**STANDING TALL, FALLING HARD, 1 SAM. 13:1-14, 15:1-14, JAN. 29/23.**

 The last time we were working from *The Story,* was before Advent. We’re back to it since we’ve become newest & most improved ever! We looked at Ruth, a foreigner, a stranger to the Israelites. She should never have been included among God’s Chosen People, for God had forbidden the intermarrying of the Israelites with those outside their faith. Yet God’s blessing was clearly on Ruth. It’s difficult to figure out God, isn’t it? He says don’t do something, people do it & God works with it; on occasion He blesses it despite our wrongdoing, & even blesses it big time. But don’t ever presume to understand God or His ways. God is never boxed in by circumstances or limited in any way! He is free to do what He knows is best. Ruth was ingrafted among the Jews & ultimately became the great grandmother of King David, & OT prophecies indicated that Jesus Christ would come from the line of David. So, Ruth, though technically ineligible as an outsider, a foreigner, is placed by God right in the middle of our Saviour’s genealogy! Aren’t you glad we are never beyond the reach, wisdom & grace of God!

 We saw how faithfully Naomi must have lived out her faith. What else would cause Ruth to proclaim her unreserved devotion to the God of the Hebrews. We talked about Ruth’s moment of decision, how she came under God’s saving grace the instant she trusted in Him wholeheartedly. But her faith was stretched day by day for the rest of her life, just as ours is. As we discussed in the newness series, we cannot say, “Oh, I committed my life to the Lord so many years ago” & do nothing afterwards to grow that faith. Nor did Ruth drift into her faith; she was intentional about it, leaving her former life behind & accepting the challenges & joys of a new life committed to God. Have you intentionally left your old life behind? While salvation takes place in that moment of decision, holiness takes a lifetime to effect in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Naomi’s God-walk encouraged Ruth in this direction.

 Looking at Ruth’s courage is a reminder that when we’re strangers or foreigners we are at our most vulnerable. Her courage was rewarded. Boaz received her graciously, generously & kindly. Each of us can do the same. It’s essential for each of us to intentionally exercise words & actions to comfort & help others—that is Christ-like. In fact, it is not uncommon for God to put someone in our path deliberately so we are specifically chosen to help them. Are you currently helping someone, extending Christ’s grace to them in kindness & action?

 Naomi, Boaz & Ruth modeled the missional church—living like the church outside the church, meeting with others in their community (not ours) & meeting their needs, not ours.

 Today’s message is from I Samuel & begins with the story of Elkanah, who had 2 wives, Peninnah & Hannah. Hannah couldn’t conceive. She was the wife Elkanah loved—a story similar to Sarah & Rebecca. Hannah like Sarah is taunted by the “other wife” who could conceive. Every year, Hannah & Elkanah went to the temple at Shilo, where Eli was the high priest. One year Hannah was praying silently, mouthing her words. Eli mistook her actions for drunkenness. She assured him that wasn’t the case. When they returned home Hannah became pregnant with Samuel. After he was weaned, she dedicated him to the Lord’s service under the mentoring of Eli.

 Samuel stayed at the temple. 3 times 1 night his name was called. Each time he went to Eli, thinking that’s who called him. After the 3rd disclaimer, Eli clued in—it might be God & told Samuel what to do if the call came again. It did. Samuel was to become God’s prophet. His 1st message wasn’t easy, for it spoke against Eli’s 2 sons who had mocked God with their immoral behaviour. They died in battle & Eli’s line in the priest-hood ended. God will not be mocked.

 “The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, & He let none of Samuel’s words fall to the ground. All Israel…recognized Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to appear at Shiloah, revealing Himself to Samuel... And Samuel’s word came to all Israel.”

Samuel is a spiritual giant in the OT. He was the last of the judges. He didn’t rule with physical strength like Samson, but rather with high spiritual quality & prayer. He didn’t wrestle so much with flesh & blood like Samson but against the powers & rulers of darkness & spiritual wickedness. He was the 1st of a succession of prophets God placed alongside Israel’s kings & priests to provide fresh moral & spiritual direction. Are you experiencing spiritual freshness?

 These events occurred at the time of the conflict with the Philistines. After a military defeat with 4,000 casualties, the Israelites, on their own, decided to take the Ark of the Covenant with them into the next battle. It contained the 10 Commandments & the heavenly manna provided for the Jews during their time in the Wilderness, fleeing from Egypt. God’s presence was also presumed to reside within it. They took it to battle like a good luck charm. Very bad move! To presume on God is never a good thing! They sustained losses of 30,000 men. What does it mean when God’s Ark is captured into enemy hands? There was gnashing of teeth on the Israeli side & surprise on the Philistine side. The news of its loss was enough to kill Eli. The Philistines put the Ark in their own temple along with their god, but God filled them with 7 months of misery—tumors—such that the Philistines put the Ark on a cart and sent it back to the Israelites.

But still the Israelite collective spirit was restless & rebellious. Though they defeated the Philistines under Samuel’s direction & though he insisted that the Israelites stop worshiping pagan gods, nevertheless, they insisted on having a king. This upset Samuel, but when he prayed

to God, God told Samuel, “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.” Uh-oh. It’s never a good thing to reject God. In spite of telling the Israelites all the things a king would demand of them—tithes of land & farm produce, conscripting their sons into battle or other serving occupations—they insisted they wanted a king—just like other nations, 1 who’d lead them into battle & be their leader. We’re that way too. Though we’ve received grace & blessings from God beyond what we could imagine, we similarly look out on the world with envy, desiring what others have rather than the gifts God’s given us in Christ. Like the seductive fruit Eve couldn’t resist, covetousness puts us on a wrong playing field with God; implying His wisdom, provision & grace aren’t enough.

 Enter Saul. Though he’s out looking for lost donkeys, God tells Samuel where to intercept him & anoint him ruler “over my people Israel”. Without any leading from Saul, Samuel tells Saul his lost donkeys have been found &the next day Samuel will tell Saul everything that is on Saul’s heart. Saul is made king of Israel even though he’s from the smallest tribe & the least important clan of that tribe—just like God’s done so many times before & since. Remember Gideon? God chose the underdog Jacob. God’s not impressed with your worldly credentials—wisdom, influence, wealth, intellect, connections. God chooses you because He has a mission He can make you successful to take on. Do you know God’s mission for you yet? Listen carefully for His leading. Saul is so not-ready; at the time of his anointing nobody can find him because he’s hiding among the supplies. *The Story* comments, quite the “inauspicious inauguration”!

 Instantly Saul is put to the test. Ammonites overwhelm Jabesh Gilead, setting terms of peace at the price of gouging an eye out of each man. When Saul hears this, the Spirit of God

comes powerfully upon him; he burns with anger, cuts 2 oxen into pieces that he distributes throughout Israel, saying anyone who doesn’t follow Saul & Samuel will be treated like these oxen. 300,000 men from Israel & 30,000 from Judah show up for battle. The Ammonites were slaughtered for their iniquity. The Lord saved Israel. Have you ever burned with anger because of injustice or mistreatment of others?

 Samuel reminds Israel what an evil thing they have done in the eyes of the Lord by requesting a king. At harvest time Samuel called on God to bring thunder &rain, which God did, so all the people stood in awe of the Lord & Samuel. Samuel says, “Don’t be afraid. Though you have done this evil, do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart.” God won’t reject His people for the sake of His great name.

Samuel says, “Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the Lord and serve Him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things He has done for you”.

How about you? Have you put another king on the throne in God’s place? Is someone or something other than God given 1st place in your life? Do you see how contemptible that is to God? But God will not abandon you when you do sin. God’s remedy is that we pray & pray for one another. Pray that a person will be teachable about going the right way. Serve God wholeheartedly & always recall what great things He has done—for you & for everyone.

Saul reigned for 42 years from age 30 to 72. Impulsively, he took matters into his own hands while waiting for Samuel. Saul’s son, Jonthan, provoked the Philistines with an attack at one of their outposts so the Philistines assembled soldiers too numerous to count. Drastically outnumbered and out-powered, the Israelites hid or crossed the Jordan to safety. They were desperate, “quaking with fear.” Saul waited for Samuel for 7 days then as the men began to scatter he ordered the burnt offering & the fellowship offering. Right at the end of the offering, Samuel arrived. “What have you done?” On his own, Saul was seeking the Lord’s favour. Bad move. Saul had betrayed the command the Lord had given him. The cost? Saul’s kingdom would not endure. The Lord would seek out a man after His own heart & appoint him ruler.

How often have we similarly acted in an impulsive way, not waiting on God for His answer or timing? We shouldn’t be so quick to judge Saul. With men abandoning the cause, & having waited a week for Samuel, you can understand how the argument gets twisted to justify the action. Saul said he was just trying to honour the Lord, but it’s simply not true. He was trying to work the Lord’s favour into what He wanted. He told Samuel he’d followed Samuel’s message from the Lord & wiped out everyone & everything as God had instructed. But then the great line from Samuel: “What then is this bleating in my ears?” Saul had not been faithful. He was trying to work the Lord into his corner. That’s a very dangerous place to be. God won’t be manipulated. He knows your heart & He knows His will for the whole world & for each of us. Don’t trifle with Him! Sometimes it’s just so hard to let go of the world’s allure.

“Who is king, God or you?” Are you totally given over to the leading of the Holy Spirit? Have you accepted God’s grace through Jesus Christ so that you are committed to bring glory to Him & not you? Trust and obey, but obey fully. God’s not half-hearted about & your wellbeing. Don’t be half-hearted in your enthusiasm for Him or in the manner you follow Him. Like Samuel, will you love Him 1st, will you honour Him 1st? Christ has loved you & continues to love you without compromise, without hesitation. Pray about & practice that this week.