

A BIBLE STUDY OF 1 SAMUEL

LOSE CONTROL



The Way
to Find Your
Soul

MARY SHANNON HOFFPAUIR

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Abingdon Women

Nashville

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Contents

About the Author	4
Preface	5
Introduction	7
Biblical Background	9
Week 1: I Believe God Is in Control:	12
Giving Lip Service Without Heart Commitment (1 Samuel 1–6)	
Week 1 Video Viewer Guide	39
Week 2: I’ve Got This Under Control:	40
Maintaining the Façade (1 Samuel 7–12)	
Week 2 Video Viewer Guide	67
Week 3: Oh, No! Now I’m Losing Control:	68
Recognizing Our Helplessness (1 Samuel 13–16)	
Week 3 Video Viewer Guide	101
Week 4: Crud, I’m Completely Out of Control:	102
Admitting Our Need (1 Samuel 16–21)	
Week 4 Video Viewer Guide	135
Week 5: Control? Over What?	136
Acknowledging We Can’t Control Anything But Ourselves (1 Samuel 22–26)	
Week 5 Video Viewer Guide	167
Week 6: God Really Is in Control:	168
Coming Full Circle to True Belief and Surrender (1 Samuel 27–31)	
Week 6 Video Viewer Guide	200
Video Viewer Guide Answers	202
Notes	203



About the Author

Mary Shannon is a powerful and seasoned Bible teacher, author, and speaker whose great love for Jesus and Scripture inspires her audiences to “get their face in the Book!” Her background is rich with a spiritual upbringing rooted solidly in the Bible. But as a self-professed recovering perfectionist, she was bound by performance-based theology much of her Christian life, believing

God’s affection and approval were contingent on toeing the line of legalism—on measuring up. Most comfortable in a ball cap and ripped jeans, Mary Shannon is a gifted storyteller with a sassy sense of humor and a fresh transparency about the messiness of life: a recipe providing her with fresh insight and ample illustrations that are sure to make you laugh and cry as she brings the Bible to life for the ordinary person. After teaching the Bible in the classroom for many years, she began to teach women in her community; and today she leads three large community women’s Bible study groups in the Phoenix metropolitan area (200–300 women each), as well as teaches across the nation as a featured speaker with the Aspire Women’s Events. The loves of her life are her daughter, Hillary, and her late son, Zach (1994–2020).

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Introduction

Have you ever thought you had your life under control—until you didn't? Perhaps you said things like “God is in control” or “God’s got this,” all the while living your life as if you’re the one who has to hold it all together. It’s like walking around with a cup of hot coffee, afraid it will spill with one wrong move. And when it does, making a mess, you realize what little control you actually have and how dependent on God you are.

I’ve known what that is like, which was the impetus for me writing this Bible study. But I never could have imagined that near the end of the writing process I would find myself in that place once again when my beloved son, Zachary, died suddenly and unexpectedly. Yes, I know what it is like to lose control and realize that the only way to find and hold onto your soul is to cling desperately to our God who is always in control.

Over the next six weeks, we will journey together through the Book of First Samuel, which tells an epic story about a fight for control. As we dig into the saga of Saul and David, Israel’s first two kings, we will discover that no plan or purpose of God can be thwarted by human beings or by anything that happens to us. Even the worst of circumstances can be used by God to accomplish His purposes in our lives. I’m believing that with everything within me, friend, and you can too.

Getting Started

As we dive into the Book of First Samuel, we will study verse by verse until we reach the final chapters, which are not written in chronological order. Then we will maneuver through the story a little differently for better understanding. Each week there are five lessons combining study of Scripture with reflection and application. As part of the study content, you’ll find a Scripture Focus and one or more Extra Insights in the margin, plus a daily Prayer Prompt that offers suggestions for talking with God about how you can apply what you’re learning in your own life.

Space is provided for recording your responses and completing exercises as you read through each lesson. I encourage you to do this work not only so that you will be prepared for the discussion of the group session (if you are meeting with a group), but also so that you will get the most from this study that you possibly can. I've found in my own life that what I put into a Bible study determines what I will get from it.

Each daily lesson should take about twenty to thirty minutes to complete. You'll need a Bible, a pen, and an open heart that is ready to receive whatever God might have to teach you. Then as you gather with your group to watch the *Lose Control* DVD, you will have the opportunity to share what you are learning and pray together. (Streaming video files are available at www.Cokesbury.com, or you may access the video for this study and other Abingdon Women studies on AmplifyMedia.com through an individual or church membership.)

Each video message is designed to follow and complement the content that you have studied during the week. Whether or not your group watches the video, it's so helpful to share your struggles and victories in your journey to "lose control" and trust God with every aspect of your life. As you do, you'll encourage one another and find strength to complete the study and put into practice all that you're learning.

A Final Word

Friend, when our circumstances and our faith are shaken, that is when we can let go of our exhausted and futile attempts to pretend that we have it all together. That is when we realize we don't have control, and we never did. That is when we discover just how much we can trust our loving, sovereign God. And in this process of learning to surrender, that is when we find our soul—which is tethered to our unshakable, unfailing God. He loves you more than you can ever fully comprehend, and He longs to lead you into the freedom of a life surrendered completely to Him.

Mary Shannon



Biblical Background

First Samuel is a book that documents Israel's quest for a king. The problem is that they already had one: God. He had never let them down. From the first call of Abraham, God had committed Himself to Abraham's family, promising to guide and protect them, growing them into a great nation, and planting them in the land of Israel. The fruit of this nation would be the awaited Messiah. Their journey would be one of faith, which their founding father Abraham would demonstrate by waiting an entire lifetime to see one miraculous shoot, his son Isaac, bursting forth.

Over time and despite great oppression from the Egyptians, the nation grew. God chose Moses to lead His people to freedom, and at the base of Mt. Sinai they officially entered into a covenant relationship with God (their king). Under His instructions, they established a sacrificial system of worship and built a way of life based on laws promoting personal morality, social justice, and practical kindness. With all the foundations built, it was time for Moses to move this once-slave nation into their homeland, Israel.

Have you ever wondered why God placed His people in the land of Israel? I mean, come on! He could have put them anywhere in the world, and He chose to place them in this tiny narrow piece of land that is only 85 miles wide and 290 miles long.¹ It's approximately the size of the state of New Jersey.² This land contained one of the greatest trade routes in the world, called "The Way of the Sea" or The Via Maris. It connected the world at the time, linking all of Egypt with the land of Mesopotamia.³

God placed His people right in the crossroads of life so the world would be able to see this peculiar group of people who worshiped a living God, not a god carved out of wood or stone. Yet, instead of ridding the land of its current inhabitants as God had instructed them to do, the Israelites settled among the native people. Instead of the nation of Israel influencing the world through their way of life, the world began to influence them. They traded their newfound freedom for a new brand of bondage.

You see, at Sinai the nation of Israel had entered into a covenant with God. This covenant was much like a marriage covenant, so the language should sound very familiar to us. They were to love and remain faithful to Him alone. They were to honor His name because they were commissioned to represent His name to the nations. He designated one day away from the normal distractions of work to focus only on their relationship with Him.

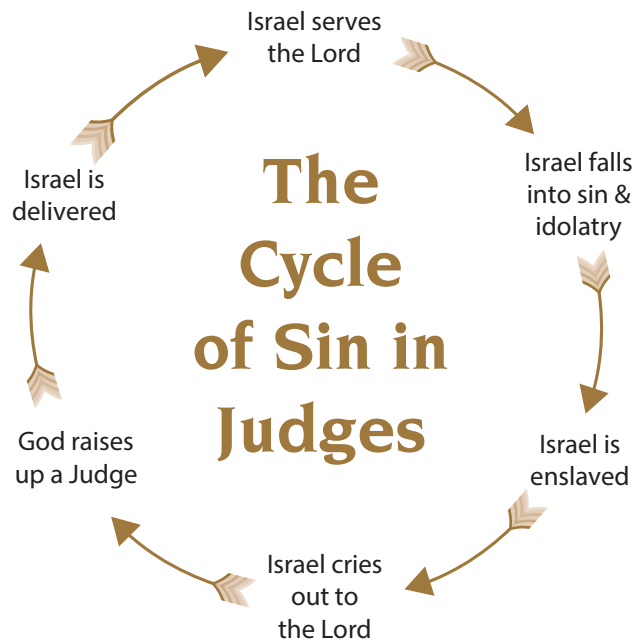
The nation agreed to all God had said through Moses and entered into this conditional covenant, which included blessings and curses. This makes sense to me, because if we live our lives loving God and others, it brings life to all. If not, it brings pain.

Years later, we encounter the Israelites living in their promised land, consistently being unfaithful to their God. They have habitually fallen for the gods of others (cheating on their loving God), and when they do, God removes His hedge of protection and oppression comes from all sides from pagan nations—the Midianites, the Canaanites, the Perezites—and maybe even the mosquito bites!

Different nations. Different times. Oppressing in different ways. Every time the nation of Israel cries out to God for deliverance, He is faithful to raise up a judge to lead and deliver them. As long as the nation of Israel has a strong leader enforcing their worship of Yahweh and Him alone, they are obedient and they live in a time of peace. Yet, as soon as that judge dies, they return to their idolatry and the cycle continues. This cycle, which is represented in the graph below, consumes the nation of Israel for four hundred years!

How many times would the nation of Israel need to be reminded that God was in control and He could be trusted? When would they stop acting like “the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle” (Psalm 32:9 NIV)?

Well, this will be the ongoing lesson in the book of I Samuel. Instead of realizing their true problem, their lack of trust, *the people of Israel decide* the solution is a king. Just another “bit and bridle.” They want to be like all the other nations. The problem is they are already like the other nations and they don’t even recognize it. They are treating the God who has called them, formed them, and delivered them as if He were made of wood or stone.







Week 1

*I Believe God
Is in Control*

Giving Lip Service Without Heart Commitment

1 Samuel 1–6



DAY 1

The Book of 1 Samuel begins with the story of Hannah, which we will explore in our video teaching this week. As we will see, Hannah, who was barren, was a godly woman and, therefore, an *exception* among the people of her time. But today we begin our study by taking a good look at a few other characters who represent the *norm* of the day—the high priest Eli and his sons Hophni and Phinehas. If Hannah was the light, Eli was the twilight and Hophni and Phinehas were the darkness. Yet, just as Hannah’s barrenness did not prove God uncaring or out of control, neither should we assume that Eli’s lack of discernment or his sons’ wickedness was out of the notice and ultimate control, or sovereignty, of a loving God. Sometimes it’s hard to see God in the darkness, but He is there and always at work. God never loses control.

Scripture Focus

1 Samuel 1:9-14; 2:12-36

Read 1 Samuel 1:9-14. Where did Eli usually sit? What did he assume about Hannah?

Eli’s seat at the door of the temple was actually more like a throne. It was high and raised up.¹ His duty was to oversee all that went on in the Tabernacle. Yet what discernment did he really have?

Eli watched Hannah bring her heavy heart, her pain, and her hopelessness to God. He watched her pour out her broken heart before God, and he assumed she was drunk. Why did the guardian of worship not recognize Hannah’s humility and sorrow?

I believe one reason is that this act of true worship was so rare in the days of the judges. Remember, these times were described as a time when

“everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). That’s a recipe for chaos.

The only thing that kept Israel in line during the time of the judges was a strong human leader. When a leader was committed to serving the Lord, the people were required to get rid of pagan worship and worship only Yahweh. Yet when that judge died, the people would once again worship pagan gods. I believe the nation of Israel during that time is a prime example of religious reformation, as opposed to spiritual revival.

Religious reformation is a temporary change in behavior due to religious constraints.

Spiritual revival is a permanent change of the heart.

I can’t help but apply this to parenting. How often did I parent to see change in behavior yet fail to actually see change in the heart? How many times did I discipline behaviors only, without taking the time to investigate, understand, and teach the hearts of my children? Listen, I’m not telling you to reason with a three-year-old in the grocery line. No, we are to establish healthy hierarchies and boundaries. But many times, I was quick to rebuke as they got older because I believed their behaviors were a reflection of me and my parenting—and Lord knows I did not want people to think we weren’t the perfect Christian family.

My adult son once told me that he wished parents would teach more like Jesus, using parables. Stories draw people in, allow listeners to come to their own conclusions, and continue to reveal deeper meanings. He said he wished I had been more transparent with him and told stories from my own life. I told him that I had lived in the fear that if I had shared my failures with him, he would have used them as permission to do the same. Yet, I understand now that this would have allowed me to teach truths through my humanity. By seeing my failures, he would have known perfection was never the standard in our home. We all need grace!

Eli was used to seeing people live their lives in obedience to a set of rules. They were going through the religious motions with no movement of the heart. Yet lowly Hannah, the exception to the norm, came in to pour out her heart to the Lord. The one who was “raised up” on his high seat or high horse failed to recognize not only true worship in another person, but also his own need for the same.

Eli knew the Lord, yet I wonder if over the years his relationship had become stale. Could this be because he was watching from an elevated view? How often do we as believers elevate ourselves above others, failing to see the plank in our own eyes?



Read 1 Samuel 2:12-17, and hold your place there. How does verse 12 describe Eli's sons?

Isn't it interesting that Eli is so quick to judge the heart of Hannah, yet he fails to judge his own sons? The one who was told she was worthless by her culture because she could not have children found her worth in the Lord. The one whom the culture elevated on his "throne" instead raised what the Bible calls "worthless" sons.

In your own words, how would you describe the connection between what 1 Samuel 2:12 says about Hophni and Phinehas and what 2 Timothy 3:5 (in the margin) says about people in the last days?

The beginning of 1 Samuel 2:12 describes the sons of the high priest as "worthless." Where I am from, some might call them "good for nothin'." The second half of that same verse explains why: they did not know God! In other words, they had no personal relationship or intimate knowledge of God. They knew about Him, but they didn't *know* Him. Their father Eli had taught them the family business, yet they had no love for it. They had been taught to walk through the religious motions. This is so tricky! If I'm being honest, I often trained my kids how to live like a Christian instead of how to enjoy a vibrant relationship with Christ.

Look again at 1 Samuel 2:12-17 and 22, and describe in your own words the behaviors we see in these sons.

With many of the offerings brought to the temple, a portion was given to God, a portion was given to the priests, and a portion was kept by the giver. Leviticus 10 tells us the portion given to the priests was to be the thigh and the breast. Yet Hophni and Phinehas decided to invite themselves into everyone's supper, and even before grace could be said, they sunk their fork into

They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!

(2 Timothy 3:5 NLT)

They'll make a show of religion, but behind the scenes they're animals. Stay clear of these people.

(2 Timothy 3:5 MSG)

Extra Insight

The word "worthless" is *beliya'al* in Hebrew. It means "wicked" or "vile." It can also mean "unprofitable" or "of no fruit."²

the roasting pot and did the ole dine and dash. They took whatever portion they wanted. If that was not bad enough, they also stole from God by taking their portion before the fat was burned off.

Not only did they take advantage of the people by stealing their offering, but they also took advantage of the young women who came to serve at the tabernacle, viewing God's offering and God's people as mere objects for their own gratification.

Hophni and Phinehas used the power of the priesthood to intimidate and manipulate people for their own benefit, and it did not take long for the people to no longer want to come and bring their offerings. The priests were to be the mediators between God and people, but instead of keeping the bridge open between the two, they created barriers. They themselves became true blockades to worship.

But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

(1 Peter 2:9 NLT)

Journal your thoughts as you compare this Old Testament narrative with 1 Peter 2:9 (in the margin). What are the privileges and dangers of being a royal priesthood? In what ways might we as Christians or the church have been blockades to the world knowing the goodness of God?

Now read 1 Samuel 2:22-26. How old was Eli at this time?

As much as we would like to, we cannot go back and change the past. All we can do is make the right choice today.

The Scripture says that Eli was "very old," which suggests that these were not young men sowing their oats but grown men making a mockery of the priesthood and the tabernacle, waiting for Pops to kick the bucket so they could take over.

When you are old, it can be hard to look back and see that the fruit of your labor is rotten. How many hours had Eli spent wondering what he had done wrong? Was guilt now keeping him from handling the current situation? Actually, none of that matters because as much as we would like to, we cannot go back and change the past, so why waste time dwelling on it? All we can do is make the right choice today.

This is easier said than done. I know this firsthand. After my divorce, I found myself living alone with my two adult children. Now, let's be clear. I was *not* a perfect parent. My ex-husband and I wrestled to be on the same page in regards to discipline. I did my best to correct behavior, but when there is a lack of unity, every kid will find it and exploit it, including my own. Now I was alone with them, healing from a devastating divorce and trying to become all that God wanted me to be. Part of that meant becoming queen of my own castle. When adult kids experience the pain of divorce, they feel like their entire foundation has crumbled and wonder if all they knew was a lie. We were three hurting people living in one household. Yet somehow in the midst of all the pain and guilt, it was still my job to produce two adults who could stand on their own two feet, treating me and others with love and respect.

So, without sharing the gory details, just know I established boundaries and held to them. Now believe me, when you change your dance moves, everyone who is used to dancing with you will freak out! It was rough for a while, but I knew that healthy boundaries were the best thing for all parties, so I stayed consistent. They began to realize that if they chose to dance with me, these were the moves. We began to hear music that sounded more like love and respect than screaming.

Eli had many opportunities to address the behaviors of his sons. When the Scripture says that he “heard all that his sons were doing” (v. 22 NASB), the idea in the Hebrew is that he “kept hearing” or “heard from time to time.”³ This was not new information. These boys had been doing these things for some time, yet Eli failed to discipline them—not only as their father but also as their boss, the high priest. The true consequence for their behaviors was death.

The repercussions for Hophni and Phinehas's actions would come later. For now, Eli just talked. He was still trying to reason with men who had lost all sense of reason, men who needed to repent but instead were scorning the offerings of God. If Eli had not previously sown the seed of respect in his sons, he was not going to reap it now. Therefore, they ignored the words of their father because, frankly, talk is cheap.

Read 1 Samuel 2:27-36, and finish the story in your own words below.

What did the prophet say to Eli in regards to his sons? What would happen to them?



What specifically would happen to Eli's descendants?

Why do you think the prophet spoke to Eli as if he were the one who had scorned the offerings? (v. 29)

Friend, God wants what every good parent wants: true relationship. He wants you and not an ornery mule “that needs a bit and bridle to stay on track” (Psalm 32:9 MSG). If all you’re doing is walking through the religious motions, stop! You are on a road to nowhere. God wants your heart, because from it flows your authentic self.

Prayer Prompt

Spend some time with your Father today. Be honest about your feelings, your situations, your screw-ups, and your regrets. Allow the Father’s love to become both a healing salve to your wounds and a sweet melody for some new dance moves!

DAY 2

Scripture Focus

1 Samuel 2:18-21; 3:1-14

Yesterday our focus was on the high priest Eli and his two scoundrel sons Hophni and Phinehas, who were a representation of the rest of the nation of Israel, a people walking through the motions of religion but having no true heart for God. Yet, the author places a small section of Scripture in the middle of this chapter that proves to be an exercise in contrast, shining the light on a young boy named Samuel—Hannah’s son. He will show us that God is in control; and if the priesthood won’t listen to Him, then He will raise up someone who will.

Read 1 Samuel 2:18-21. Where did Samuel grow up?

In the middle of the darkness of chapter 2, we meet this young boy clothed in a white linen ephod, the official dress of the priests. Can’t you



see the light of hope jumping off the page of Scripture? Can't you just sense the innocence? Samuel had been dedicated to the Lord by his mother as a fulfillment of an oath she made to God for giving her a son.

Take a look at 1 Samuel 3:1. According to this verse, what did Samuel do in the temple?

I love how one Bible version describes it: he was “ministering to the LORD” (ESV). This young boy was doing what would have been considered menial or simple tasks, yet these tasks were performed out of a pure heart. I’m sure the tasks of Hophni and Phinehas seemed much more important, but we know that God does not value the motions as much as the motivations. This young boy honestly was the closest thing the people of Israel had to a true minister.

Are you a minister according to the definition in the margin? In what ways do you minister? To whom do you minister?

Often we forget that we all are called to minister to those around us, and sometimes those in official ministry forget that their position is not one of power or prestige but of service. Even Jesus took the form, or nature, of a servant (see Philippians 2:5-11).

First Samuel 2:19 tells us that Hannah made her son a robe every year and brought it to him when she and her husband, Elkanah, would come for the annual sacrifice. I can just picture her sitting by candlelight after all her chores were done and sewing this robe as she thought and prayed for her little boy. He was living proof that God had heard her prayers and cared for her. If God had brought Samuel to her, then she would trust that God would lead, guide, and protect him in her absence.

It could not have been easy for Samuel to grow up in an environment with Hophni and Phinehas. Most of us parents, especially when our kids are young, want to isolate them from the influences of jokers like these two. And yet here Hannah dropped off her kid to live with them, growing up in the shadow and under the bad influence of these privileged scalawags. It almost seems like the male version of Cinderella and her two wicked stepsisters. Maybe this is the point. Had Eli created an environment of image, prestige, and ease that promoted an attitude of entitlement in his sons?

God does not value the motions as much as the motivations.

Extra Insight

Minister (verb)—to give service, care, or aid; attend, as to wants or necessities; to contribute, as to comfort or happiness.⁴

How can we expect to grow or mature if we never experience hardship? We need to stop asking God to get us out of every hard situation and start asking Him *what* we can get out of this hard situation. Jesus did not avoid suffering. In fact, Hebrews 5:8 (NIV) says, “He learned obedience from what he suffered.” He suffered on a cross so you and I could experience salvation and new life. Jesus was very clear that in order to follow Him, we too must carry crosses (Matthew 16:24). We too will suffer!

Sometimes in our suffering we feel that God is silent. Did you notice that 1 Samuel 3:1 says “the word of the LORD was rare in those days”? Why would God choose to be silent? Didn’t He care about His people?

Have you ever given advice over and over to someone you love just to watch them ignore it? Eventually, we stop giving it because they haven’t listened to the advice we have already given them. God’s people were experiencing what Amos 8:11 calls a famine “of hearing the words of the LORD.” They had no appetite for God’s Word, so He took away even the opportunity to hear it.

God promised that if we seek Him with all of our hearts, we will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13), but doesn’t it often seem as if He is purposefully hiding from us? It could be that He has already shown us many things that we are ignoring, and He is patiently waiting for us to address those.

I remember watching my child have a fit while I patiently waited for him or her to stop and obey my instructions. How ironic that when the word of the Lord was rare, God spoke to a child.

Read 1 Samuel 3:2-10, and hold your place there. Do you believe the description of Eli’s eyesight is only literal, or could it also have some spiritual significance? Explain.

Extra Insight

The Hebrew verb for “grow dim” in 1 Samuel 3:2, *keheh*,⁵ comes from the same root verb used in 3:13 for “to restrain.”⁶ Perhaps the narrator is drawing our attention to the key reason why Eli’s vision was dimmed, because he failed to restrain his sons.

What things had Eli overlooked? Write your insights below.

Where does this Scripture say Samuel was lying down?

The author is painting a beautiful picture with a word play on darkness and light. Here you have Eli lying down in his “usual” place, a place of routine. Just as his eyes had become dim from old age, his spiritual vision had become dull as well. He chose not to see the behaviors of his sons and their effect on the people. He failed to see the true humility of Hannah and his own need for repentance. Here he lay in his dimly lit room while the young, bright-eyed Samuel lay in the Tabernacle.

The author tells us that the lamp of God had not gone out yet. This refers to the beautiful golden lampstand located in the Tabernacle tent within the first room known as the Holy Place. It stood at the left side of the Holy Place.⁷ The Table of Presence would have been on the right side,⁸ leaving the altar of incense front and center before the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.⁹ In this sacred place, this young boy slept at the base of the flaming candelabra, probably still dressed in his little white ephod. Samuel had fallen asleep as close to the presence of God as he was allowed, possibly waiting for the lamps to dim so he could fill the oil that was never to run out. Just another menial task, right?

I can just see the Father’s smile as he looked down on this innocent boy bathed in the symbolic light of His Spirit, knowing that tonight Samuel would become a true prophet in Israel. Tonight young Samuel would hear the voice of God.

Write in your own words the sequence of events that occur in verses 4-10.

How sweet that each time Samuel heard his name being called, he went to Eli. This shows not only his willingness to serve but also his respect for and obedience to Eli. He seemed to be able to go right into Eli’s room when called, so we might assume true parental informality and affection. Could Eli have become like a grandparent raising a grandson, hoping for a second chance at parental redemption? Once again, though, we see the “dim eyes” of Eli as it took him three chances to finally recognize what was going on. We can’t judge Samuel for naivety, because Scripture tells us that Samuel “did not yet know the LORD; and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to

Extra Insight

Look up Genesis 22:1, Genesis 46:2, Exodus 3:4, Isaiah 6:8, and Acts 9:10 for other instances when God called individuals by name and they responded with “Here I am.”

him” (1 Samuel 3:7). Literally, the Hebrew term *yada’* suggests that Samuel was not acquainted with nor hadn’t heard from the Lord.¹⁰

Had Eli only taught Samuel how to perform the works of the Tabernacle yet failed to teach him about the God of the Tabernacle? Or did Eli simply not have any personal experience with God Himself? Possibly both. But the story tells us that when Eli realized God was speaking to young Samuel, he did teach Samuel what to do.

I love Eli’s instructions. He told Samuel to go back to where he had been, lie down, and wait. Now that is amazing advice. How often do we quiet ourselves and make ourselves available to hear God? Our world is so busy! There is so much noise, activity, and distraction that I wonder if we are even able to hear when God is trying to speak to us.

This is why I go to the mountain trails daily to run and talk with God. It is my time to get away from distraction. Sometimes I’m quiet; sometimes I scream it out, cry it out, or if I’m honest, cuss it out. But every day we hash it out. I know one thing: if you run a long enough distance, you finally come to the end of yourself—left with the energy only to listen, to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

According to 1 Samuel 3:11-14, what message did Samuel receive?

What did Samuel do after he had received this message? (v. 15)

If you received a message from God to give to a spiritual leader (especially a negative one like this), or even a person of any powerful position, wouldn’t you have a hard time sleeping? When Eli came to Samuel the next morning, he instructed Samuel not to leave out a single word. Samuel did not! This is the sign of a true prophet: obedience.

How amazing that in the presence of the priesthood God chose to speak to and through a child. Could it be because he was the only one with ears to hear and a heart to obey—the only one who was willing to open the door? Oh, the beauty of childlike faith! The bright eyes of expectancy not yet clouded by the disappointments of this world. Authenticity not yet shrouded by layers of protection. May we be like young Samuel, more aware of being loved than being imperfect.

Extra Insights

Eli recognized that God was trying to speak to this young boy personally. Often as parents or mentors, we feel the pressure of bringing God’s word or wisdom to children when God is capable of doing that Himself. Let’s show our kids how to go to a quiet place to wait and listen for God to speak and, when He does, to respond with “here I am.”

Eli told Samuel to respond if God spoke. Our posture of waiting and listening will not always produce a voice. We wait with expectation, but we do not presume.



Prayer Prompt

Run into your Father's "room" today! The door is always open. Shout, "Here I am!" Ask your Father to reveal the areas of your life where your eyes have become dim. Ask Him to pour His love over you. Now, let that child inside you drink it in, because God's love will produce the trust necessary for you to climb out of any ditch, dark place, or difficult situation.

DAY 3

Yesterday, the end of 1 Samuel 3 left us with the hope for Israel's future under the reliable leadership of Samuel as their priest, prophet, and judge. Yet as we begin chapter 4 today, we are reminded that the present stability of the nation is anything but reliable.

Once again Israel would battle with a neighboring people for land rights. The Philistines were no joke. These Aegean people, most likely from the island of Crete, had made their way to the land of Israel hundreds of years before. They had already settled along the Mediterranean coast by the time the Israelites made their exodus out of Egypt. They were more advanced than the Israelites, with their innovative use of iron and their aggressive military policies.¹¹ Like most of the surrounding nations, they were polytheistic, which means they worshiped many gods. But as the story will reveal, Dagon was their chief god.

Read 1 Samuel 4:1-4.

How many Israelites died on the battlefield that day (v. 2)?

How did the elders decide to proceed in hopes of turning the tide of the battle (v. 3)?

The ark played center stage in the battle at Jericho, which we read about in Joshua 6. This was the first battle the Israelites faced when taking the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. Jericho was a stronghold city that connected the two dominant trade routes in the land of Israel. It was highly fortified and well defended; but if the Israelites were going to conquer the land of Israel, they had to conquer Jericho.

Scripture Focus

1 Samuel 4

The Book of Joshua tells us that the angel of the Lord, with his drawn sword, had shown himself to Joshua one day as Joshua was scouting Jericho. Joshua, being a smart guy, asked him, “Whose side are you on?” Not a bad question when you are facing a man with a drawn sword. In present day vernacular, the angel responded, “I’m not here to take sides. I’m here to take over.” He then laid out the battle plan before Joshua: Walk around the city once a day for six days, but on the seventh day walk around seven times, ending with a loud battle cry. You may know what happened—and if you don’t, be sure and read Joshua chapter 6. As the children’s song says, “The walls came a tumbling down,” and Jericho was defeated.

What interests me in relation to our story in 1 Samuel is the formation the angel told the Israelites to get into as they walked around the walls.

Extra Insight

A shofar is one of the earliest known musical instruments.¹² Made from a hollow ram’s horn, the shofar was used both in battle (Job 39:25) and in liturgical celebrations (2 Samuel 6:15; Psalm 81:3).

Read Joshua 6:8-12. What was the order of procession? List it below.

Picture the Israelites approaching the walls of Jericho—the armed guards leading the way, followed by the seven priests blowing seven shofars (see Extra Insight) to announce the coming of the king, and a second group of armed guards following the ark of the covenant. The ark, lifted high on the priests’ shoulders, symbolized the king’s throne. The people of God brought up the rear—approximately two million of them if the women and children were present. There are so many miracles in this story, one of which is keeping this many people silent as they walked around the approximate half-mile circumference of Jericho, especially if you assume the presence of women and children. Now that’s funny! After all, this was a *king’s* procession.

The point here is that the battle of Jericho was God’s to fight. This was His plan, and all He asked of the Israelites was to follow. God told Joshua that He had already delivered Jericho into his hands (Joshua 6:2). The victory would be His.

Returning to our story in 1 Samuel 4, we might assume the elders are considering battles such as Jericho because they have come to the conclusion that they are losing since the ark of God is not present. The problem is

that they have missed the whole point of Jericho. In the battle of Jericho, the ark represented the seat or throne of God, their king. This is because in the Tabernacle, the Shekinah glory of God lived above the mercy seat of the ark. The ark was a visual representation that God Himself was leading His people into battle according to His battle plan. They were showing their trust in Him by obediently following His plan. By the way, nothing about His plan would have seemed right to any human being, which reminds me of a couple of proverbs (take a look in the margin).

How could a plan so simple be so powerful? How could a plan of walking around a city for seven days work? Couldn't we also say this about God's plan of salvation? The idea of salvation by faith alone, without works, has baffled many for centuries. Some call this "easy believeism," but is it? Is it ever easy to truly trust God?

In this current battle with the Philistines in 1 Samuel 4:1-4, we do not see the Israelite people request, receive, or follow a plan from God, their king. Why? They had no true shepherd guiding them. They weren't experiencing a deep personal connection with God, and when they prayed, they heard nothing but silence. They were left walking through the motions of life based on ancient teachings, battling whatever came their way with whatever means possible. But this battle had gotten the best of them! This confrontation caused them to run for cover and reevaluate what they were doing. They knew this battle could not be won without the supernatural power of God. This battle was out of their control. It took a great defeat for the people to remember the God of the Exodus, the God of miracles.

I see the same tendency in myself. Why is God an afterthought for me so often? I wouldn't say it outright, but my lifestyle betrays that often I live as if I truly don't need Him. I can handle my day-to-day operations because I totally know how to live this Christian-life-thing. I know how to walk the walk. I know how to obey the rules (at least the big ones). That is, until the wheels fall off. Then I shake the dirt off, try to stop the bleeding, gather my senses, and ask, "What the heck just happened?" And I am left with a broken "box" that God has vacated—if He was ever in it to begin with. Because of my legalistic religious background, my first response tends to be that God is punishing me. Somehow I have left Him out of my life or haven't walked in His ways, and as a result "this is what I get." So out of fear, I run back and grab the Scriptures or go to church because if I can appease God, I will once again have victory—or more honestly, I can re-enter my comfort zone. Truth be known, the Scriptures, the sermons, and the encouraging social media posts come up short. Somewhere there is a disconnect.

*There is a way that appears
to be right,
but in the end it leads
to death.*

(Proverbs 14:12 NIV)

*Many are the plans in a
person's heart,
but it is the LORD's
purpose that prevails.*

(Proverbs 19:21 NIV)



Have you ever experienced a disconnect between your circumstances and what you believe about God? If so, write about it briefly.

Many pagan polytheistic people, like the Philistines, would bring offerings to appease their gods, who always seemed to be angry. They would actually carry images of their gods with them as they went to war to bring them good luck and victory, perhaps because victory might prove their god was stronger.¹³

The Israelites might have been lifting up the one true God in some way, but they were doing it like the pagans by making Him an image to be carried in and out of battle. The ark of the covenant had become a graven image representing God instead of a mercy seat upon which the living God would sit, dwell, and rule over His people. Yes, they ran back and grabbed His seat, but they left Him behind, so to speak.

How often do we treat the living God as a graven image to be carried around wherever we need Him? What are some ways that we, like the Israelites, put God in a box?

Finish reading 1 Samuel 4, verses 5-22.

Why do you think the people shouted when the ark entered the camp?

Do you think the people presumed that presence of the ark meant the presence of God?



**Can we judge the presence of the Spirit by the noise in the sanctuary?
Explain your response.**

How interesting it is that we so often limit God. Wasn't this the very thing God had warned about in His second commandment (Exodus 20:4), essentially saying, "Do not attempt to confine me in an image. Remember, you were made in my image. I am not made in yours." Here the Israelites did what we all tend to do. They confined God to a box—something they could see, touch, and control. The ark in many ways represented God, but the ark was not God—nor was it a slam-dunk guarantee of success!

The Bible reveals God to us, yet the Bible is not God. God is the *living* Word. Sometimes I wonder if we wield the Bible much like the Israelites wielded the ark, carrying it into battle presuming our interpretations are right. Do we intimidate others to instill fear in our enemies? Do we believe that if we give it priority, we won't have defeat? The Bible leads us to God, but it too cannot contain Him. Even if we search it from cover to cover, there will always be places of mystery. Our God is alive!

In some ways, the Philistines had more respect for the God of the Israelites than the Israelites. The ruckus in the Israelite camp got the Philistines' attention, but it was the reputation of God that truly brought them fear. The stories from Egypt were still top news, and the Philistines were fully aware of the power of Israel's God.

This story ends in defeat for the Israelites, and the ark of the covenant is stolen by the Philistines. How could that be? Why would God allow these pagan people to take His ark? Was He not as powerful as they thought? Was He not paying attention? Did He not care?

Going through tough times of defeat, suffering, and pain will make us question God. We question His character and motives. When things are bad enough, we even question His existence. (Even the psalmist does that in Psalm 13. Check it out.) What happens when the things you thought you knew about God are stolen? What happens when the life you are experiencing doesn't seem to fit the box you constructed with Scripture? What happens when you come up with more questions than answers?

The Bible leads us to God, but it too cannot contain Him. Even if we search it from cover to cover, there will always be places of mystery.

When have you felt stuck in the messy middle between questions and faith?

In my opinion, when our faith is shaken, we can really start to grow. That's when we come to God confessing our brokenness, when we ask Him to break down our images and replace them with His true self. That's when the disconnect transfigures into glorious true relationship! Sister, stop depending on what you think you know about God or what you've been told about Him, and spend time actually getting to know Him. He is alive and still speaking!

Prayer Prompt

Bring all your questions before God today. Tell Him about your “disconnect” and your frustrations. Ask Him to teach you and to show you His heart and character. Give Him permission to break down any false images of Him that you or your traditions have built. Start a new journey with Him today. Let God out of the box!

DAY 4

Scripture Focus

1 Samuel 5; 6:1-12

As we concluded 1 Samuel 4 yesterday, we read that the prophecy given to Samuel about the house of Eli had been set into motion. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were killed on the battlefield. When word got back to Eli regarding his sons—and especially the loss of the ark—he fell from his “lifted” seat and broke his neck, killing him. If that's not dreary enough, Phinehas's wife had a son and saddled him with the name Ichabod (no, not the Headless Horseman), which means “The Glory has departed from Israel.” Imagine growing up with that name!

Maybe the dreary ending of chapter 4 begs for the comedic relief offered by chapter 5. This story makes me laugh every time. So, go ahead and jump right in!

Read 1 Samuel 5 and hold your place there.

Can you picture it? The Philistines bring the ark of the covenant into their own city of Ashdod. I can just hear the shouts. I bet there was dancing in the streets. They had defeated the Israelites, and they thought they had taken their god. The God who destroyed Egypt had been defeated. Or had He?

The interesting thing about these polytheistic people is their unwillingness to offend any god. Therefore, if an image such as the ark was captured, they would just add it to their temple alongside their other images. They placed the ark at the feet of their chief god, Dagon. Of course, they believed Dagon was more powerful, as evidenced by their latest victory, but they found no reason to offend the God of Israel. As we read the story, though, it seems God was not equally as worried about offending them. Yahweh does not share His glory with another.

Look again at 1 Samuel 5:1-5. In the space below, draw a picture of what the Philistines discovered as they entered their temple the next two mornings.

Two mornings in a row, the Philistines not only had to put their god back together but also back on his throne. Here we see people once more maneuvering their gods.

How ironic that next Dagon lost his head and his hands. A graven image has neither will nor power. The power resided in the ones putting their god back together! Lord knows, if I have to put my god back together, I am in big trouble because I can barely keep up with my own head and hands. Amen?

According to 1 Samuel 5:6 and 6:4, what were the Philistines afflicted with?

Okay, let's first address the tumors. The King James Version of the Bible refers to these tumors as "emerods," which comes from a root word meaning "to swell." The Hebrew word literally means "mound."¹⁵ The context has led historians and Bible commentators to conclude that they were occurrences of tumors, boils, or maybe even hemorrhoids. Whatever you want to call them doesn't matter to me. All I know is that I wouldn't want them! I don't want any kind of swelling mound anywhere on my body. With that said, I can't help but imagine how helpless you would be to defend your land if you were dealing



Extra Insight

The same Hebrew word used in the root of the name Ichabod (1 Samuel 4:21), meaning "not glory," is translated in 1 Samuel 5:6 as "heavy."¹⁴ The glory of the Lord had departed from the Israelites with the loss of the ark. In Ashdod, the glory of the Lord seemed heavy handed (pun intended!). Whether we long for or dread the glory of the Lord, we must confess it has weight.

with mounds of hemorrhoids. Sitting would be questionable. Fighting would be impossible. Could this be the first recorded “pain in the butt”?

Chapter 6 lets us know that the Philistines had also been struck with plagues involving rats. (Maybe the tumors were a result of these plagues? I don’t know. This could be one of those chicken-or-egg questions.) What I do know is that the people of Ashdod wanted that ark gone. The rest of chapter 5 fills us in on the game of “hot potato” that the Philistines started to play. “I don’t want it. Here, you take it!” They passed the ark through the Philistine cities along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, each time producing the same results. Finally it came to the city of Ekron.

Read 1 Samuel 6:1-6. How did the Philistines decide to deal with the ark?

Finally, the big dogs (priests and diviners) got together to decide what they were going to do with this ark. It couldn’t possibly be a coincidence that every time this ark entered a city, the people were struck with disease and plague. So, they decided to somehow send it back to the Israelites. I imagine someone piping up and saying something like, “We can’t send it back empty. I mean come on. If this god is angry, he will want parting gifts, right? Plus, I hear the God of Israel is really into guilt offerings. I’m not sure what those are, but I’ve actually heard about an incident in the desert where they were being bitten by serpents and their god had them make a bronze image of a serpent and raise it up. They literally had to look at what was killing them. So how about we make golden images of the rats and tumors?”

Seriously, the Philistines felt the heavy hand of God on them and their land. They determined to give God His due glory and not to harden their hearts like the Egyptians had done before them. The stubborn heart of Pharaoh had hurt his people, his nation, and his family, yet in no way did it hinder God’s plan for His people to leave Egypt and enter the Promised Land.

Isn’t that how it all started? Wanting to be like God, having knowledge and control. In the Garden, the serpent of old convinced Eve that she could be like God by knowing good and evil. The problem is, differentiating between good and evil is only one aspect of God. Having the knowledge of good and evil without possessing the power to use that knowledge wisely actually leaves us feeling more human than deity. We realize that knowledge does not mean control. Actually, the more knowledgeable I become, the more out of control I often feel. To be honest, sometimes I just want to live with my head in the sand. Isn’t this what Paul was saying in Romans 7:8-11 (NLT)?



⁸But sin used this command to arouse all kinds of covetous desires within me! If there were no law, sin would not have that power. ⁹At one time I lived without understanding the law. But when I learned the command not to covet, for instance, the power of sin came to life, ¹⁰and I died. So I discovered that the law's commands, which were supposed to bring life, brought spiritual death instead. ¹¹Sin took advantage of those commands and deceived me; it used the commands to kill me.

How do these words of Paul affirm the idea that knowledge does not mean control?

When I think back on my twenty-five-year marriage, I knew we had problems, but it seemed like any attempt I made to solve them never worked. We were too afraid of what others would think and, honestly, too broke to get outside help. So being the dutiful Christian couple, we just doubled down, polished our masks, and poured into our kids. I can only speak for myself, but on most days I felt like a failure as a wife, so instead I determined to be the best mother a girl could be. If I couldn't control my marriage, I would control my kids. I wasn't happy, but dang it, I was going to make sure that my children were. My kids were pretty amazing on their own, but if the world wasn't turning in their favor on a given day, I had the charisma and determination to change its trajectory. If I'm being honest, my ex-husband and I did our best to solve all of their problems and influence most of their decisions, but by doing that, we unknowingly set ourselves up as gods in their lives.

Well, my marriage didn't make it, and the images we built crumbled. I'm not kidding when I say we entered a season of tumors and plagues. My adult children felt their lives melting away, and they ended up with what they considered to be a mere shadow of the life they were "supposed" to have—and lucky me got a front row seat. I will tell you that in the last three years, I have grown in knowledge like you can't imagine. Knowledge about myself (more than I ever really wanted!). Knowledge about my children. Knowledge about psychology, personalities, chronic illness, and the grace of God. Yet, with all this newfound knowledge, I have gained very little control. Matter of fact, the more knowledge I have gained, the more control I have relinquished to God.

Hear me when I say that a time will come when you can't make your children's decisions (or anyone else's) or solve their problems. All you may have is knowledge (sometimes too much), understanding, and compassion—yet very little control. When that time comes, you will see pain and desperation in their eyes, partly because they too will realize that you cannot fix this one

with a kiss and a band-aid, a parent teacher conference, or a check. You will feel so helpless—and you may wish you had allowed them more time to work out their own faith and build their own faith muscles. You may wish that there had been more times when you had just gotten out of the way.

Yet, God desperately loves us. Yet, God! Don't you love those words? None of this came as a surprise to Him. He has both knowledge and control—all of which is wrapped in the most beautiful package of grace. He has a plan for you. Release your grip. Leave your broken graven image on the floor and watch Him work!

It is amazing to me that the Philistines, of all people, recognized quickly that things were out of their control, and they chose to release their grip on their “trophy.”

Read 1 Samuel 6:7-12. What plan did the Philistines come up with to send the ark back to the land of the Israelites?

Extra Insight

When mama cows are separated from their babies, they make a higher pitched, louder call meant to alert their calves that they are being missed.¹⁶

Do you think the natural instinct of a milk cow would be to walk away from her young? Of course not! This was the point. The Philistines needed to know if the God of Israel was truly behind all of the painful events they had been experiencing or if it was just bad luck. To know for sure, they set up a scenario that would go against nature. A mama cow would never walk away from her young, who had been caged away from her, knowing the calf needed her milk to survive. Yet that is exactly what happened. It didn't just happen with one cow, but two.

The two mama cows, who had never been yoked, walked in unison straight to the land of Israel. Scripture says they lowed as they went. As a mom, this part breaks me! Two different things were pulling at their hearts, and although the one was greater, the lesser still hurt. Their lowing was the sound of sacrifice.

In order to set things right, there had to be sacrifice. It is interesting to note that the sacrifices thus far in 1 Samuel have come from mothers—first Hannah and now the milk cows. Setting things right requires us to focus on God over the ones we love. Sometimes when we choose to do what is right over what is easy, there is lots of lowing.

Setting things right requires us to focus on God over the ones we love.

Prayer Prompt

Ask God to show you areas in your life you try to control. Prayerfully consider if all of your striving has been beneficial or simply taking the ark from

city to city—in other words, putting out one fire just to start another. When we feel out of control in one area, we tend to seek control in others. Journal about what trusting God would look like in your specific situation.

DAY 5

Yesterday we ended our lesson with the sound of lowing ringing in our ears, and today we resume the story with those same cows making their way into an Israelite village. Imagine the people working in the fields when, all of a sudden, they hear what sounds like cattle lowing. When they lift their eyes, they see two milk cows—no doubt engorged with milk—yoked together and pulling the ark of God on a cart. I would have loved to see their faces—the faces of the people, not the cows, that is!

Read 1 Samuel 6:13-21. What was the name of the village? Where did the cart stop?

Before we move on—and trust me, you won't mind waiting—let's learn a little bit about this place. Beth-shemesh was a levitical city set aside for the clan of Kohath as recorded in Joshua 21:13-16. Stick with me here. I promise it will make a difference in our understanding of this story.

Read Numbers 4:1-15. What specific job was given to the house of Kohath?

So, let's tie this together. The two cows, despite their natural instinct to stay with their calves, brought the ark of the covenant straight to a levitical city. Not only did priests live in this area but also the very family who had been given the responsibility to care for the holy things inside the Tabernacle—the ark being the greatest of them all. So, if anyone knew how to treat the ark of the covenant with reverence, it would have been these very people or the group of priests among them.

What did they do first after discovering the ark (1 Samuel 6:14-15)?



Scripture Focus

1 Samuel 6:13-21

Extra Insight

The Levites were descendants of Jacob's son, Levi. God set this clan apart to serve God. When the Tabernacle was created (Exodus 25–31, 35–40), the Levites were responsible for disassembling, transporting, and reconstructing the tabernacle when the Israelites traveled.¹⁷

I know, right? This is so heartbreaking. Not only did these mama cows sacrifice by leaving their calves behind and carrying the ark of God back to His people, but they literally became the sacrifice once the people received it. There is nothing fair about this situation and, honestly, nothing holy.

Read Leviticus 1:3. According to this verse, what were the requirements of a burnt offering?

You got it! A *male* from the herd without spot or blemish. What about a milk cow made them think *male* or without blemish? I'm sorry, but I didn't make it through childbirth without a few blemishes! What about you? The very ones who should have known how to handle the ark and make sacrifices did not do it properly! Just another example of the compromise within the priesthood. Well, the lords of the Philistines saw all they needed to see, so they went back home; and frankly, I am glad they did. For what comes next would have sent them home with more questions than answers. When the people of God misuse the things of God, the consequences can really bring confusion to outsiders.

I am sure the Israelites came from all over to see this miraculous return of the ark back to them. There must have been great fanfare when they pulled the graven images from the cart one by one, describing what they were and which city they were from. I can just hear the shouting as each city of the Philistines was called out by name, none of which was spared from God's judgment. Yet, then we read something that makes us recoil. Their celebration soon turned to weeping.

Reread 1 Samuel 6:19-20, also reading Numbers 3:4 for context clues. What happened in these verses?



Why did they suffer this fate?

When the ark was not within the Tabernacle, it was to be covered by at least three coverings—the veil leading into the Holy of Holies, a cover of animal skins, and a cloth of solid blue (Numbers 4:4-7). Commentators question

whether the Israelites merely uncovered the ark for all to see or if someone actually attempted to look inside. (Even Indiana Jones knew better than that!) We don't know. Either action was prohibited and punishable by death.

Depending on the Bible translation you consult, you will learn that anywhere from seventy to fifty thousand people died that day. However, most scholars think about seventy people perished because Beth-shemesh was a small town.^{18,19} But what is even more interesting to me is the Israelites' response to this deadly event:

"Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?"

(1 Samuel 6:20)

Well, the answer to the first question is *nobody*! We see this several places in Scripture:

"But," he [God] said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."

(Exodus 33:20)

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father's side, has made Him known.

(John 1:18 BSB)

[He] who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

(1 Timothy 6:16)

No one can see God and live! Therefore, God sent His Son Jesus, being fully God yet fully flesh. Jesus, the Living Word, reveals God to us. Think about it. When you speak, your words reveal who you are. If you want to get to know someone, you talk and have relationship. If you want to know God, look to Jesus. Jesus is the full expression of God in flesh and blood. Colossians 2:9 says that in Him the fullness of deity (God) dwells.

Let's take another look at John 1:18. The NIV puts it this way: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." Jesus, being in the closest relationship with His Father, has made God known to us.

How does this relate to our study today? Just as Jesus points to God, so the ark points to Jesus. Explore this with me. It was made out of acacia wood (Exodus 25:10). This makes practical sense considering acacia trees would have been the most readily available material in the area. Yet there are those who also believe that acacia wood is resistant to decay, offering another reason for the selection.²⁰ In the desert terrain, the acacia also

If you want to know God, look to Jesus. Jesus is the full expression of God in flesh and blood.

produces thorns for protection against drought.²¹ It doesn't take much to see the beautiful picture of Jesus and His humanity in this symbolism. The body of Jesus saw no decay because he remained in the tomb for only three days, and he bore the curse of thorns on His brow.

The acacia wood was covered in gold, representing Jesus's deity (Exodus 25:11).²² The covering, the Mercy Seat, was made out of one solid piece of gold that was beaten to form a covering with two cherubim on either end, whose wings stretched out over the seat (Exodus 25:17-20). They seemed to offer some kind of shade or protection over the mercy seat. Never lifting their eyes away from the place where, once a year, blood would be sprinkled for the atonement of the nation. I am sure you have already picked up on the symbolism of the "beating" connected to the death of Jesus, but I also want you to see something really cool.

Read John 20:11-12. How many angels were in the tomb of Jesus when Mary looked in? Where were they seated?

Here we have the mercy seat depicted in the tomb. The body of Jesus had lain between the two angels—His blood sprinkled on the greatest mercy seat for all. He had fulfilled the law, and through a new covenant of His blood, He would usher in grace. Those are but a few of the amazing things about the ark that point to Jesus.

Of course, we can see these representations because we have the full revelation of Scripture, but these Old Testament characters would not have understood them. Yet in His great love, God stooped to give them earthly representations of a future mystery—the mystery of grace through the blood of Jesus.

Considering what it represented, the ark was to be treated with the utmost respect. But instead, the people of Israel treated it with contempt. The sad fact is that despite their proximity to the law, they didn't understand the consequences any more than the Philistines.

When people encountered Jesus, they often came to the same conclusion as the Philistines did. If we can't control it, we don't want it. Send it away!

Let's look to a New Testament story and consider similarities. Read Mark 5:1-20. What do the people do in verse 17?

The Gentiles living on the north side of the Sea of Galilee, in the area called the Decapolis, had been dealing with a demon-possessed man for years. They could not control him. They could not bind him. All they could do was stay away from him as he inhabited the tombs, screaming out twenty-four-seven. I am sure they could not even bear to look at him with the deep bloody wounds covering his naked, dirty body. Jesus came to their land and met this man straight away. He had just calmed the storm, showing His disciples that He was the God of creation. He was the God of everything “natural.” Now He would show them and any onlookers that He was also the God of everything “supernatural.” Jesus calmed the possessed man. He cast out the demons, the man breathed in peace, and like the sea, he was still!

Yet, verse 17 tells us that when the people of the town came and saw what had happened, they wanted Jesus to leave. What? Yes. They must have wondered, *Who could be stronger than the demons? If we could not control this wild man, we definitely cannot control Him.* This power that they did not know and could not control scared them more than the demons! *Please go away from us, Jesus.* When a person encounters a holy God, his or her instinct is to hide. Just ask Adam and Eve (Genesis 3).

This story about the Israelites looking upon the ark reminds me of a belief I learned as a child, that God is too pure to look upon sin (Habakkuk 1:13). I can still hear the pastor yelling, “God hates sin!” The problem was that in my mind, *sin* and *sinner* were synonymous, which left me feeling shame. I believed the only reason God could bare to look at me was that He was actually seeing His son instead of me. Like some holy decoupage, I was hidden by Jesus. Later I began to realize the implication of Jesus’s divinity. As the full expression of God, He not only looked upon sinners, He also ate with them, touched them, and seemed to delight in them. He wasn’t repulsed by them; He was drawn to them—not to camouflage them or cover them, but to cleanse them and set them free from hiding.

The truth is, we aren’t hidden *from* God, we’re hidden *in* God. We aren’t hidden *by* Christ; we’re hidden *with* Christ (Colossians 3:3). In Jesus, we have been reconciled. He sees us. He delights in us. He wants a relationship with us. In his book *Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning explores how God’s love is always an open-armed invitation back into authentic relationship, one in which His love sees us as we are and not as we should be.²³ God never sends us away. I don’t believe that sin keeps God from us, but it keeps us from God. And that’s good news.



Prayer Prompt

What is keeping you from a deep connection with your Father right now? Consider not only your behaviors but also your beliefs. Are you assuming things about God that may not be true? Are you giving Him motives that He doesn't have? Are you assuming all the voices or judgments in your head are from God? Could they be from you instead? Be reconciled with God. Don't send Him away. Talk to Him.



Video Viewer Guide: Week 1

God is always at _____. He is always in _____.

Our worth is not found in what we _____, produce, or achieve. It is found in the heart of _____.

Comparison highlights our _____.

The only One who can fill your _____ _____ is the One who knit you together in your mother's womb.

_____ are the indicators of what is going on inside of us, but we are not _____ to them.

Life is hard, but God has fully _____ us with everything we need to get through it.

Anything that is out of our control is still within _____.

Scriptures: 1 Samuel 1:1-7, Psalm 143:8, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, Romans 15:4, Genesis 2:1, 1 Samuel 1:19-20