed along the way. The questions at the end of each chapter are invitations, not assignments: a chance to notice, to be honest, and to take one more step.

The road is long. The God who sees is faithful.

Lace ‘em up, my friend.

Let’s go.

Table of Contents

1. Amidah	5
2. Reversal of Fortunes	7
3. Seasons	10
4. Necessary Defeats	12
5. God's Got This	14
6. Ho-Hum Holiness	17
7. One Question. Three Answers.	19
8. Poor Choices	22
9. Lost Donkeys	25
10. Called and Cowering	28
11. Rookie of the Year (or Not)	31
12. "Come Closer"	33
13. When Fear Replaces Faith	36
14. Father and Son. Formula and Faith.	39
15. Bleating Sheep	42
16. Quiet Shifts	45
17. Slaying Giants	47
18. Welcome to the Wilderness	50
19. God's Hidden Hand	53
20. When Reality Lands Like a Spear	55
21. Man on the Run	58
22. Refuge Over Rejection	60
23. Presence	63
24. A Tale of Two Kings	65
25. Triggered	68
26. The Test of the Spear	71
27. Weary in the Waiting	73
28. When Silence is Loud	76
29. Closed Doors and Suitcases	79
30. Where Refuge is Found	82
31. Finish the Book. Reflect on the Story.	85

The Chapter-a-Day Journey

The reflections in this book come from a chapter-a-day blogging journey that began in April 2006. It was sort of an experiment. I already spent quiet time each morning reflecting on one chapter of God's Great Story. My friend, Kevin, and I started years before doing it together. We called one another every day to share one thing the chapter made us think about.

In 2006 I began a [blog](#) and thought I might just share my "one thing" from the chapter each day on the blog. I called it Wayfarer, since it was a journey itself within my own spiritual journey and life journey. It's been over twenty years later. I'm still trekking through life one-chapter every weekday. During Covid I began recording each post as a podcast which you can find on every major blogging platform, including [Apple](#) and [Spotify](#).

This will explain why some posts reference a date, a season, or a particular life event. These reflections each came from one daily waypoint on life's road. I wasn't just writing about the chapter; I was reflecting on where the text was meeting me on that day and informing my thoughts and attitudes as I entered it.

Along the way, I have had offers from publishers to turn my chapter-a-day posts into a book. While I was honored by the offer, it would have required me to remove them from the internet so that they could be exclusively sold as a book. I offered them freely. I want them to remain free and available for anyone, anywhere, anytime to access.

If these reflections are a blessing to you, and you would like to support this continuing effort of my chapter-a-day posts and podcast, you are welcome to make a donation. I also hope you will share this book, or my blog and podcast with friends and family who might enjoy it.

Tom Vander Well

tomvanderwell@gmail.com

tomvanderwell.com

Tom Vander Well

@tomvwe11



venmo

About the Author



Tom Vander Well is an author, speaker, playwright, and actor. He is CEO of Intelligentics, a customer experience research firm, where he spent his career analyzing over 100,000 business phone calls. He channeled that experience into an Amazon International Bestseller, [This Call May Be Monitored \(What Eavesdropping on Corporate America Taught Me About Business and Life\)](#). Tom has also served as a long-term teaching leader in his local church. He lives in Pella, Iowa with his wife, Wendy.

1. Amidah

Originally published on May 4, 2026



Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ... 1 Samuel 1:13 (NIV)

Today the chapter-a-day journey begins a trek through 1 Samuel. It's the adventurous story of nations, wars, and the making of kings. But just like Luke's version of Jesus' story, the story fascinatingly begins with a woman ... a barren woman.

Hannah is one of the two wives of a man named Elkanah. His other wife Penninah, has had many sons and daughters. Hannah remains childless. A fact that her rival wife mercilessly uses to diminish her at every opportunity.

When Hannah accompanies her husband on his annual pilgrimage to offer sacrifices at God's tent temple — the Tabernacle, she finds herself hitting rock bottom. She takes her sorrow, her anguish, and her heart's desire to the entrance of the Tabernacle. There, she prays.

Hannah's prayer was Deeply focused. Silent. Intense.

I pictured her standing there, so silently intent that the priest thought she was drunk. I heard echoes of Paul's words

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans." Rom 8:26 (NIV) "Do not be drunk on wine...but filled with the Spirit." Eph 5:18 (NIV)

In Jewish tradition, Hannah is an example of Amidah prayer. “Amidah” literally means “standing.” Amidah is the central prayer in Jewish worship and it’s prayed three times a day.

It begins by taking three steps forward — as if you’re approaching God’s throne (or Hannah approaching God’s Tabernacle).

It’s prayed silently - or in a breath’s whisper.

It’s prayed with minimal movement.

It’s prayed with deep concentration.

Amidah is not performative or polished prayer. It’s not prayer for loud effect. It’s prayer that’s present, raw, focused, and deeply personal.

In the quiet this morning, I was mesmerized by Hanna’s Amid. I’ve mentioned in previous posts/podcasts that God has been whispering to me repeatedly about my prayer life of late. I have always attempted to live each day in a perpetual attitude of prayer — making my life a continuous conversation with God.

But sometimes life requires a more intense prayer offering. Prayer that...

Approaches fearlessly. Stands courageously. Groans the heart’s deepest longings wordlessly. Pounds at God’s door shamelessly.

And so, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to end my post/podcast right here.

It’s time for me to stand, and pray.

For the Journey

1. What does Hannah’s prayer reveal about bringing honest longing before God?
2. Where have you been tempted to hide your deepest desire or grief?
3. What would it look like to pray with Hannah’s candor this week?

2. Reversal of Fortunes

Originally published on May 5, 2026



“The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor. ” 1 Samuel 2:6-8 (NIV)

Yesterday was May the Fourth, which has become a bit of a cultural phenomenon celebrating the Star Wars universe. Some people may be unfamiliar with the fact that George Lucas, Star Wars creator, was credited as being one of the best students of Joseph Campbell. Campbell was a great 20th century scholar and unlocked the mysteries of human mythology.

In creating the original Star Wars story, Lucas tapped into some of the most core themes that resonate for us as human beings. The orphan boy is mentored by a wise old sage and is launched on a heroes journey. A rag-tag group of freedom fighters face a David vs Goliath fight against a seemingly unstoppable evil empire. A selfish scoundrel finds out he just might have a soul after all. These are all themes and archetypes that recur again and again in stories, even from ancient times.

As I meditated on today’s chapter, I found it to have a bit of epic feel to it. It’s not just narrating facts, there’s a spiritual heartbeat thumping underneath the text.

The chapter begins with Hannah, the barren woman we met in the opening chapter who promised that if God answered her prayer and gave her a son, she’d give the boy back to the Lord. She wasn't flirting with God — she stepped into something deeper, something intimate and costly. Because most of us want God to fix our pain. Hannah invited God to redeem it. And redemption

often requires open hands.

Having made good on her trust and delivering her son, Samuel, to be raised in God's Tabernacle by the high priest, Eli, she sings a song. The song is about God's providence.

He reverses fortunes (the weak are lifted, the strong are humbled) He brings life and death, poverty and wealth He raises the poor from the dust and seats them with princes

Hannah reveals God as the great Reverser of human expectations, and she should know. She's experienced it first hand. But the song isn't just a reflection of Hannah's fortune, it's a foreshadowing of the fortunes of the high priest Eli and his sons.

The priesthood as originally designed was a family business. Only sons of Moses' brother Aaron could be priests. Eli and his sons got the job because they were in line, but inheritance is no substitute for faithfulness. Eli's are described as "scoundrels." The original Hebrew word is not gentle.

They were anti-priests. They didn't just fail to honor God They actively undermined the sacred system they were entrusted to steward. They turned worship into exploitation. They turned sacrifice into appetite. They turned proximity to God into a tool for self-gratification.

And Eli saw his son's corruption...and did nothing .

Enter the Lone Stranger . A nameless "man of God" shows up. Nameless because the messenger isn't important — the message is. God is about to make a few changes:

Eli's priestly line will die out. God will raise up a "faithful priest," who will follow God's heart and mind. This priest will minister before God's "anointed" (e.g. A king is coming!)

And right there, quietly sitting in the corner of the chapter is the boy, Samuel — entrusted to God by his mother — "growing in stature and in favor with the LORD and with people."

In the quiet this morning, I hear God's Spirit whispering a truth that eventually becomes a roar:

God is not impressed with appearances or bound by human systems. He often overturns what we assume is stable. The powerful fall. The overlooked rise, and the silent child in the corner becomes the voice of God.

And the comfortable, entitled insiders? They collapse under the weight of their own unfaithfulness.

As for me, my job is to be faithful. Like the priest God says He's going raise, I am seek after God's heart and mind. As for what happens with me and my fortunes in this earthly life...

I can trust God with that story.

For the Journey

1. What reversals does Hannah celebrate in her song?
2. Which measure of success or strength most shapes your expectations?
3. How can you honor God's upside-down priorities in one decision?

3. Seasons

Originally published on May 7, 2026



The boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli. In those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions . 1 Samuel 3:1 (NIV)

Wendy and I were away on Tuesday night, visiting with dear friends we'd not seen for a few years. As we drove home yesterday morning I marveled at the ever changing Iowa landscape. Trees have exploded into bloom in all their variations of greenish hues. The rolling fields that have lain desolate in the grays and browns of winter's annual slumber of death are suddenly resurrected. Everywhere, the landscape itself was being transformed by the resurgent life of spring.

Along my life journey, I've observed that it is easy for me to miss the simple spiritual lessons that God wove into creation itself. Paul wrote to the followers of Jesus in Rome that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." (Rom 1:20) The more technology sucks me into screens, and the more life keeps me inside on the couch, the more apt I become to miss the obvious spiritual lessons God is perpetually sharing around me all the time.

I thought about this as I read the beginning of today's chapter. As Samuel is growing up as an apprentice in God's Tabernacle it is spiritually a season of winter .

The system is going through the motions — yet hollow, drained of life.

God has been silent.

For as long as people remember life has spiritually been a desolate landscape barren of color — perpetually draped in drab brown and gray.

That's about to change.

The apprentice hears God's voice. He learns how to both listen — and hear . Seeds of the Spirit begin to germinate beneath the surface.

As I look back on my life journey, I recognize that even my life contains seasons . Seasons of planting, cultivating, and weeding. Seasons of heat and sun—of explosive summer growth. Seasons of fruitfulness—the deep satisfaction of harvest. Seasons of silence... and the chill of winter's death.

Like Samuel hearing God's voice but not understanding, it's taken me decades to recognize that I am perpetually in a season of life — and to learn to be content .

As I meditated on this, my mind wandered back to our recent chapter-a-day trek through Luke's version of Jesus' story. From chapter nine on, Jesus repeatedly tells His followers that his suffering and death are imminent like the mantra of the Stark family in Game of Thrones — "Winter is coming."

But after winter's death comes the new life of spring. Jesus asks His followers on the road to Emmaus, "Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?"

New life springs out of death's desolation. This spiritual truth is woven into creation itself.

And in the quiet this morning, my heart is leaning into these simple truths.

Life contains seasons. Seasons have purpose. My struggling against the season I am in has always been wasted energy. I can embrace the season I am in, find contentment...

...and trust the Story being written.

For the Journey

1. How does Samuel respond when God calls in an unfamiliar season?
2. Where might familiarity be keeping you from recognizing a new invitation?
3. What practice could help you listen before you speak this week?

4. Necessary Defeats

Originally published on May 8, 2026



So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died. 1 Samuel 4:10-11 (NIV)

As a student of history, I enjoy starting my morning perusal of news and events with what happened on “this day in history.” Yesterday, May 7, marked the anniversary of the sinking of the luxury liner HMS Lusitania by German U-boat in 1915. It was a tragic act of war that claimed the lives of 1,198 innocent lives, including 128 Americans on board. The terrible event was instrumental as a spark that would lead to America's involvement in World War I and ultimately, victory over Germany.

As I've studied history, I've observed that it is not uncommon for a major defeat to be the catalyst for ultimate victory. It is sometimes the sting of loss that forces...

re-evaluation of the situation . changes in attitudes and actions. a renewed focus.

I thought about this as I meditated on today's chapter. It is a dark moment for God's people as they are routed by their enemies, the neighboring Philistines. Not only are tens of thousands of Israel's soldiers killed, but the Ark of the Covenant — the symbol of God's very presence — is captured.

Just two chapters ago, a Man of God appears out of nowhere to utter a prophecy regarding the end of the High Priest, Eli, and his family. On this day of defeat for Israel, the prophets words are also fulfilled. Eli and his sons die that day.

I tried to slip my feet into the sandals of one of Israel's elders at the end of that day. I imagined the utter shock of having everything in life suddenly in question.

Our armies have been slaughtered. Will our nation even survive? I've lost many family members and friends. Who will care for their families? The High Priest and his family are dead. He's been our only leader for 40 years! The Ark of God is captured. Has God completely abandoned us?

One of the things I love about history, of course, is that I know the rest of the story.

Defeat is sometimes the catalyst of something good that's coming.

God has been raising a boy named Samuel in preparation for him being one of the strongest and most influential leaders in history. Under Samuel's leadership, a change in national government will take place, a King will be established over Israel, and a boy named David will unify the tribes and usher in a golden age as a nation.

But it begins in the utter darkness of defeat.

Along my journey, I've noticed that this same pattern is found in other areas of life. In sports, it is sometimes the bitter loss that sparks a team to a championship run. Businesses sometimes get to the brink of failure before leadership makes the necessary changes that lead to record growth. I've also witnessed individuals whose lives become tragically unmanageable before they realize they are powerless over their addictions and take the First Step towards a new and better life.

My mind wanders back to yesterday's post/podcast. I observed that there are seasons in life. The events of today's chapter had to feel like the death-like chill of winter for those who survived. But Spring always follows winter. New life is germinating under the surface.

I'm reminded in the quiet this morning that when life hands me a bitter defeat, when seemingly everything has gone wrong — it is never hopeless. In fact, I might not be able to see it, but it may be the very thing that is necessary for the good things God has for me in the next chapter of my story.

For the Journey

1. What do Israel's losses expose about its understanding of the ark?
2. When have you confused a religious symbol or habit with trust in God?
3. What honest reassessment might a disappointment be inviting?

5. God's Got This

Originally published on May 11, 2026



When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. 1 Samuel 5:3-4 (NIV)

As I listen to voices of late, I hear a lot of fear and bewilderment with our current culture.

Both sides of the spectrum have become trenches of hatred and antagonism. Public discourse has given way to name calling and threats. Law and order seems to have given way to terrorism, violence, and chaos.

The response I hear from many is pessimism, anxiety, and a sense of doom. I've heard more than one voice proclaim that "the end must be near."

Today's chapter stands as a fascinating counterpoint to those feelings. Let's remind ourselves of the backstory.

God had proclaimed that the house of Eli and his corrupt sons would come to a bitter end. The tribes of Israel went out to war with the neighboring Philistines. They brought the Ark of the Covenant, hoping it would bring them victory.

They were defeated. The Ark was captured. The tribes of Israel lick their wounds.

Today's chapter shifts to Philistine territory.

The Ark of the Covenant is placed in the Temple of a fertility/agricultural god named Dagon in Ashdod. Twice they wake-up to find the statue of Dagon fallen before the Ark. A plague breaks out among the people, their bodies covered with boil-like tumors.

The Philistines move the Ark to another city, but the contagion follows.

They try to move the Ark to a third city, but the citizens rise up to say "You're not bringing that thing here!"

As I meditated on these events in the quiet this morning, I remembered that just a few chapters ago it said that God had been silent for years while Eli and his son's corruption ran amok in and around God's tent temple. God seemed similarly absent as they brought the Ark to battle, being routed by their enemies.

Suddenly, sitting in the Temple of Dagon, God appears to wake up.

But God was never absent. And, He wasn't asleep.

He simply refused to be manipulated.

Israel thought they could carry God like a good-luck charm. The Philistines thought they could capture God like a trophy.

They were both wrong.

The fascinating thing about today's chapter is God revealing He is perfectly capable of defending Himself with no human intervention or assistance. God is not fragile. The Israelites lost because of their disobedience, not because Yahweh was weak.

That distinction matters.

I have observed that throughout history followers of Jesus have panicked whenever culture shifted, institutions weakened, or the Church lost influence. But today's chapter whispers: "God is not pacing nervously in heaven." The ark in Philistine territory is a reminder that God's reign does not depend on favorable polling numbers, political victories, or cultural dominance. He can walk into enemy territory all by Himself and start knocking idols over in the middle of the night.

I'm reminded in the quiet this morning that God will not be reduced to a mascot, a political ally, or a lucky charm. The Ark in today's chapter is dangerous because the presence of God destabilizes every false center of power. And perhaps the most haunting question from the story is: Where in my heart and life have I positioned Dagon next to God? What have I tried to enthrone alongside Him?

Success? Certainty? Image? Comfort? Control? Ideology?

Because eventually, one way or another, Dagon always falls.

And perhaps the beautiful mercy hidden in the chapter is this: God loves us enough to topple what cannot save us .

Sometimes the crash in the night is grace wearing combat boots.

For the Journey

1. What happens to Dagon when the ark enters his temple?
2. Where does fear make you imagine God has lost control?
3. What anxiety can you release rather than trying to manage God?

6. Ho-Hum Holiness

Originally published on May 15, 2026



And the people of Beth Shemesh asked, “Who can stand in the presence of the Lord, this holy God? To whom will the ark go up from here?” 1 Samuel 6:20 (NIV)

I grew up in a church that on Sunday practiced high-church pageantry. There were both adult and children’s choirs in full robes. There was a pipe organ and the minister was in full regalia. Worship was formal.

I can still remember being a squirrely kid under the stern gaze of the organist and choir director as I sat in my robe in the choir loft. As a child, it was easy to miss the point of all the pomp. It was easy to make light of all the religious regalia and holy hoopla.

One of the things that I’ve observed along my spiritual journey is that familiarity with God is not the same as reverence for God.

In today’s chapter, the Philistines decide that seven months of holding on to the Ark of the Covenant and suffering from plague was enough. I can’t forget that seven throughout the Great Story represents “completeness.” The Israelites tried to use the Ark like a good luck charm that would bring them victory. The Philistines tried to hold on to the Ark as if it were a trophy of war. God refuses to be manipulated by either human motivation. Having completed this divine object lesson, the Ark is returned to Israel by the Philistines along with a guilt offering.

The Philistines are very careful how they return the Ark. They put it on a brand new cart (a sign of reverence). They use two cows that have never been yoked and had recently calved. This was a

test. The cows should instinctively want to stay near where their calves were — instead the cows pull the Ark directly back to Israel.

Fascinating that a pair of cows obey divine purposes and the pagan Philistines learn that God is not to be trifled with.

The Ark's first stop is a border town called Beth Shemesh. The people are overjoyed to see the Ark, but like kids in the choir loft they don't take God's presence seriously. They see this as their opportunity to take peek inside the Ark and see its contents for themselves. They pay for it with their lives.

The men of Beth Shemesh were not Philistines. They were covenant people. And yet they handled what they knew to be the most holy thing of their faith tradition carelessly.

I've observed that one of the strangest dangers along my spiritual journey is that the longer I walk around sacred things the easier it becomes to lose my sense of wonder. What is holy becomes ho-hum. And, when that happens...

I stop trembling. I stop listening. I stop approaching God with awe.

And eventually, God becomes furniture.

Today's chapter whispers: "Don't lose the weight of glory."

The cows in this story may actually shame the humans a bit. They instinctively move toward the purposes of God while people nearby oscillate between superstition and irreverence. There's almost a dark humor in it — the livestock are spiritually more responsive than the human beings.

And yet beneath the warning is grace.

Because the ark comes back.

God returns to His people despite their failures. Despite their superstition. Despite their irreverence. Despite their fear. And that is the heartbeat beneath the thunder.

Despite their repeated disobedience the holy God still desires to dwell among His people.

For the Journey

1. How do different communities react to the presence of the ark?
2. Where has familiarity dulled your sense of reverence?
3. What ordinary moment can you approach with fresh attentiveness?

7. One Question. Three Answers.

Originally published on May 18, 2026



The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time—twenty years in all. 1 Samuel 1:2 (NIV)

I have had a lot of people asking me about my book over the past couple of weeks. The publisher's official launch was just about two weeks ago and it's stirred a lot of interest and questions. Many of the questions I've received have been about time .

“ How much time did it take you to write the book ?” is perhaps the most asked question.

The question has three answers.

The actual writing took between 2-3 months. I rose every morning at 5:00 a.m., grabbed my coffee, walked straight to the keyboard and wrote for one hour. At 6 o'clock I stopped writing and forgot about it until the following morning. I didn't count the exact number but the first draft was finished between 60 and 90 days. Then with edits, rewrites, and publishing took over twice that amount of time.

So, you could say it took 60-90 days to write, and 10 months total from start to publishing.

The idea for the book came to me over a decade ago. I was journaling one day over a pint at the local pub and I decided to list all of the “life lessons” that I'd learned from my career. I began to simply write all the spiritual principles I'd picked up along the line. When I was finished, there were over 30 of them. “This is a book,” I said to myself.

So, you could say it took over a decade.

The fact is that the book is not just about my business career, but my life story. I was dead set that I was going to do one thing in life. It took years for God to steer me to what it was He really purposed for me. And then came the long slog of having to learn the many lessons and spiritual principles.

So, you could say it took about 45 years.

Today's chapter is one of those dramatic inflection points in the Great Story.

Samuel steps into his own as a true leader of his people. He becomes Israel's priest, prophet, and final judge.

Samuel calls Israel to true repentance. Hearts turn. Idols are removed. Lives are sincerely and ritually poured out and surrendered to God.

God thunders from heaven, throwing the Philistine's into confusion and making way for a major victory. The result was not only recaptured territory from the Philistines, but a peace treaty with another enemy as well.

Israel famously sets up standing stone as a memorial to these momentous events. They call the memorial rock "Ebenezer" meaning "stone of help" with the understanding "Thus far, God has helped us."

As I meditated on these things in the quiet this morning, I had a veritable plethora of options to think and write about. There are so many great spiritual themes and lessons lying on the surface.

But I was drawn to an easily overlooked verse in the chapter.

The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim a long time—twenty years in all.

It's equivalent of the graphic transition that comes up for a few seconds in a movie that says, "Twenty years later."

Two decades pressed into a single sentence.

As I look back on my life journey from the 60 year mile-marker, I can point you to many dramatic moments and seasons along the way. Like the Great Story itself, not all of those dramatic moments are mountain tops. I've had my share of dark valleys. Some were low points that life brought my way — and some were pits in which I willingly and foolishly placed myself.

Right now, I'm experiencing a bit of a mountain top with the publishing of my book. But it didn't happen in just 60-90 days of typing. It happened over a decade of waiting for the right time — and God's purposes. It happened over a 32 year career and a 45 year life journey required for the content to be planted, germinate, and grow.

Oaks grow while nobody notices.

In the quiet this morning, I'm reminded of a fact that data has clearly revealed in my career researching customer expectations. With the exponential rise in the speed of rising technology and the increasing speed at which we can do almost everything in life, we are an increasingly impatient culture. We want what we want and we want it now .

How quickly can the drone arrive with my spur-of-the-moment Amazon order?

And here is the hard reality I must face as a follower of Jesus: God exists outside of time, so He is never in a hurry.

Between the opening of today's chapter to the dramatic action it contains there was twenty-years.

Twenty-years of doing hum-drum every day life. Twenty-years of Samuel learning, maturing, preparing. Twenty-years of the people's hearts being cultivated.

God's Kingdom and His purposes don't cater to the human expectations of timeliness. They are operating on an eternal scale outside of time. I've learned that life flows much better for me when I surrender my desires and expectations to the timing and purposes God has for me. My job is to simply keep walking the journey, following Jesus' footsteps, and loving people well.

The fruits of the Spirit do not include speed, industriousness, or achievement.

The fruit of the Spirit does, however, include patience.

For the Journey

1. How does Samuel lead the people toward repentance and remembrance?
2. What season of your life makes more sense in retrospect?
3. What marker of God's faithfulness could you name or share?

8. Poor Choices

Originally published on May 19, 2026



But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. 1 Samuel 8:6-7 (NIV)

There are moments that are hinge-pins in human history.

Today’s chapter is quietly one of them.

For hundreds of years, starting right after leading the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, God asked them to live differently than any other people group on earth. God asked them to trust Him to lead. He gave them instructions for managing every day life. His presence was designed to be at the center of everything . He would raise up human leaders as needed. God, however, would be their ultimate leader. As long as they faithfully trusted, obeyed, and followed — God promised to bless, provide, and protect.

It was a radical and revolutionary paradigm in a survival-of-the-fittest, “king of the mountain” world of human empire. It was a living testament to the words God would later speak through Isaiah:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.”

It wasn’t easy. The loose confederation of twelve Hebrew tribes struggled.

Struggled to trust. Struggled to obey. Struggled to follow.

Walking by faith is difficult by human standards. It's why Jesus described it as a narrow road that few people choose to take. And in today's chapter the Hebrews look around at all of the other nations and city-states in the world and said, "We'd rather be like them." They wanted a human king who would provide a strong centralized human government. They wanted certainty, structure, and guaranteed outcomes. A much easier road, by all appearances.

Samuel is distraught at his people's demand. He warns them of the negative consequences to which this course of action will lead. Jewish commentators often point to a repeated Hebrew word, *yiqqach*, that Samuel uses - which translates "take."

The Hebrews expected the King to give them what they wanted. Samuel counters that a King will take more than they realize: Take sons. Take daughters. Take fields. Take grain. Take freedom.

The people however, are entrenched. They demand a king.

And then, God does something astonishing. He simply says, "Okay." The God who people often presume to be a judgmental and condemning tyrant just lets His people choose a different path than the one He prescribed and purposed for them. He gives them free will, knowing where it will lead.

Saul will fail. David will rise. Solomon will shine and fracture Kingdoms will divide into bloody civil war. Exile will come.

And yet somehow, mysteriously, God still works through the mess. God sometimes permits human choices while still weaving redemption through them.

And, in the quiet this morning — I suddenly see my story in the Great Story.

Looking back, I can point to so many times I chose to go my own way. There are so many waypoints on life's road when I made foolish, self-centered choices based on my own human desires — even when I knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was not what God wanted.

Did I suffer the consequences of my choices?

Yes.

Did God leave me or forsake me?

No.

Like the Hebrews choosing human empire over God's kingdom, God time and time again simply said "Okay" to my choices. Time and time again He has woven redemption in and through the disastrous aftermath of those choices.

The haunting beauty of today's chapter is that God lets the people choose — even knowing the heartbreak ahead. This is one of the Bible's most sobering truths: God sometimes loves us enough to let us experience the weight of what we insist upon.

But even then... grace keeps moving.

Because the monarchy Israel demanded eventually becomes the lineage through which the true King arrives.

God writes redemption with crooked human lines. Like a master novelist scribbling hope in the margins of our disastrous edits.

Which means this chapter is not merely: "Don't reject God."

It is also: "Even when I do, God is still writing the story."

For the Journey

1. What do the elders ask for, and what warning do they receive?
2. When have you wanted what others had despite the cost?
3. What choice today calls for listening beyond your immediate desire?

9. Lost Donkeys

Originally published on May 20, 2026



Now the donkeys belonging to Saul's father Kish were lost, and Kish said to his son Saul, "Take one of the servants with you and go and look for the donkeys." 1 Samuel 9:3 (NIV)

I've always loved theatre. From the moment I was surprisingly cast by my teacher in the lead role of a 6th grade play, I had a quiet passion for it. Little did I know that God had purposes for that passion.

On the first day of my sophomore year of high school I was cast in a film. During the production of the movie I met a man who would become my spiritual mentor. Then he would hire me in the job that would become my career. I now own the company he founded.

Though everyone suggested a million practical things I should major in at college, I decided to eschew practicality and follow my passion. I majored in theatre — and it prepared me for life and a successful business career in ways I could have never imagined .

Backstage, in a community theatre production of South Pacific , I met a woman named Wendy. She was the prop master for the show. We became friends. Then she became my wife and partner in all things.

In today's chapter, a young man named Saul is tasked by his father with a relatively mundane task. He's sent to look for some lost donkeys. The search becomes a multi-day journey. Saul has zero clue that God has told His prophet Samuel to be on the lookout for a young man looking for donkeys. Samuel is told to anoint the donkey hunter as the new King of Israel.

Saul is not searching for a throne. He's searching for donkeys. Yet God is guiding every step.

This theme echoes throughout the Great Story:

Moses tending sheep before encountering the burning bush.

David watching flocks before being anointed King.

Peter casting nets before Jesus calls him to become a fisher of men.

God often meets people while they are busy doing the ordinary thing in front of them. Like simply following a quiet passion for the stage. God is at work in my life even when I think I'm merely chasing lost donkeys.

Saul wakes up believing the day is about missing animals. Samuel wakes up knowing the kingdom is arriving. Both are walking toward the same moment. And, that's the mystery of God's providence.

How many moments in life felt random at the time?

a delayed conversation

an unexpected detour

a frustrating loss

a chance meeting

a job we almost didn't take

a coffee invitation

a closed door

a wandering donkey

It's only in looking back from a waypoint further down life's road that I realize: God was steering the entire time.

It's easy to imagine God's calling arriving with trumpets and lightning bolts. Along my life journey, I've come to realize that more often, God hides destiny inside ordinary obedience.

I take a chance and audition. I take the networking meeting. I write the post. I show up for coffee. I follow the nudge.

Meanwhile, heaven is arranging divine appointments I can't possibly see or imagine.

Now, if you'll excuse me, the curtain is rising on this another day in the journey. There are no lost donkeys on my task list, but there are a host of other routine, mundane tasks to perform. And so, I

will faithfully play my part — and trust God’s providence for whatever He has planned and purposed in the midst of it.

For the Journey

1. How does a search for lost donkeys become part of Saul’s story?
2. Which apparent detour in your life proved unexpectedly important?
3. How might you stay open to purpose in today’s interruptions?

10. Called and Cowering

Originally published on May 21, 2026



So they inquired further of the Lord, “Has the man come here yet?” And the Lord said, “Yes, he has hidden himself among the supplies.” 1 Samuel 10:22 (NIV)

I was fourteen years old when God gave me a very clear call to proclaim His Word. The whole thing was ludicrous.

I was young and naive. I was uneducated. I had no experience.

And yet, I quietly told God that if He gave me the opportunity, I would do what asked. I preached my first message less than three months later. In less than a year from receiving the call, I found myself traveling around the state preparing and delivering a message in different churches every Sunday.

I know. It's crazy. But, it's true.

Along my journey, I've observed and learned that when God calls individuals, rarely are those individuals ready or prepared for the task.

Moses balked in front of the burning bush. Gideon repeatedly asked for proof. Elijah ran for the hills and asked to die. Peter told Jesus to take a hike.

In today's chapter, Samuel anoints Saul as the first King of Israel. He gives Saul a series of prophetic signs he can expect. The signs include Saul running into a group of prophets, the Spirit of God descending on him, and Saul beginning to prophesy with them. Everything happened

exactly as Samuel predicted. Yet when the nation was gathered, the lots were cast, and the grand moment came to introduce the tall, handsome young man as king...

Saul was hiding among the baggage.

As I meditated on Saul's cowering this morning, my heart and mind meandered down two different paths of thought.

On one hand, Saul's reaction — and the reactions of the other characters I noted from the Great Story — reveal a certain humility. In a world that places excessive importance on "influence" and "likes" there is something almost refreshing about a person who isn't anxiously clawing their way to the top. History is rife with stories of individuals clamoring for the crown in the perpetual game of thrones. I find it a bit novel to have an individual whose motivation isn't the fame, power, and fortune. Perhaps that's the exact reason God tends to choose such individuals.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that Saul is cowering at God's calling along with the many others I mentioned. When God comes calling it almost always feels larger than the person receiving it.

Saul's story begins with insecurity, hesitation, and bewilderment. That part is relatable. Most worthwhile callings begin there.

Getting married. Parenthood. Leadership. Writing a book. Leading a company. Loving someone deeply. Ending a marriage. Speaking truth publicly. Creating art that matters. Following God into uncertainty. Rarely have I felt ready for God's calling.

I want guarantees, clarity, and certainty. God, if you could please just provide me with a five-year strategic plan laminated in heavenly gold foil, I will be glad to do this thing you're calling me to do.

But I've learned along my journey that God's callings don't come with legal assurances and laminated strategy plans. Instead, they are typically accompanied by a next step, and just enough light to see it. They come with a strange sign and a whisper in the heart saying: "I will be with you."

Saul's tragedy will not be that he began weak. His tragedy will be that insecurity slowly curdled into fear, image-management, jealousy, and self-protection.

Weak beginnings are not the danger — refusing continual surrender is.

Because the same man who once hid among the baggage will one day build monuments to himself. And that is the quiet warning humming beneath today's chapter: calling can either deepen humility... or feed ego.

And every soul eventually chooses which way the oil flows.

In the quiet this morning I hear a simple invitation to stop waiting to feel completely qualified before obeying God. The kingdom has always moved forward through trembling people with oil still

dripping down their foreheads. Like a fifteen-year-old standing up to give a message in front of a church full of strangers.

For the Journey

1. What contrast do you see between Saul's calling and his hiding?
2. Where do you feel both called and afraid?
3. What small step of courage could move you out of hiding?

11. Rookie of the Year (or Not)

Originally published on May 22, 2026



When Saul heard their words, the Spirit of God came powerfully upon him, and he burned with anger. He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel, proclaiming, "This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel." Then the terror of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out together as one . 1 Samuel 11:6-7 (NIV)

Wendy and I love baseball, and our Chicago Cubs. Living in Iowa affords us the opportunity of following the Iowa Cubs, Chicago's Triple-A farm team. It's so fun watching the team's young talent come up through the ranks. Over the years there are so many young players we've gotten to know and love before most of Cubs Nation have even heard their names.

It's one of the nuances that you find is part of the game when you really follow baseball. The rookie player gets called up and has instant impact.

"Is this the next Hall of Famer?" "Maybe this kid will take our team to the next level!" "He's got 'Rookie of the Year' written all over him!"

Today's chapter is fascinating because as it opens we find the newly anointed King Saul ... farming .

No crown. No throne. No harem.

Young King Saul is dirty, sweaty, and working behind a pair of oxen in the field when word reaches him about a territorial threat to two of the twelve tribes who lived east of the Jordan River.

This is it. The moment. Saul is down on the farm, but the phone just rang in the dugout. He's getting called up to The Show, and his debut is going to be the lead story on SportsCenter tomorrow.

Saul does everything right .

He is bold and courageous in calling the nation together. He is humble, acknowledging Samuel as a co-leader. He is authoritative in his leadership. He is cunning in his military strategy. He is victorious. In victory, he is gracious to his detractors. He gives the glory to God.

Saul doesn't strike out. Not once. He bats 1.000 in his debut, knocks it out of the park, and seals the victory over one of their hated rivals.

Israel Nation is buzzing. The Rookie of the Year has arrived.

But here's the thing that every baseball fan has experienced. It's a long season. A great start does not guarantee success in the grind of games. As I write these words in the quiet this morning, the names and faces of players come to mind. So many young players with amazing debuts that had everyone thinking Rookie of the Year and future Hall of Famer, only to become a sports trivia question on the television broadcast during the rain delay.

"What rookie batted 1.000 in his debut back in 1996?"

In today's chapter, the Spirit came powerfully upon Saul, and he played one heck of a game. But among the fruit of that same Spirit is faithfulness , and it's a long season. He's not going to be Rookie of the Year. In fact, by the end of the season the club is going to be desperate to cut him from the team.

In the quiet this morning, Saul's debut soberly reminds me that this earthly life is a long season. God's desire for me is not one game of brilliance in which I batted a thousand, but quietly showing up every day and playing a complete season marked by patience, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. That's a contribution that's a win-win for the team and me.

For the Journey

1. What changes in Saul when he hears about Jabesh Gilead?
2. How do early successes affect your expectations of leaders or yourself?
3. How can you celebrate a good beginning without assuming the story is finished?

12. "Come Closer"

Originally published on May 26, 2026



"Do not be afraid," Samuel replied. "You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart." 1 Samuel 12:20 (NIV)

Our daughter Madison was always that kid who typically avoided admission of guilt like a high-priced defense attorney. Even as a toddler, Maddy Kate had the "never plead guilty" mindset imprinted on her soul. And if she decided that the blue sky was actually purple, you had a zero-percent chance of convincing her otherwise.

That said, there is one event from her childhood that sticks out in my mind for being such an anomaly.

Madison was twelve. If I remember correctly it was evening and we'd had friends over cooking burgers, having a little campfire, and hanging out. Suddenly Madison appeared with a very serious look on her face. She said we needed to talk.

The tears began to flow. Her lip quivered.

She confessed to me that she and her friend had taken a wine cooler (remember Bartles & James?) from the refrigerator and snuck off because they wanted to try it. Switching into remorse mode she quickly assured me through her tears that they didn't drink the whole thing, that she was sorry she'd done it, and she promised she'd never do anything of the kind again.

I had one overwhelming desire in that moment.

I wanted to wrap her in my arms and hold her close.

And so, I did, as I secretly smiled and told her she was forgiven — and that I trusted her promise to never do it again.

Today's chapter is about a big transition. For the people of Israel, the retirement of Samuel is both a change of leadership, but it's also a complete change in system of government. Samuel is the last of the Judges — individuals raised by God to lead the tribes for a specific time and purpose. The people had asked for a change. They wanted a human monarch - a king - like all the other nations had. And so, like the prodigal's father, Father God is granting them their desire knowing that they will find themselves wading in the pig slop of their choices.

Samuel's farewell speech is not haphazard. It's formatted in the outline of an ancient covenant renewal:

Witness testimony

Historical review

Covenant obligations

Blessings/curses

Divine sign.

Samuel is essentially renewing Israel's relationship with God before the monarchy fully begins. And he does not soft-sell the truth. He reminds the people that asking for a king was something God warned them against through Moses back when the Law was given. Their demand for a king was the wrong thing to do, and they would suffer the consequences of their decision.

Cut to the quick, the people confess and express remorse for their demand, asking Samuel to pray to God that God won't kill them .

Time-out.

Isn't that what I naturally expect in the fear of my remorse?

"Dad's gonna kill me!"

Which makes Samuel's response even more important. Essentially, he says, "Yes, you've done this evil. Now, don't turn away from the Lord."

Not, "You've failed. Now leave." Not, "You've ruined everything. There's no hope for you." Not, "I sentence you to death."

Father God's response is "Yes, you sinned...Come closer."

And that's the rhythm of God's grace. Samuel even referenced it in his farewell speech. Time and time again the people had turned against God. Time and time again God graciously forgave them, embraced them, and faithfully kept His covenant with them.

Here they are turning against God again . Here God is, again , faithfully embracing them despite their failure.

Along my spiritual journey I've observed that the enemy wants me to believe one of two lies about my sin:

"It's really not that serious."

"It's ruined everything forever."

I've found both lies to be equally poisonous. Jesus' message is the truth in the tension between those two extremes when He says to me: "Your sin is real. My grace is more real."

As my mind wanders back to my daughter's wine cooler rebellion, I have to smile. It was relatively easy for me to be a gracious father amidst Madison's overwrought remorse for what was a minor moral infraction. I can point to multiple mistakes I've made in life that are far more serious. Yet, every time, Father God has responded the same way.

"Yes, you sinned. Come here. Come closer."

For the Journey

1. What does Samuel say after the people acknowledge their wrong?
2. Where does shame tempt you to pull away rather than draw near?
3. What act of return or trust could you make today?

13. When Fear Replaces Faith

Originally published on May 27, 2026



“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 Mikdash, 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.” 1 Samuel 13:11-12 (NIV)

There is a great scene in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. Young King Henry of England and his army are marching on France. Early victories were costly. Poor, early winter weather sets in. The army is decimated by battle and illness. Those who are left are wet, muddy, cold, and disheartened. Meanwhile, the King of France has rallied his army and hired foreign mercenaries to help repel Henry and the rag tag remnants of his army.

At this low-point of strength and morale the French send their Herald to Henry to offer him ransom. This was a common practice among royals in those days. In the face of sure defeat, Henry could surrender himself to the French king. His army would be allowed to return to England. England would be forced to pay “ransom” for Henry’s return. Henry and England would suffer humiliation but he would save his own skin along with the lives of his army.

Henry refuses this offer and tells the French herald to return to his master saying,

“We would not seek a battle as we are, Nor, as we are we say we will not shun it.”

As the Herald is riding away the Duke of Gloucestershire whispers his fearful doubt, saying to Henry, “I hope they will not come upon us now.”

Henry's reply to the Duke is epic.

"We are in God's hand, brother, not in theirs."

This scene came to mind this morning as I meditated on today's chapter, in which Saul is a contrasting parallel to Shakespeare's Henry.

Much like England, the army of Israel is facing an almost impossible military situation. The neighboring Philistines have an advantage in numbers and weapons. Everyone knows it.

Samuel tells Saul to wait and do nothing for seven days.

Saul has mustered as many men as he can to face the threat, but for a week they wait and stare across the field at the overwhelming army of the enemy. Men begin to desert. They flee to hide in caves and even travel to other countries in the opposite direction. Saul's situation is quickly descending from bad to worse.

Day seven arrives. Samuel still hasn't arrived. Saul loses patience. He takes it upon himself to do Samuel's job and offer sacrifices to God and seek God's favor. As the smoke of the burnt offerings is still rising to the heavens, Samuel arrives. Timing in Scripture can be delightfully brutal sometimes. Like Jesus calming the storm after having to be woken by His disciples, God has a way of showing up exactly one minute after we panic.

This moment becomes the defining fracture point of Saul's reign. The issue is not merely ritual violation. It is trust. Saul could not endure uncertainty long enough to obey. Saul's core issue is not weakness. It's self-reliance baptized in religious language.

As I meditated on the moment this morning I found Saul's outward behavior is understandable. From a purely pragmatic leadership perspective, it almost feels reasonable. His troops are scattering. The enemy is enormous. Samuel is late. Time is running out.

But the very human moment exposes a hard spiritual truth: pragmatism can become rebellion when fear replaces trust.

In his rebuke of Saul, Samuel foreshadows that God has already decided to raise up Saul's replacement. And this encourages me to think about what I know about David in contrast to this telling moment for Saul. Saul grasps for control. David repeatedly turns to dependence on God. And, therein lies the difference between Saul and "a man after God's own heart."

This chapter is ultimately about what happens in the gap between instruction and fulfillment. Saul's true enemy was not Philistines. It was silence .

Seven days. But heaven's delays expose what hurried circumstances conceal. Anyone can appear faithful when answers arrive quickly. Faith is revealed in the waiting room. Many of my worst decisions on life's road were not made in outright rebellion. They were made in anxious acceleration.

I confess. I get tired of waiting...

for clarity,

for healing,

for provision,

for reconciliation,

for opportunity,

for God to do something.

So, I do what so many others before me have done. I sleep with Hagar. I force doors open. I grasp for control. I offer sacrifices God never asked for.

And then Samuel walks over the hill. There's a painful tenderness in this story because Saul was not trying to abandon God. He was trying to manage God. And, that may be the more dangerous temptation.

Yet the chapter also whispers hope. God's purposes are never dependent on human perfection. Even while Saul is unraveling, David is already somewhere tending sheep beneath the same sky. Despite my weaknesses, God is often preparing the answer long before you can see the shepherd walking toward the battlefield.

And Shakespeare? He inspires me with a contrasting example. Henry had faith to trust God amidst the overwhelming odds against him. Shakespeare wasn't making up a fictitious story. Henry's victory at the Battle of Agincourt as one of the most miraculous victories in history.

In the wake of his victory, Henry is asked by one of his men whether they can share the good news.

"Yes, captain," he replies, "but with this acknowledgment...That God fought for us."

I spent a lot of my life journey acting like Saul when situations turn grim.

Today, and moving forward, I want to be more like Henry.

For the Journey

1. What pressure leads Saul to act before Samuel arrives?
2. When has urgency persuaded you to compromise a conviction?
3. What would patient faithfulness look like in a current pressure point?

14. Father and Son. Formula and Faith.

Originally published on May 28, 2026



Saul was staying on the outskirts of Gibeah under a pomegranate tree in Migron. With him were about six hundred men.... Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, “Come, let’s go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.” 1 Samuel 14:2, 6 (NIV)

I was raised in the pomp of high-church pageantry that often traded the Spirit for spectacle. Later, I found myself entrenched in the rigidity of fundamentalist formulas. In that particular tribe, the exchange was religious rule-keeping taking the place of living righteousness.

Along my life journey, I’ve learned and observed that faith is never a formula.

Today’s chapter provides a fascinating contrast between faith and religious formula. What makes it even more fascinating is that the contrast is between father and son — between King Saul and his son, Jonathan. The author of Samuel continues to reveal the fatal flaws in Saul’s character, while establishing Jonathan as the kind of young man perfect to be a mentor and bff to David.

As the chapter opens, Israel remains badly outmatched by the Philistines. Saul’s army is small, frightened, and poorly armed. The momentum from the disaster in yesterday’s chapter still hangs over everything like smoke after a fire.

Saul sits under a tree with 600 men. Jonathan decides to act, saying “Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.” And this statement is the beating heart of the chapter.

God rewards Jonathan's faith. He climbs up dangerous cliffs to approach a Philistine outpost. His surprise, special-forces attack sparks a wide-spread Philistine panic. When this happens, Saul finally moves to pursue their enemies. But his actions reveal that Saul is less depending on God and more dependent on religious formulas.

The first thing Saul does is ask for the Ark of the Covenant to be brought forward. The author already established back in chapter four that when Israel tried to use the Ark like a military good luck charm the results were not favorable. Saul seems not to have learned that lesson.

Saul then demands that his entire army begin fasting , which is a long established religious practice intended to purposefully suppress physical appetite in order to expand and deepen spiritual sense and understanding. Saul, however, is using the fast as another religious good luck charm.

"If we fast, God will be happy with us and give us His favor!"

Only God didn't ask Saul and his army to fast. This is Saul thinking that God will be manipulated by his formulaic religious rigor. It's foolish. Asking an army in an active military campaign not to eat will only weaken them physically and discourage them emotionally. By the time they start plundering their vanquished foes, the men are so starved that they sin by eating the meat before it was drained of blood as prescribed by the Law.

Saul then builds an altar to God and inquired of God whether he should pursue the fleeing Philistines. He once again eschews acting in faith looking for a religious formula to provide him certainty. Wouldn't you know it? God remains silent.

In the quiet this morning, I find myself reflecting on this very simple and stark contrast between father and son. Am I sitting under a tree going through religious motions or climbing the cliff with Jonathan?

Saul had the title. Jonathan had the faith.

Saul waited passively while maintaining appearances. Jonathan stepped forward into uncertainty trusting God. And what struck me as I meditated on the passage this morning is that Jonathan didn't have certainty — he had willingness , and that matters.

How often have I delayed obedience waiting for:

absolute clarity,

guaranteed outcomes,

perfect conditions,

zero risk.

But throughout the Great Story, God moves through people willing to take the next faithful step before the whole map is visible.

“Perhaps the Lord will act...”

There’s humility there, but there's also courage. Not arrogance. Not paralysis. Just simple faith.

Finally, there’s Saul’s tragic command for his army to fast.

Jesus once criticized religious leaders for tying up “heavy burdens” and laying them on people’s shoulders. Saul exemplified that management style perfectly. But God’s kingdom is not sustained by starvation. It is sustained by trust.

Jonathan’s faith strengthened the people. Saul’s insecurity drained them.

And that remains true in every generation. Whether it’s business, family, church, or community — I want leaders who feed courage not fear. As a leader I want to motivate people to climbing cliffs with hope, not leave people sitting faint beneath trees.

For the Journey

1. How do Jonathan and Saul approach the Philistine threat differently?
2. Where have you mistaken a familiar formula for living faith?
3. What faithful initiative could you take without demanding a guaranteed outcome?

15. Bleating Sheep

Originally published on May 29, 2026



When Samuel reached him, Saul said, “The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord’s instructions.” But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?” 1 Samuel 15:13-14 (NIV)

There is a classic Monty Python sketch about a man who returns a dead parrot to the pet shop where he’d purchased it. The man in the pet shop deftly insists the that parrot really isn’t dead and one of the most hilarious arguments in comedy history ensues.

This sketch came to mind this morning as I meditated on today’s chapter. Within today’s chapter there is a moment that is darkly humorous amidst what is essentially a sad and tragic event.

Saul is given instructions to march against an ancient foe of his people who have been a plague to the Hebrews since they wandered out of Egypt. The Amalekites had become an archetype of enemies who completely reject God, His purposes, and His people. Saul is told to completely destroy them and everything that is theirs. In other words, take no plunder . No livestock. No treasure. No prisoners.

Saul marches. He defeats his foes. Then his men begin to grumble.

“Come on, your majesty! These Amalekites have some great herds here and we need some good steak for our victory feast! And look at these treasures! Really, sire. We can destroy all the cheap stuff — but we gotta take the good stuff!”

Saul shrugs. He relents. They take the plunder. Let the victory celebration begin!

I found it fascinating that Saul's first move is to have a monument erected in his own honor. This small detail signals how far he has drifted. Saul hid among the baggage when chosen king — now he is building monuments to himself. His trajectory has moved from insecurity to self-exaltation.

Samuel, who repeatedly finds himself arriving on the scene in the immediate aftermath of Saul's foolishness, enters the victory party. Saul, filled with pride in his accomplishment, brags about his successful mission.

"The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions."

But in the background we hear bleating sheep and cows lowing.

Background noise wordlessly signals the irony of the moment. Saul is self-congratulating himself for his obedience while the obvious sign of his disobedience is audibly apparent.

Samuel confronts. Saul shifts blame — then makes excuses. Then he denies and doubles-down on his insistence that he did obey.

Samuel is telling him this parrot is dead. Saul is trying to insist it's just resting.

Saul's excuses are drowned out by the sound of livestock.

In the quiet this morning, I find myself chewing on the truth that God is not seeking partial obedience decorated with religious language or ritual. Saul's mistake was not open rebellion. His mistake was editing God's instructions to fit his own wisdom.

He obeyed most of the command.

Most .

And that little space between God's will and Saul's preference became a chasm.

Along my spiritual journey, I've come to realize that the greatest danger is often not outright rejection of God. It is convincing myself that my version of obedience is close enough.

I keep Agag alive. I save a few sheep. I preserve the things I secretly value. Then I offer God noble explanations for why I did.

And that leads to an uncomfortable question. What sheep are bleating in the background of my life?

What evidence exists that I have quietly substituted my desires, appetites, and judgment for God's? I find that today's chapter is not pushing me to perfectionism — It's calling me toward surrender.

Because God desires something deeper than religious performance. He desires hearts that trust Him enough to obey—even when obedience costs us something we would rather keep.

For the Journey

1. How does Saul explain the sounds of the surviving livestock?
2. Where are you most skilled at rationalizing partial obedience?
3. What truth do you need to name plainly before taking your next step?

16. Quiet Shifts

Originally published on June 1, 2026



So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah. 1 Samuel 16:13 (NIV)

Today's chapter is one of the most pivotal moments in the entire Great Story. It's a shift that will have monumental, eternal consequences.

But it's so quiet.

No press release. No red carpets. No paparazzi. No bright lights in the big city.

God sends Samuel to a little backwater agricultural town called Bethlehem to the home of a man with many sons but of no particularly impressive standing. Even then, I couldn't help but notice that everyone is looking in the wrong direction.

Jesse is looking at his most impressive sons. Even Samuel is looking particularly at Eliab. But the most important person to God is invisible to everyone else. He hadn't even been invited to the party. David was the youngest. David was the smallest. David was at the lowest rung of the family ladder doing the most menial of daily chores — tending the sheep.

"The Lord does not look at the things people look at," God tells Samuel. "People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

The Hebrew word for “heart” (levav) refers not merely to emotions but to the center of will, character, intention, and devotion. God sees something in the shepherd boy that He knows will make him a great leader.

But there’s more to it than that. Everything in the Great Story is connected, and the connections in today’s chapter are astounding.

David’s story begins in the same town where Jesus will later be born. Bethlehem becomes the city of God’s unexpected kings. David is introduced as a shepherd, who will eventually shepherd his people. Jesus’ birth in the same town of Bethlehem is first proclaimed to shepherds, and Jesus will become the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep. David is anointed king. The Hebrew word for “anointed” is related to the word Messiah .

Everything God is doing in today’s chapter is a foreshadowing of the larger story.

But it’s so quiet .

No entourage. No announcement. David just goes back to his flocks.

David is anointed, but it will be about two decades before he will sit on a throne. Saul is entrenched on the throne and there is a long, long road between David’s anointing and coronation. David has to grow up. He has lessons to learn and only suffering will forge him into the leader God intends for him to be.

And this is what struck me most as I meditated in the quiet this morning. I was fourteen when God placed a call on my own life. While there were some things that happened immediately that confirmed the call, I’m 45 years in and have yet — I believe — to experience its ultimate fulfillment.

In a culture that increasingly wants things to happen with impatient immediacy, I am reminded once again that God often operates in painfully slow earthly timelines.

David, from Bethlehem, was a shepherd long before he became a king. Jesus, born in Bethlehem, was a carpenter long before He became the King of Kings.

Along my spiritual journey, I’ve learned that if I’m going to reach the completion of God’s call and work in my life — I have to be willing to keep walking and wait for God’s timing to work out. Sometimes God moves in quiet tectonic shifts that no one feels on the surface in the moment, but that shift will ultimately lead to massive earthquakes in life down the road.

For the Journey

1. What does God emphasize when Samuel considers Jesse’s sons?
2. Which quiet change have you underestimated because it lacked spectacle?
3. How can you attend to character rather than appearance this week?

17. Slaying Giants

Originally published on June 2, 2026



"Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine." 1 Samuel 17:36-37 (NIV)

Every once in a while I will hear something that wedges itself in my heart and brain. So it was a few weeks ago when my friend Mike made an observation I'd never heard or considered. He observed that David, whose victory over Goliath is still considered the quintessential example of an underdog's improbably\ victory, never talked about it. Not once in his song lyrics in the Psalms does David refer to the moment that made him famous. In the long history we have of David's life, not once does he reference it — ever.

I've had to chew on that one. And, chew I have.

It could be said that it was simply David's humility, and I think that there's no doubt in my mind that humility is a piece of it. But as I meditated on this fact my mind wandered back to Malcolm Gladwell's book *David and Goliath* in which he unpacks the reality that David's victory over Goliath should not have been a surprise (in fact his TED Talk on the subject is fascinating). History teaches us that slings like the one David used were very accurate and very deadly weapons. Expert slingers can even hit a bird in flight. You can find plenty of YouTube videos demonstrating a sling's devastating power.

As I read the story again in today's chapter, I couldn't help but think about David's offer to fight Goliath a bit differently . I considered that David's confidence may not be faith-filled, giant-killing courage . David knew that God would give him victory, not because of a miracle, but because for years God had prepared him. For years David had trained and become an expert at using his sling. He'd had to fight animals larger and stronger than he was — and he knew what a well thrown stone could do. I think David knew that killing Goliath was a shoulder-shrugging no-brainer.

Goliath was huge . Which meant, he was a big easy-to-hit TARGET. Goliath was infantry, which meant the giant would start by just standing there. If he did move, Goliath's size would make him relatively slow and lumbering. Gladwell also points out that it's quite possible that Goliath's enormous size may have also come with physical limitations that medical science has documented come with unusually tall people. Goliath's shield bearer remained with him, and Goliath had to keep getting closer to David before he saw that David was just a boy — perhaps meaning that Goliath had poor eye-sight.

All this means that David's victory wasn't improbable at all. And, I begin to think David knew it. Perhaps David never bragged about it because in his heart of hearts he knew there was nothing to brag about. In his mind, the whole affair may have seemed silly. It was the easiest of his life's many battles and military victories.

Which brings me back to the theme of Gladwell's book, and the spiritual reminder for me this morning.

Sometimes giants aren't what they seem. And I give them too much credit.

As I walk this life journey, I find that it's easy for me to get pessimistically overwhelmed by giants in my life.

Financial struggles. Unrealized dreams. Thought struggles. Health issues.

And when I'm facing my own giants, I find myself doing what Saul and the army of Israel did.

Stall. Stand there. Do nothing.

The sum of my life experiences thus far has taught me that this is never a great recipe for actually overcoming or accomplishing anything. What am I waiting for? A miracle? For God to simply remove the giant so I don't have to deal with it? For someone to show up and rescue me? For circumstances to just somehow change on their own?

David's solution wasn't miraculous. It was rather ordinary. He picked up the sling he used every day as a shepherd. He applied every day knowledge and experience to the problem. Most importantly, he simply acted .

And that, in the quiet this morning, is the simple reminder I need right now. I'm prone to paralysis when it comes to perceived giants in my life. I'm really good at looking for miraculous, improbable victories. But, giants aren't as scary or powerful as I allow them to be — and applying the slings of

simple everyday action proves it to me time-and-time again.

Financial struggles? A financial plan and a few changes in spending habits. Unrealized dreams? Write them down. Create a map. Take a step toward them. Thought struggles? Get them out. Process. Forge new thought patterns. Health issues? Move. Make different food choices.

Slaying giants is often as simple as small simple acts consistently applied.

For the Journey

1. What past experiences give David confidence before Goliath?
2. What challenge seems larger than the resources you possess?
3. Which remembered act of faithfulness can strengthen your next step?

18. Welcome to the Wilderness

Originally published on June 3, 2026



From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. 1 Samuel 18:2-3 (NIV)

I had a long-time friend. We walked a lot of life's road together. As time wore on, however, I noticed a strange dynamic in our relationship. Whenever I experienced a win in life, my friend experienced a sense of diminishment. He wasn't experiencing the same type of wins, and my success became a mirror in which he felt loss.

I am no stranger to envy. In fact, it's one of my core struggles as an Enneagram Type Four.

I know what's like to feel like there's something wrong with me. If others experience success it's easy for me to feel like there's something right with them that's missing in me.

So, I totally understood my friend's own sense of envy and shame. But, the dynamic eventually began to wear on the relationship. It became an unhealthy cycle. This was early in my life journey and I didn't have the experience or wisdom to see it or to address it in a healthy way. The relationship eventually waned.

I thought about this friend as I read today's chapter. David has been anointed king, but he's decades from the throne. His victory of Goliath kick-started the path to success — but that path leads straight through the household of the man that David is going to supplant. And it's a dramatically dysfunctional brood.

Saul, the success-grasping, mistake-diminishing, self-aggrandizing king is a mental health mess. He's already got an established history of deep depression and fits of rage. When he hears his peoples' praise of David's victory it triggers jealous rage. David is already in his service as a court musician — specifically to play when he's in a funk. Now, instead of David's lullabies calming the King, it twice prompts Saul to try and murder the kid with a spear. As the toxic jealousy and envy slowly takes over, Saul begins to plot David's destruction.

But Saul's own children? They love David.

Jonathan is a total contrast to his father. Jonathan feels no envy whatsoever — despite the fact that David could easily be seen as a rival for his position and inheritance. Jonathan is shining example of humility and love in contrast to his father's envy and jealousy. He celebrates David and his successes. He is happy to set aside his own pride and desires to help his friend in any way he can.

And then there's Saul's young daughter, Michal. She's infatuated with the handsome young shepherd boy and his meteoric rise to fame and fortune in her father's service. Daddy tries to leverage his little-girl's crush into a plot to have his rival killed. Once again, David overcomes the trap and succeeds against the odds.

Saul's bitter rival and lowly minstrel is now a member of the family .

Fasten your seat-belts. Everyone is in for a bumpy ride.

This, however, is an important part of David's journey. A struggling slog through the wilderness is a part of every hero's journey.

Moses had Midian. Bilbo Baggins had Mirkwood. Harry Potter had the Forbidden Forest. Luke Skywalker had Dagobah.

David will eventually have the desert and the Cave of Adullam, but his wilderness journey begins in the tangled forest of family dysfunction inside a mad king's household.

Every individual I know — even the most successful — have had their own wilderness experiences. It's a spiritual principle that God wove into creation and the realities of this fallen world. Spiritual maturity and wholeness are not granted by God as a gift. They are forged through trials, tribulations, challenges, struggles, and the time required for all these ingredients to bake themselves inside my heart and life in such a way that a casserole of faith, perseverance, hope, and spiritual maturity come out of the heat of life's oven.

And in the quiet this morning, my mind wanders back to my old friend. Looking back, I see an image of Saul in his spirit at the time — unraveling in envy and jealousy rather than rising to the challenge of learning humility. I'm sorry I was not a place of maturity to address it and assist at the time. But, we all have our own personal journeys.

Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi that he was confident that God would continue to do His good work until it was completed. I'm equally confident that God has continued to do His good

work in my friend's heart and life journey. He is on his own spiritual journey with God. I was simply called upon to play a small part in that journey for a season.

And that's the reminder taking into my day. God is at work in every person's life and journey.

Mad King Saul is on his journey. Jonathan is on his. David is on his. Michal is on hers.

And, I'm on my own journey of Life and Spirit — the one for which I alone am responsible.

Lace 'em up. Time to press on another day in the wilderness.

For the Journey

1. How do Saul and Jonathan respond differently to David's success?
2. Where does comparison threaten friendship or gratitude?
3. How might you celebrate someone else's flourishing today?

19. God's Hidden Hand

Originally published on June 4, 2026



So Michal let David down through a window, and he fled and escaped . 1 Samuel 19:12 (NIV)

Well over a decade ago my dad was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma. He was told at the time that the averages suggested he had about three and a half years to live.

He's still living.

He successfully took care of my mom in her journey with Alzheimers for almost a decade until she slipped into eternity back in 2023. He survived a bout with a nasty infectious superbug that required an antibiotic so strong the doctors warned him that the cure itself could kill him. At 89, he's still in independent living. In fact, he's busy working on large stained glass piece that he was commissioned to design and create for the new oncology wing of our local hospital.

I remember telling my dad back when he was initially struggling with his doctor's three-and-a-half years prognosis that it was God who numbers our days — not his doctor.

Dad came to mind today as I read today's chapter. Mad King Saul is on a tear. He wants David dead like Robert De Niro's Al Capone wanted Eliot Ness dead in *The Untouchables* . He's increasingly obsessed with putting his young rival six-feet-under.

What's fascinating about today's chapter is that everyone, including Saul's own family members, work to protect David.

Jonathan. Michal. Samuel. Unnamed prophets. Even the Spirit's intervention upon Saul himself.

David is protected from every direction.

When I read today's chapter, it is tempting to focus on David's escapes. But the deeper reality is that David is not surviving because he is clever. He is surviving because God is quietly arranging people, circumstances, conversations, delays, and interventions that David cannot even see.

I'll be honest. I typically would prefer obvious miracles in life. Yet God's most common form of protection is hidden providence.

A friend who speaks up. A spouse who warns us. A closed door. A delayed appointment. A conversation we didn't expect. A circumstance that mysteriously changes course.

Looking back, I suddenly realize that what seemed random was actually God standing guard over a promise.

David's life in this chapter reminds me that God's care is often invisible while we are living it. Only later do we see the fingerprints. And perhaps that's the invitation of today's chapter...to trust that the God who holds our future and numbers our days is already at work in places we cannot see, through people we may not even notice, protecting purposes we don't yet fully understand.

It's only when we look back over a decade of days that medical science said we'd never live that the truth comes into focus.

The spear gets our attention.

But the hidden hand of God is the real story.

For the Journey

1. How is David protected despite Saul's repeated efforts?
2. Where do you struggle to see God at work behind the scenes?
3. Whose quiet help can you recognize and thank?

20. When Reality Lands Like a Spear

Originally published on June 5, 2026



But Saul hurled his spear at him to kill him. Then Jonathan knew that his father intended to kill David. 1 Samuel 20:33 (NIV)

I had an unexpected conversation with a loved one the other day. It was about a person they loved barreling down a path of self-destruction. They have done everything they can from kindness and encouragement to truth-filled intervention — but their friend’s trajectory has yet to change. As we chatted about the situation, it became clear that my loved one was grappling with one of life’s most harsh lessons.

No matter how much we love a person and no matter how much we want the best for them, we cannot control or change another human being. That has to come from within them.

Today’s chapter is one of the most emotionally deep moments in all of the Great Story. It speaks to the depth of friendship between David and Saul’s son, Prince Jonathan. As I meditated on the chapter, I wondered why Jonathan isn’t studied and discussed more often. He is a model of humility, spiritual maturity, and godly surrender. His love for David requires that he set aside his own selfish ambitions and vain conceits — to surrender his will to God’s will regarding who will sit on the throne. That surrender comes with a personal cost to Jonathan, but he chooses love of a friend over his own personal interests.

That’s the kind of person God calls all of us to be. The kind of person I want to be.

The struggle for Jonathan thus far in the story is that the love for his friend David does not negate his love for his own father. Jonathan wants what's best for everyone. He wants David to live and flourish and realize all that God has planned for him. He also wants his father to be mentally healthy, to do the right thing, and to be faithful to God. But when things come to a head — and at some point life always leads to those fish-or-cut-bait moments — Saul hurls his spear at Jonathan with murderous intent. Jonathan's own father tries to kill him because of his friendship with David.

Jonathan finally sees clearly.

For a long time he has hoped his father might change. For a long time he has believed things might improve. For a long time he has tried to reconcile what he knows about David with what he hopes about Saul.

Then dad's spear came hurtling toward his heart.

That settles the matter. Reality can no longer be denied. Sometimes spiritual maturity requires grieving the truth rather than pretending it isn't true.

As I look back on my life journey and recall a number of broken relationships, I see with the clarity of 20-20 hindsight so many moments when I desperately wanted someone to become who they are not becoming.

I want the relationship restored. I want the wound healed. I want the conflict resolved. I want the person to change.

And sometimes God gently but firmly brings us to the place Jonathan finally arrives in today's chapter. The place where hope gives way to clarity.

Not despair. Not bitterness. Clarity .

Jonathan does not stop loving Saul. He does not stop honoring his father. But he finally accepts reality as it is.

Along my life journey I've spent enormous energy trying to force reality into the shape of my wishes. The wisdom in today's chapter is that faith often begins where illusion ends.

Jonathan's tears are not weakness. They are the tears of a man who has finally stopped arguing with the truth. And once he accepts the truth, he is free to do the next faithful thing.

And that is exactly what God continues to ask of me on this journey.

Stop fighting reality. Stop defending what God has exposed. Stop clinging to the version of the story I wish were true. Grieve what is lost, accept what is real, and then take the next faithful step.

That is what David and Jonathan do as they part in tears beneath the open sky.

And that is the very real place I left my loved one in our chat the other day. It's that place of bitter reality Jonathan found himself. When we finally embrace that all our hopes and wishes for another person will not miraculously change them. Sometimes love means that our deep desires for their well-being will sit — perhaps forever — in the grief that the person will tragically make other choices.

For the Journey

1. What does Jonathan learn about Saul's intentions toward David?
2. Which unwelcome reality have you been reluctant to accept?
3. What courageous conversation or decision would honor the truth?

21. Man on the Run

Originally published on June 8, 2026



That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath . 1 Samuel 21:10 (NIV)

It was a Sunday morning and I stood before two prayer warriors desperately asking for their prayers. I was weeping. They were not wispy, single tears that quietly escaped from the corners of my eyes. They were crocodile tears that flooded down my face.

That afternoon I was scheduled to leave for a business trip with two colleagues. I would be speaking that week at a large national conference. It was a major opportunity and an honor to be asked to present.

It was also, in that moment, the last thing on earth I wanted to do.

When I entered my job, almost 30 years before, God had spoken words of promise and blessing over me and my calling to the job. But, the promises seemed perpetually on the horizon — out of reach. And I was feeling far more cursed than blessed. Everything at work, in our business, was stressful. Relationships were strained. Crucial conversations were being avoided. The future felt uncertain, at best. Doom felt far more likely an outcome.

That moment came to mind this morning as I meditated on today's chapter. David, the triumphant victor over Goliath, the hero of Israel, and anointed king — is suddenly a man on the run. Mad king Saul's homicidal tendencies toward David — whom he views as a rival — have turned into an official, kingdom-wide head-hunt. There is a price on David's head even though he did nothing to deserve it.

David's first move? To go to God's place. He flees to the high-priest at Nob, where God's tent temple was currently operating. He arrives empty-handed.

No army. No title. No position. No certainty.

The promises of God remain true. But they no longer look true. That was me on that Sunday morning standing before my prayer partners with tears dripping off my cheeks and chin. This is not the first time I'd been here.

God had spoken. I believe Him. Yet all the evidence around me seemed to be moving in the opposite direction. On the spiritual journey, this is the way.

The promotion becomes unemployment. The marriage becomes loneliness. The dream becomes wilderness.

David's story reminds me that God's promises are often fulfilled through seasons that appear to contradict them.

David has been anointed king. Yet today he is begging for bread. Both things are true. And perhaps that's the lesson. The anointing did not exempt David from the wilderness. The wilderness becomes part of the anointing.

It's easy to assume that when God calls, doors will open smoothly and circumstances will align neatly. But the Great Story repeatedly tells a different story.

Joseph is given dreams before prison. Moses receives a calling before forty years in Midian. David is anointed before exile. Jesus is declared God's beloved Son before entering the wilderness.

The path to God's promise often winds through places where the promise seems impossible.

Yet God is not absent. He is there providing what is needed.

Providing bread. Providing a sword. Providing escape.

Just enough for one more day in the wilderness — like manna.

In the quiet this morning I'm reminded that sometimes faith is not standing on a battlefield facing a giant. It is eating borrowed bread, looking over your shoulder, and trusting God for tomorrow.

And in the economy of God's Kingdom, that may be the greater miracle.

For the Journey

1. What choices does David make while fleeing?
2. How does fear change the way you interpret your options?
3. What support could you seek rather than navigating uncertainty alone?

22. Refuge Over Rejection

Originally published on June 9, 2026



All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their commander. About four hundred men were with him. "Stay with me; don't be afraid. The man who wants to kill you is trying to kill me too. You will be safe with me." 1 Samuel 22:2, 23 (NIV)

Our local gathering of Jesus' followers has been focused on a theme this year. The theme is "Refuge over Rejection." In a world that is increasingly focused on rejecting, cancelling, and shunning anyone we find undesirable or with whom we disagree, we're spending the entire year digging in what it means to find refuge in God and to be a refuge for others. We're learning to choose refuge over rejection.

In recent weeks, we've talked a lot about Twelve Step groups, where people find themselves when they finally admit they are powerless over their addictions and their lives have become unmanageable. We imagined some of the key characters in the Great Story walking into a Twelve Step group amidst the ruin of their lives and sharing their stories, their tragic mistakes, and their fatal flaws. Even revered "heroes of the faith" had messy, unmanageable lives.

Today's chapter provides a fascinating contrast between worldly realities - how things appear on the surface, and spiritual realities - what's going on underneath the surface.

From the world's perspective, King Saul holds all the cards. He sits on the throne. He has the kingdom at his disposal. He has an equipped army to command. He has wealth, provision, and power.

David, on the other hand, has nothing. He had to borrow Goliath's sword and some bread from the priest. He's hiding in a cave in the wilderness. He's having to beg his nation's enemies for assistance. No wealth, no provision, no power.

But under the surface of appearances, a different story is playing out in the spiritual realm.

Saul is spiraling further into madness. He is delusional, believing David is "lying in wait" to kill him. His words reveal that his thinking has become extreme — paranoid, all-or-nothing terms in which the entire world is against him and he is the one who is suffering. He's even turning on his own tribe and most loyal supporters. "Is that why you have all conspired against me?" "No one tells me when my son makes a covenant with the son of Jesse." "None of you is concerned about me."

Then Saul goes off the proverbial cliff. Learning that the priest Ahimelek had helped David by giving him Goliath's sword and some bread — Saul has Ahimelek and his family murdered. He then has all of God's priests and the entire town of Nob (where Ahimelek was from) massacred. Everyone. Women. Children.

Spiritually? Saul is quickly descending into darkness.

David, on the other hand, is spiritually moving in the opposite direction. Yes, he's living in the wilderness, an outlaw and fugitive with a price on his head. Yet suddenly finds that he's not alone. In fact, people want to be with him. His family joins him. A community of societal outcasts and rejects forms around him — looking to David as their leader.

David: The original Robin Hood.

He's learning to make do with daily bread and survive. He's learning to lead a rag-tag band of misfits. He's caring for his family and a diverse community. He's learning to negotiate and make alliances with other nations.

Spiritually? David is slowly becoming the leader God anointed him to be.

And here is the ironic part.

The man seeking refuge from Saul has become a refuge for others.

Saul rejects and kills everyone he perceives to be against him. David is a refuge for those "in distress or in debt or discontented."

And in the quiet this morning, I find myself once again meditating on the theme of "refuge over rejection." One of the principles that I've been chewing on all year is that there is a reciprocal relationship between me needing and experiencing God's refuge and my ability to be a refuge to others. If I never need or experience refuge — I'm unlikely to be a refuge for anyone else. And believe me, I have needed refuge along my life journey.

I have made messy, tragic mistakes. My life has been unmanageable. I've been to many Twelve Step meetings. I know the desperate need for refuge from myself and others.

So when someone needs refuge? I can be like David to Ahimelek's only surviving son: "Stay with me; don't be afraid. .. You will be safe with me."

For the Journey

1. Who gathers to David, and what kind of refuge begins to form?
2. Where have rejection and belonging shaped your understanding of community?
3. Who might need you to offer a place of welcome?

23. Presence

Originally published on June 10, 2026



And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. 1 Samuel 23:16 (NIV)

As the young woman approached me, I could tell she was distraught. Her countenance. Her body language. She was not herself.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Okay," she said.

"Just okay?"

The tears began to flow as she described an unexpected curve ball that life had thrown her that week. Suddenly everything in life felt uncertain and scary for her and her family.

I listened quietly as she poured out her anxiety and her fears. I had no great answers to her dilemma. There was no quick fix in my personal tool bag. In the end of our conversation I simply reminded her that I loved her. I encouraged her to trust God to provide and lead — because He is faithful. I prayed for her and her family.

In yesterday's post/podcast David, the outlaw king, was the man in need of refuge who became a refuge for others. In today's chapter, I'm reminded that David is still in need of refuge. He finds it in his bff — Jonathan — the son of the very man who desperately wants David dead.

"Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God. " As I meditated on the text, I couldn't help but notice the wording. Jonathan did not strengthen David for God. He strengthened David in God. There is a difference. Along my journey, many people have tried to strengthen me in myself: "You're strong enough." "You can do this." "Believe in yourself." There is certainly value in self-confidence, but wilderness seasons eventually expose its' limits. David's circumstances had not improved. Saul still wanted him dead. Keilah had betrayed him. The Ziphites would betray him. He still had no throne. Nothing changed externally. Yet Jonathan leaves this last recorded meeting between the two friends, and David continues his wilderness journey. Why? Because his strength was renewed in God. I find it striking that one of the greatest gifts Jonathan ever gave David was not protection, strategy, money, or political influence. It was presence . He entered the wilderness and reminded his friend of what was true. And there's an important reminder for me in Jonathan's actions. Sometimes the most Christlike thing I can do is simply walk into another person's wilderness and remind them that God has not forgotten them. Sometimes, when I am the one hiding among the rocks, what I need most is not a solution. I need someone to help me find strength in God again. That strength may not remove me from the wilderness. But it will carry me through until I reach my own Rock of Escape.

By the way, I continued to keep tabs on the young woman. She didn't need me to fix things for her. She needed my presence, and my pointing her back to a faithful God who can be trusted with the story he's authoring in her life and the lives of her family. It was just a few weeks later that God provided her with a solution that put her family in an even better place than they'd been before life had thrown her that wicked curve ball.

God is faithful. Trust Him.

For the Journey

1. How does David seek guidance amid changing threats?
2. What does God's presence mean when circumstances remain difficult?
3. What question do you need to bring to God before acting?

24. A Tale of Two Kings

Originally published on June 11, 2026



See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. See that there is nothing in my hand to indicate that I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life . 1 Samuel 24:11 (NIV)

As I've progressed in my life journey my heart and mind have increasingly and repeatedly returned again and again to Shakespeare's Macbeth . For those who don't remember high school Lit, it's the story of a middling field general in Scotland who experiences a brilliant victory. On his way home from battle, he meets three weird sisters who utter a prophecy that he will ascend to become a nobleman, and then to be King of Scotland.

Macbeth writes his wife this prophetic news, and as he returns home the King of Scotland decides to spend the night at Macbeth's house as he is traveling through. Macbeth and his Lady decide that the King's timely visit must be providence. It's their opportunity to make the prophecy happen.

They murder the king of Scotland.

Immediately, Macbeth begins a long, slow descent into madness .

Macbeth came to mind as I read today's chapter about Saul, another King descending into madness. In today's chapter, Saul continues his all-out murderous search for David. He goes into a cave to relieve himself not knowing David and his men were hiding in the back of the same cave. This is David's chance to go the way of Macbeth and take his destiny into his own hands.

David refuses to take destiny into his own hands. He leaves it in God's hands.

Instead, he cuts part of Saul's robe off to prove to the Mad King (also his father-in-law), that he spared Saul's life.

As I meditated on this episode in the quiet this morning, I thought about the straggling end of the list of the fruits of the Spirit: self-control . As I pondered, I realized that in my entire life I can't remember hearing one message, I can't think of one book, that address self-control as a fruit of the Spirit. I've heard and read a lot about love, joy, peace, and patience. But self-control? crickets.

In Jewish thought there is a concept called yetzer hara . It's literally translated "evil inclination" but the concept is really "self-centered inclination." Rabbis note that there are many things in life that a "self-centered inclination" lead us to do that are not necessarily evil. One rabbinic saying says that without the yetzer hara , a man would not build a house, marry a wife, have children, or engage in business. In other words, ambition, desire, competitiveness, self-preservation, and the drive to achieve are all tied to the yetzer hara . Those impulses become destructive only when they are ungoverned.

The spiritual task, the Rabbis teach, is not annihilation of yetzer hara , but mastery over it. In other words... self-control .

Exhibit A?

David in today's chapter. He is given the opportunity to make his destiny happen. David's men are essentially appealing to David's yetzer hara :

Seize the opportunity. Protect yourself. Eliminate the threat. Take the throne.

The rabbis would say that the real battle in the cave isn't David versus Saul, but David versus David. Every human instinct says, "Do it." But, unlike Macbeth, David exhibits self-control. He restrains himself. He demonstrates mastery over yetzer hara . And with that, we see the character of a true king developing.

In the quiet this morning, I once again realize that the wilderness was not merely hiding David. It was forming David. Anyone can trust God when there is no opportunity to take matters into their own hands. The true test comes when the opportunity is right there... The email is drafted. The cutting remark is loaded. The revenge is available. The shortcut is open. My enemy is suddenly right there for the taking. And in that moment I discover whether I trust God's timing or my own. Many of life's most important moments don't look like opportunities to do wrong. They look like opportunities to do the right thing the wrong way. David understood something that I confess I often forget: If God has truly promised something, then I don't have to sin to obtain it. What God intends to give me never needs to be stolen. So the question lingering in the cave at En Gedi is one I'm carrying into my day: What promise, outcome, victory, or vindication am I trying to force with my own hands that God is asking me to trust Him to provide?

Because I don't want be Macbeth. I want to be David.

For the Journey

1. What does David refuse to do when Saul is vulnerable?
2. Where would revenge feel easier than restraint?
3. What boundary or act of mercy could reflect your deepest values?

25. Triggered

Originally published on June 12, 2026



"May God deal with David, be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!" 1 Samuel 25:22 (NIV) On more than one occasion on this life journey, I've found myself the target of personal attacks from individuals seeking to diminish me in public. False accusations made, vicious rumors spread, and personal campaigns of ill-will carried out behind my back. And if there's one thing I've learned about myself along the way is that I have a hair-trigger whenever I feel I'm being dishonored. It's a quick fuse to explosive rage within me.

Today's chapter is a fascinating study in David's personal leadership development. And it's particularly fascinating in light of yesterday's chapter in which David had a chance to kill Saul — the man who wants him dead and is the source of his misery — and David spares his enemy's life.

In today's chapter, it's sheep-shearing season. In the ancient near east, that means it was party time. Ancient sheep-shearing was much more than agricultural work. It was harvest season, payday, and celebration rolled together. Think of a successful farmer hosting a massive post-harvest feast.

There's this wealthy local farmer near David's hideout named Nabal. The name Nabal means "fool," but not in the modern sense of being unintelligent. In Hebrew thought, a fool is someone who lives as if God does not matter, like the person described in Psalm 14: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" Nabal possesses wealth but lacks wisdom, generosity, gratitude, and reverence.

Along the growing season, David and his men had been kind of a local private security force for Nabal and his workers. They provided protection from enemies and roving bands of thieves. They themselves looked out for Nabal's workers and herds and didn't take what wasn't there. So when the harvest came and Nabal was enjoying the plenty of his fields and herds, David asks Nabal to show a little generosity.

In the ancient Near East, local strongmen often extorted mafia-like protection money. David's men had apparently done the opposite . Nabal's own servants testify that David's men had been a "wall around us." David wasn't demanding tribute. He was asking for goodwill after providing genuine no-cost protection.

Nabal, the fool who lives as if there is no God, refuses. He looks out for number one. He selfishly hoards his wealth and refuses to be generous with those who had been generously good to him. Nabal's dishonor triggers David's rage. David straps on his sword, gathers his men - and marches off to murder Nabal and all the men of his household.

And isn't it ironic?

David had endured years of persecution from Saul. He had lived in caves. He had been hunted like an animal. Yet he spared Saul.

One wealthy rancher insults him, and suddenly he is ready to kill hundreds. Why? Because Saul's attacks threatened David's life . Nabal's words threatened David's ego .

I confess, I get that . I see myself in that rage. I've felt it.

God, however, intervenes in the person of one of the most amazing women in the entire Great Story. Nabal is a fool, but his wife Abigail is amazingly wise. She not only sees the situation for what it is, but she acts shrewdly and judiciously. She gathers generous provisions, meets David and his men as they're on their way to attack her household, she humbles herself before David. She honors him with the provisions. She pleads for him to understand the situation and be merciful.

She saves David from the foolish and unnecessary slaughter of what might have been hundreds. As I meditated on this in the quiet this morning, I think sometimes the deepest wounds are not physical danger but personal disrespect. And that is where Abigail's wisdom speaks directly to me and my hair-trigger of dishonor, in particular. As I said, I've encountered my own Nabals on this life journey. The insulting email. The mean-spirited rival. The ungrateful colleague. The one who refuses to acknowledge my sacrifices. The social media jab. The temptation is for me to become prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner. To rage, rampage, and lash out for revenge. Abigail reminds David—and me—that God is perfectly capable of handling Nabal. David does not need to seize justice with his own hands. Neither do I. The spiritual maturity of David in yesterday's chapter was sparing Saul. The spiritual maturity he learns in today's chapter is trusting God enough to walk away from Nabal. One temptation is revenge against my enemies. The other is revenge against those who simply offend me. The first is difficult. The second may be even harder. Yet the wisdom of Abigail whispers from page: Don't do something in anger today that my future

self will regret tomorrow. Let God carry what I was never meant to carry. God's got this.

For the Journey

1. How does Abigail interrupt David's intended response?
2. What situation triggers a reaction larger than the offense itself?
3. Who could help you pause before responding in anger?

26. The Test of the Spear

Originally published on June 15, 2026



"Here is the king's spear," David answered. "Let one of your young men come over and get it. The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness. The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord's anointed. As surely as I valued your life today, so may the Lord value my life and deliver me from all trouble." 1 Samuel 26: 22-24 (NIV)

For my language requirement in high school I took German. On a regular basis our teacher, Frau Zembles, would start class by shutting the door and loudly announcing: "Ein schtick papier!" ("One sheet of paper!"). I and my classmates would groan. It was a pop-quiz.

Today's chapter is fascinating because it feels strangely familiar. It's like experiencing déjà vu on David's wilderness journey. David once again has Saul completely at his mercy. Once again, Saul is pursuing him unjustly. Once again, David refuses to seize the throne by violence. Yet this chapter is not a repetition. It is a test. In chapter 24, David passed the test once. In chapter 26, he must pass it again. As a pilgrim on this spiritual journey, I've come to observe that God rarely gives final exams. He's more likely to pop-up unexpectedly announcing "Ein schtick papier!"

David's location is once again betrayed to Saul. Saul, despite having previously given up pursuing David, once again gathers the troops to hunt David down. David finds the King and his soldiers sleeping deeply in the middle of the night. Saul's spear is thrust into the ground by his head next to a water jug.

David's companion sees the opportunity to kill Saul. Once again, David refuses. Instead, he takes the spear and the jug. He walks a safe distance away, then he wakes up the camp to announce

what he'd done. Once again, he confronts Saul with the fact that he had the opportunity to kill him - but didn't. Then he returns Saul's spear to him.

Saul's spear.

Throughout these chapters Saul's spear becomes an emblem of his power, paranoia, and violence. Earlier he hurled it at David and Jonathan. Now David quietly removes it from Saul's side. Without striking a blow, David symbolically demonstrates that Saul's power is already slipping away.

Saul once again admits wrongdoing. Yet nothing changes. What a sad portrait of confession without repentance. Saul feels remorse, but he never truly turns.

As I meditated on the episode this morning it struck me that David isn't merely resisting evil. He's resisting justification. And, that's harder. I know what it feels like to hold Saul's spear. I saw the person's face in my mind as I read the chapter. The person who wronged me, lied about me, and wounded me. The person who attacked my reputation. And then suddenly, I possessed the opportunity to strike back — to deal a crippling blow to their life and to see the person publicly humiliated. And because I'd been hurt, the idea of retaliation felt righteous.

But in that moment God stood at the door announcing, "Ein schtick papier!"

David teaches me that having the opportunity to wound someone is not the same thing as having permission. This may be one of the most important leadership lessons in the entire Great Story. Character is not revealed by what I do when I'm powerless. Character is revealed by what I do when I'm holding the spear. Anyone can refrain from revenge when revenge isn't available. David stands over a sleeping king and discovers the deeper victory. The greatest enemy in the camp isn't Saul. It's the temptation to become Saul.

And that's the wilderness lesson for me in the quiet this morning. I can spend years praying for God to remove my enemies. Perhaps God is more interested in making sure I don't become them.

Before God gives David a throne, He proves David can be trusted with a spear.

And perhaps that's a test every anointed leader must pass.

For the Journey

1. What is repeated when David encounters Saul again?
2. Which lesson keeps returning in your own journey?
3. How might you meet the next familiar test differently?

27. Weary in the Waiting

Originally published on June 16, 2026



But David thought to himself, “One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul. The best thing I can do is to escape to the land of the Philistines. Then Saul will give up searching for me anywhere in Israel, and I will slip out of his hand.” 1 Samuel 27:1 (NIV)

My career began with a promise from God that if I took the job and stuck with it, I would be blessed. It also began with a promise from the founder of our company. If I and my colleague would take the job and be faithful, we would someday own the company. When my colleague and I became owners, with my colleague being the majority owner, I was promised that someday our roles would be reversed. I would become the majority owner and run the company.

No timeframe was given. It was never discussed. There was no plan.

There was simply a promise.

With no plan and no conversation, the wait became excruciating. I began to question. Would the promise ever be fulfilled? Can I trust the promise?

In the midst of my doubt and frustration, I received an unexpected phone call from a headhunter. A firm similar to our company was looking for a CEO. I threw my hat in the ring and went through a long psychological test focused on leadership ability. At the end of the test, the headhunter said that he was amazed by the results. There were certain questions, he said, that no one ever gets right — but I did.

"I'm highly recommending you for this job."

Interviews later, I found myself a finalist for the job. Wendy and I secretly began contemplating what it might mean to pack up and move our lives to another city. We discussed what it might look like to leave our community and start all over.

And a part of me wanted it. I was sick of waiting for the promise and the contention that was increasingly growing with the company because of the waiting. I didn't get the job. The long slog of waiting in the wilderness continued.

In today's chapter, David finds himself in the same weariness. He's been promised the throne. He's been divinely protected. But he's sick of waiting. David has been developing as a leader. He's been making strong, faith-filled decisions. The King who will be a man after God's own heart is growing and emerging. But in today's chapter, David reveals that he still very human.

His faith gives way to fear.

The first verse says is tall. He said in his heart, "The promise might not happen."

He doesn't ask God. He doesn't go to the priest. He doesn't inquire of the ephod. In fact, God isn't mentioned in the chapter at all. This is a man acting on his own, motivated by his own personal fears and doubts. He flees to the land of the Philistines — to the city where Goliath was born. He settles in and becomes a warlord.

As I read the story, my soul groaned, "I get it."

Today's chapter is all about those seasons of life's journey when God's promises seem delayed. David had every reason to believe. Yet he became exhausted by waiting. And, along the journey, I've learned that waiting is often where my faith is tested most severely.

It's easy for me to understand faith being tested in moments of crisis:

The giant. The battle. The cave.

But often faith is tested in the long stretch afterward.

The months. The years. The unanswered prayers.

The promise that seems perpetually on the horizon.

Eventually I become tempted to say:

"Perhaps God's promise isn't going to happen." "Perhaps I'd better take matters into my own hands." "Perhaps survival is the best I can hope for."

That is where David finds himself. The good news is that God's faithfulness proves stronger than David's discouragement. David stumbles, compromises, and miscalculates. Yet God does not abandon him.

The chapter reminds me that the story of redemption has never depended on perfect faith. It depends on a faithful God. And, sometimes the most dangerous words in my journey are not spoken aloud. They are whispered in my heart.

"I'm not sure the promise will ever happen. It's time to pursue my own way."

In the quiet this morning, I find myself re-examining those private narratives. Because what I say in my heart eventually shapes where my feet will go. And the quiet thread running beneath this difficult chapter of David's story, is that even when David wanders into Philistine territory, God's providence follows him there.

God is not only present in my victories. He is present in the compromises, the confusion, the waiting, and the wilderness.

Even when I lose sight of the promise, God has not lost sight of me.

For the Journey

1. Why does David choose to live among the Philistines?
2. How has a long wait affected your trust or judgment?
3. What would it mean to distinguish prudent action from fear-driven escape?

28. When Silence is Loud

Originally published on June 17, 2026



[Saul] inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him by dreams or Urim or prophets. Saul then said to his attendants, "Find me a woman who is a medium, so I may go and inquire of her." 1 Samuel 28:6-7 (NIV) There comes a point in all good stories and movies when the events come to dramatic inevitability. Modern screenwriters sometimes call it "the point of no return."

Michael Corleone shoots Sollozzo and McCluskey in the diner. Aragorn leads a rag-tag army to the Black Gate to distract Sauron from Frodo. Voldemort marches on Hogwarts, and Harry knows that he is the final horcrux. Macbeth's wife is dead and he realizes his candle is about to be snuffed out.

For the past few weeks our chapter-a-day journey has been wandering through the fascinating saga of two contrasting men. Saul, the first King of Israel, and David, the shepherd boy who is anointed to grow-up and take Saul's place. It's been just over ten chapters of text that cover about twenty-years of time.

Today's chapter is the moment of dramatic inevitability. It's one of the strangest and darkest chapters in all of the Great Story.

David, having been on the run from Saul, finds himself a war-lord and mercenary working for Israel's enemy, Achish the King of Gath of the Philistines. As the Philistines gather for war against Saul and Israel, Achish believes David has fully turned on Israel and is completely loyal to him. David continues to play out his deception, and suddenly finds himself between a rock and hard place.

Saul gathers his army for battle, and realizes that the odds are completely against. In fear, Saul frantically inquires of God through every legitimate channel — but God chooses to remain silent . Saul, who once rid the land of all the occultists and mediums — now seeks one out. In desperation he disguises himself, sneaks through or around Philistine lines and begs the medium to bring up Samuel from the dead. Even the medium is freaked out when Samuel actually appears.

Making an appearance from beyond the grave, Samuel gives his final prophetic pronouncement. What he had prophetically proclaimed for decades during his life is now precariously present. This is it. The inevitable end.

God has departed from Saul.

The kingdom has been given to David.

Saul's disobedience regarding Amalek remains the decisive issue.

Israel will lose the battle.

Saul and his sons will die tomorrow .

As I mediated on the moment this morning, my heart continued to return to God's silence . God is silent, but He is not absent. In fact, God's judgment is unfolding exactly as Samuel had previously foretold. God's silence does not mean God has lost control — or that He's disinterested. Sometimes silence means God has already spoken.

Saul's problem was not lack of revelation. It was refusal to listen to, believe, and obey the revelation he had already received.

I have struggled with what I perceived to be God's silence in various seasons of my own journey. When God seems silent, my greatest temptation is to look for another voice. One that will tell me what we want to hear, promise certainty, and relieve my fears. I might seek that voice through superstition, through ideology, through outrage. or my own anxious imagination.

Saul's story reminds me that the issue is often not that God hasn't spoken. The issue is whether I am willing to trust and obey what has already been said.

The contrast between David and Saul continues to widen. David is confused, displaced, frightened, and imperfect. Saul is all those things as well.

The difference is that David keeps returning to God.

Saul keeps looking elsewhere.

And in the quiet this morning, I realize the most dangerous moment in my spiritual journey is not when God seems silent. It is when fear convinces me to seek guidance everywhere except from Him.

For the Journey

1. Where does Saul turn when he receives no answer?
2. How do you respond when guidance seems absent?
3. What tempting shortcut might you need to refuse?

29. Closed Doors and Suitcases

Originally published on June 18, 2026



“But what have I done?” asked David. “What have you found against your servant from the day I came to you until now? Why can’t I go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?” 1 Samuel 29:8 (NIV)

In yesterday’s post/podcast, I shared the story of a particularly challenging season in which I was impatient and sick of waiting for God to fulfill the promises that had been made with regard to my career. During that time I’d been a finalist for a CEO position with another company - but failed to get the job. I confess that a big part of me was disappointed.

It was just a week or two later that my business partner and I had one of the most contentious meetings I could remember. My frustration, which was already at an all-time high, shot into the stratosphere. I remember crying on the hour drive home.

The following Sunday I saw a colleague and confidant who was one of the only people who knew about my off-the-charts frustration. He was also the only person, other than Wendy, who knew about my job interview to be CEO for another company. I shared with him about my contentious meeting with my business partner, then I shared with him how discouraged I was that I didn’t get the other job.

“I’m so sick of this! So sick of waiting,” I told him. “I just wish I’d gotten that job. I want to move to another city where no one knows me and get a fresh start!”

As we were exiting the room, a dear friend and prayer warrior approached. She gave me a hug and asked if she could pray for me. Of course, I said "Sure!" I never turn down another person's prayers for me.

My confidant and Wendy were both there along with my confidant's wife. They all gathered around me, laid hands on me, and my prayer warrior friend began to pray. She was praying blessings over me — and then she stopped — she went silent for a few seconds — and then she said, "The Father says, 'I see those suitcases in your hands. I want you to drop them. Let go of them. I've got you.'"

In today's chapter, David finds that his own decision to run in fear has trapped him between a rock and a hard place. He's been living with and serving Israel's enemy - Achish, King of Gath of the Philistines. The Philistines were actually a Federation of five city states who each had their own king. Achish was one of them.

All five Philistine Kings decided to go to war against Saul and Israel, and Achish calls David and his men to fight for him on the side of the Philistines. David has a serious dilemma. David picked up his suitcases and fled to Philistine territory because he lost confidence that God would protect him from Saul. He's been deceiving and manipulating Achish with regard to his loyalty. Now, that decision has placed him in a moral trap.

If David and his men go into battle with Achish against Saul and Israel. David has three choices:

Fight against Israel and betray his people. (God wouldn't be happy)

Refuse to fight and betray Achish. (Achish would kill him for the betrayal)

Switch sides during battle (Risking destruction from both sides)

David has maneuvered himself into a corner. Then something unexpected happens. The other four Philistine Kings, who know David is a Hebrew and was formerly one of Saul's warriors - tell Achish that they don't trust David's loyalty to Achish. They think he's a double-agent. They demand that Achish send David away. God uses the distrust of pagan Philistine commanders to rescue David from the consequences of his own compromise. The very people who threaten David's security become the means of his deliverance.

It's a masterpiece of divine providence.

And, as I meditated on the chapter, and on God's divine providence, my mind wanders back to that other job. What if I had gotten the job? I saw the potential job as my salvation from my troubles and frustrations — but what if God was saving me from far deeper troubles than I could ever imagine?

David's fear led him into Philistine territory. His compromise created impossible choices. His own strategy became a trap. Yet God was already working behind the scenes.

The beautiful truth of today's chapter is that God's providence is not limited to my best decisions. The Philistine commanders become God's rescue team without ever realizing it. How many times in

my journey have I been angry about a closed door only to discover later that it likely saved me from disaster?

The job I didn't get. The relationship that ended. The deal that fell through. The opportunity that disappeared.

At the time it felt like rejection. Years later I recognize it as protection.

David thinks he is being excluded. In reality, he is being delivered.

And perhaps that is the enduring lesson. Sometimes the most gracious thing God does is refuse to let me proceed down a road I have chosen for myself.

The closed door may not be God's absence.

It may be His mercy.

For the Journey

1. How do the Philistine commanders alter David's plans?
2. When has a closed door later looked like protection?
3. What possibility could you release without forcing it open?

30. Where Refuge is Found

Originally published on June 19, 2026



David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters. But David found strength in the Lord his God . 1 Samuel 30:6 (NIV)

I was recently a guest on the Wake Up the Lions! podcast with Rory Paquette (the episode has yet to be published). Rory asked me a lot of questions about the chapter-a-day journey and my 20 years doing this blog and podcast. As the interview went on, he asked me about what it's like going back over the same chapters across the years. He asked me what changes.

The answer is simple. The Word doesn't change, but I do. Each time I approach a chapter for the third, or fifth, or sixth time in 20 years - I'm at a different place in my life journey and my spiritual journey. The words meet me where I am in the moment -- to provide me what I need at that particular waypoint in the journey. It might be the same as it was years ago -- or it might be something completely different.

Today's chapter is a great Exhibit A.

As I mentioned a week or so ago, our local gathering of Jesus' followers is digging into a year-long theme of "Refuge Over Rejection." We're learning what it means for God to be our refuge, and what it means to be a refuge for others. This week I happen to be wrapping up a three-week series of messages about "refuge" from Psalms 1, 2, and 3. In the first week, I shared:

Refuge isn't a place you run to - it's a life you grow into. It's finding the refuge of God within me. When God is continually my source in the quiet - He grows into my refuge in crisis.

The message this Sunday is from Psalm 3 -- written by David when his own son almost stole the kingdom from him in a coup and David found himself once again on the run.

So as I read today's chapter this morning -- my mind and heart have for weeks been focused on the theme of refuge . They have been focused specifically on David's crisis much later in his life.

In today's chapter. David is still a young man. He's living on the run as a mercenary in enemy territory. He's leading a motley crew of outcast and misfit warriors. And as they return home from being told they can't fight in the war behind Achish -- they find that their hometown of Ziklag has been raided by their old enemies the Amalekites. The city is in ruins - burned to the ground. Their families and all that they own have been stolen as plunder.

David's own warriors -- not the most emotionally stable lot -- go emotionally ballistic. They rage that their wives and children have been taken captive. They do what we humans do in crisis -- we look for someone to blame. And they blame David . The angry warriors pick up stones to kill him in retribution for their losses.

And then the narrator gives us one sentence that is the heart of the chapter.

But David found strength in the Lord his God .

David, the shepherd boy who had spent years in the quiet fields finding God as his source and refuge against lions and bears. David, the young man who had spent time in the quiet since he was boy pouring out his heart and soul to God song lyrics and poems. David, in this moment of crisis, his men about to kill him, desperately needs a refuge -- and he finds it within.

Refuge isn't a place you run to - it's a life you grow into.

Everything else in the story flows from this moment.

I couldn't help but notice what David does not do. He doesn't deny the loss. He doesn't pretend everything is fine. He doesn't suppress his grief.

He weeps. The men weep. Everyone is devastated. Faith is not the absence of sorrow. Faith is choosing where to turn with sorrow. It is the invitation to the "chain reaction of praise."

Where do I go when everything burns down?

When my marriage is struggling. When the diagnosis comes. When my dream collapses. When my business disappoints. When the promises seem delayed.

Many people seek God so that circumstances will improve, but David sought God long before before the circumstances went south. So when the crisis erupted, God's refuge was right there -- within -- in his heart and soul at the moment he needed it.

And, it's the turning point. Once David strengthens himself in God, clarity returns. Direction returns. Action returns. Hope returns.

God remarkably restores everything that David and his men lost. Yet the deeper miracle may be that before God restored David's circumstances, God restored David's soul.

Sometimes the first victory God intends is not around me.

It's within me.

For the Journey

1. Where does David find strength in his distress?
2. What sources of strength do you reach for first in a crisis?
3. What deliberate practice could help you seek refuge in God?

31. Finish the Book. Reflect on the Story.

Originally published on June 26, 2026



When the people of Jabesh Gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all their valiant men marched through the night to Beth Shan. They took down the bodies of Saul and his sons from the wall of Beth Shan and went to Jabesh, where they burned them. Then they took their bones and buried them under a tamarisk tree at Jabesh, and they fasted seven days. 1 Samuel 31:11-13 (NIV)

There is a moment at the end of every novel I read in which I slowly close the book, and sit for a moment with the story. Now that the story is complete, I can sit with it in its wholeness. I've completed my journey through the story, now from the destination I can sit and look back at where I've been. I can see the story for the first time in its entirety and reflect on the entire story for the first time.

Today we reach the end of 1 Samuel. We've spent nearly a month walking beside David through caves, wildernesses, disappointments, temptations, friendships, betrayals, and long years of waiting. Yet the book closes not with David's triumph—but with Saul's tragedy. It would seem that the author wants me to sit with the consequences before I celebrate the successor.

The story ends, not with a coronation, but with a funeral.

Everything that Samuel's apparition had prophesied happens. Israel is routed by the Philistines. Saul's sons are all killed in the battle. Saul, knowing that he's defeated, famously "falls on his own sword" and commits suicide. The bodies of Saul and his sons are mutilated and hung on the walls of the city of Beth Shan in a final humiliation.

Then, in a moment of irony that is lost on most readers, Saul's death stirs the hearts of the people of Jabesh-Gilead. In Saul's first heroic act as King he gathers Israel to save the people of Jabesh-Gilead from a powerful local enemy named Nahash the Ammonite. It was Saul's finest hour, the first of his reign, and the people of Jabesh-Gilead gratefully remember. They send their men on an all-night march through rough terrain to retrieve the bodies of Saul and his sons off the walls of Beth-Shan. They returned to give them a proper burial and honor their fallen leader with a seven-day fast.

My failures can have lasting consequences—but so can my acts of courage and kindness. Decades after Saul's character unraveled, there were still people willing to risk everything because they remembered the day he came for them when no one else would. I find it a fitting note of grace at the end of Saul's story: even in a tragic life, God does not allow every good thing to be erased.

As I sit and meditate on the story of Saul's reign and the rise of David I found it beautiful how the author weaves the story from beginning to end.

The book begins with a barren woman praying. It ends with a nation mourning.

It begins with an old priest falling backward to his death. It ends with a king falling forward onto his sword.

It begins with lost donkeys. It ends with a lost kingdom.

It begins with God raising the humble. It ends with the proud brought low.

But the book ends with Saul's end. Which means the author wants me to sit with Saul's story and his end. As I meditated it struck me that today's chapter isn't ultimately about death. It's about the end of a trajectory.

Saul didn't die on Mount Gilboa. Not really. His death began years earlier when he stopped believing that obedience was enough. Through it all, Saul had everything he needed at his disposal. He had the power, wealth, and resources. What he didn't have was faith to trust the story God wanted to author in and through him. Instead, Saul began:

Grasping. Managing. Protecting. Controlling. Defending himself.

Fear became the operating system of Saul's soul. Every decision afterward simply followed the direction he had already chosen. Falling on his sword was the final act in long trajectory of fear.

David's story has been the opposite. He has lost almost everything. His home, marriage, status, and safety. Yet every wilderness experience has slowly loosened his grip on control and tightened his grip on God.

One king spent years trying to save his throne and lost it. The other spent years surrendering the throne God had promised him—and eventually received it. That's one of the great paradoxes of Scripture. The life I clutch with a tight grip becomes brittle. The life I let go of and entrust to God

becomes fruitful.

In the quiet this morning as I close the book and sit with the story, a single thread seems to run from beginning to end:

God is far more interested in forming the heart of His servants than in accelerating the fulfillment of His promises.

Hannah had to wait. Samuel had to listen. Saul had to choose. David had to wander.

The wilderness was never a detour. It was the workshop.

It is as true in my life story as it was in theirs.

For the Journey

1. What act of courage closes the account of Saul's death?
2. Looking back over this book, what patterns of character and grace stand out?
3. What part of your own story deserves patient reflection before you move on?

The Road Continues

We began with Hannah's whispered prayer and end beneath the shadow of Saul's death. The journey does not tie every loose end into a bow. It's one of the realities of the Great Story and life itself. It's sometimes messy, and some things remain a mystery. That is one reason 1 Samuel feels so much like life.

Across these chapters, the contrast between appearance and character returns again and again. So does the tension between grasping for control and learning to trust. Calling rarely eliminates waiting. Success never exempts a person from the next test. And even in seasons when God seems quiet, the story is still moving – even if we can't see or perceive it.

I hope you'll continue the journey with 2 Samuel, but before you do I encourage you to take a moment to look back. Which scene from 1 Samuel has stayed with you? Which person's failure feels uncomfortably familiar? Which small act of faithfulness gives you hope?

The crown is not the final point of the story. What happens to us on the road matters. May we keep listening, keep learning, and keep walking.

Thanks for joining me on this chapter-a-day trek.

Let's press on together.