

OLD TESTAMENT FIGURES

Samuel, The Last Judge

Why the last judge was never the answer

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, January 9, 2022
PASSAGES	1 Samuel 3:1-21; 1 Samuel 7:3-12; 1 Samuel 8:3-7; 1 Samuel 2:26; 1 Samuel 2:34-35; Judges 21:25; Romans 6:3-4
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:07:55 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Samuel was never the cure for Israel. What he brought was the word of God, spoken plainly even when it cost him — and that is what turned the nation. The faithfulness Israel could not sustain for one generation was finally supplied by the one who is himself the Word, and who kept it perfectly on our behalf.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Judges is not a collection of hero stories. It is a long argument for why Israel needed a hero — a real one, a faithful one, an enduring one.
- ◆ Samuel's first prophetic word was the condemnation of Eli, the man who raised him. His ministry opens with the hardest thing he would ever have to say.
- ◆ Carrying the ark into battle is not the same as consulting God. One is asking him; the other is grabbing his box.
- ◆ God fought for Israel at Ebenezer and not at the earlier battle, because when and how he blesses Israel tells the surrounding nations what he is like.
- ◆ Samuel's own sons took bribes exactly as Eli's had. The point of his life was never his excellence — it was the word he would not hold back.

- ◆ Asking for a king changed nothing structurally: the king's heir succeeds him just as the judge's sons had. What Israel wanted was the feeling of safety, and God was supposed to be that.
- ◆ We fight for faithfulness and offer it as worship. We do not stand on it. We stand on the faithfulness of Christ, who obeyed completely in our place.

► 1:12:00

Hope is working through the major figures of the Old Testament. Joshua was last week, and since Matt preached the judges recently he skipped straight to the last of them — Samuel. But he started with a recap of Judges anyway, because you cannot feel the weight of 1 Samuel without the taste Judges leaves in your mouth.

1. The book that sets the table

► 1:12:32

Judges opens well. “After the death of Joshua the people of Israel inquired of the Lord” — exactly what you would want. Expectations are high for a miracle nation born out of slavery. What follows is a spiral, and Matt traced it judge by judge to show the design in it.

► 1:13:40

Othniel gets four clean sentences: Israel is unfaithful, Israel cries out, God raises a deliverer, done. Ehud wins by a sneaky plan with no mention of Yahweh. Deborah is judging, but not at Shiloh, and Barak will not go to war without her. Gideon's generation cries out and is met with rebuke rather than rescue, then crowns him in all but name — he refuses the kingship, fathers seventy sons, names his heir Abimelech, “my father is king,” and makes a golden ephod the people worship. “Tell me you're a king without telling me you're a king,” Matt said. Abimelech is not called by God at all and murders his brothers. Jephthah is chosen because he is big.

► 1:16:38

Then Samson, announced twice as a miracle baby — the biggest build-up and the biggest letdown. Israel does not repent; by now Israel does not even cry out. Samson spends his strength on himself, kills men for their clothes, never raises an army, and at the end asks for vengeance “for my two eyes” rather than that the nations would know Yahweh is God. He is a small replica of the nation he was supposed to serve. The book closes with a Levite's concubine, a dismembered body sent through the tribes, and a civil war that nearly erases Benjamin, under the refrain that there was no king in Israel and each man did what was right in his own eyes.

2. A priest's house and a boy in a linen ephod

► 1:18:40

That bitter taste is what you carry into 1 Samuel — where you are introduced almost immediately to Eli and his sons. Hophni and Phinehas were not merely taking extra from the offerings; they were taking the portions that belonged to the Lord, and sleeping with the women serving at the tent, and everyone knew. Eli appears to confront them. He does not restrain them. Set against that, in the next breath:

“Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man.”

1 SAMUEL 2:26 ↗

Matt caught himself on that line — he thought it was in Luke. It is: [Luke 2:52](#) is quoting it, and usefully, because like Samuel, Jesus walks onto the stage in a season of deep unfaithfulness when the word of God had gone rare.

► 1:20:57

An unnamed man of God comes to Eli with the sentence:

“And this that shall come upon your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you: both of them shall die on the same day. And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever.”

1 SAMUEL 2:34–35 ↗

Eli is out, for poorly representing God — a small picture of the nation standing on the edge of the same judgment.

3. The first word he ever had to deliver

► 1:22:46

“At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. Then the Lord called Samuel... Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him... Therefore Eli said to Samuel, ‘Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, “Speak, Lord, for your servant hears.”’”

1 SAMUEL 3:2–10 ↗

► 1:24:40

Most of us know the call. Fewer of us notice the content. The first word God ever gave Samuel was the same word the man of God had already brought — the ruin of Eli’s house. It was barely about Samuel at all. “Can you imagine your first prophetic word being about the condemnation coming to your own adoptive father,” Matt said. Samuel lay there until morning. Mercifully, he did not have to find a way to raise it: Eli demanded it, under oath, and then answered, “It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him.” His role in Israel was set from that night — say what God says, even when it is the hardest thing in the room. And from Dan to Beersheba, all Israel knew he was established as a prophet.

4. Consulting the Lord, and grabbing his box

► 1:27:03

Israel loses a skirmish to the Philistines, and has a great idea: take the ark into battle. Hophni and Phinehas carry it. Nobody consults the Lord. “They grabbed his box,” Matt said. “Those are actually different things. They may feel similar, but consulting the Lord versus trying to manipulate his power is totally different.” Israel loses far worse. The runner reaches Eli with three pieces of news, and Eli falls backward and dies — the text noting he was old and he was heavy, which, Matt pointed out, quietly reaches back to the sons stealing extra meat from the offerings.

► 1:29:28

The ark, meanwhile, fights its own war. Set in Dagon’s temple, the statue topples, is stood back up, and topples again with its head and hands broken off on the threshold. God does not send Israelites to recover it; he deals with the Philistines directly, with plagues and tumors and mice, until they work out on their own how to send it back with honor. No Israelite taught them that reverence. And when it comes home, nobody much wants it — which, Matt said, is itself a good sign. Awe was back on the menu, and Israel had been reminded the ark is not a toy.

5. Ebenezer — till now the Lord has helped us

► 1:30:45

“If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtarothe from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.”

1 SAMUEL 7:3 ↗

Matt leaned on that *if*, and on how worn the instruction already was. Moses said put away your idols. Joshua said put away your idols. Othniel, Ehud, Gideon — and here we are again. This time they do. They fast, they pray, they serve the Lord only, and when the Philistines advance the Lord thunders against them.

► 1:33:15

“Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen and called its name Ebenezer; for he said, ‘Till now the Lord has helped us.’”

1 SAMUEL 7:12 ↗

Why fight now and not when they hauled the ark out? Because context carries the message. “When and how God blesses Israel actually affects the signaling of what God is like to all the nations around,” Matt said. A victory handed to Israel while they were serving Baal and the Ashtarothe preaches the wrong sermon. The blessing was never ultimately about prospering Israel; it was about Israel being a light to the world.

6. Samuel’s sons, and the king they asked for

► 1:34:58

Then the detail Matt deliberately refused to skip. Samuel grows old and appoints his sons as judges, and they turn aside after gain, take bribes, and pervert justice. Two sons. Corruption named twice. “Does that remind you of any other guys?”

► 1:37:42

So the elders come to Ramah: you are old, your sons do not walk in your ways, give us a king like all the nations. Matt pressed on the logic. The thing they object to is inheritance — the judge’s sons becoming

the default. A monarchy is the identical arrangement with more weapons. “It’s the same as a prophet, except he has a lot more weapons.” What they actually wanted was the royal standard and the elite troops and the feeling of safety.

“Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.”

1 SAMUEL 8:7 ↗

7. It was never about Samuel

▶ 1:36:04

Here is the hinge of the message. Samuel was a better man than Eli, but Samuel was not the prescription Israel needed — look at how his sons turned out. Remember how the story began: the word was rare in those days. “It’s not about the abiding strength of a man,” Matt said. “It’s about him faithfully saying the word, and that’s what prompted Israel towards their repentance. And he didn’t hold back the word” — not even when the word was against the man who raised him.

8. “I’m just going to drop it in”

▶ 1:41:34

What do we learn from the judges and from Israel under Samuel? That the people could not sustain faithfulness. Not because they were inferior — we have different clothes and smartphones, not different hearts. Idolatry was a constant, multi-generational, non-stop battle, and loyalty to Yahweh was not anyone’s default setting from birth.

Matt’s picture for our confidence was Sam and Frodo on the road to Mount Doom, with a scroll of the twelve previous men who carried the ring to the crack of doom and decided at the last second to keep it. Sam reads the twelve, turns to Frodo, and asks what the plan is. “I’m just going to drop it in.” You would start stress-sweating. You would say: no, you need a different plan. “Without a doubt, even though we’re modern, we shouldn’t just assume — I am faithful by default, I don’t know what their problem was, I’m just going to go with my gut and let love guide me.”

9. Which Baal, which love

▶ 1:43:36

Then a parallel he offered carefully, as something to take to the Lord. *Baal* means master, or lord. An Israelite could in total innocence pray to the baal of Israel, meaning Yahweh. Another man nearby prays to Baal and means the storm god who rides the clouds. Same word; the difference between faithfulness and idolatry. You would want somebody to tap each of them on the shoulder and ask which one they meant.

► 1:45:12

Matt feels the same about the word *love*. “I let love be my guide” can mean holding hands and we’re all in this together, or it can mean the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who the Bible says is love, whose ways I want to follow. Two people can say the identical sentence and be talking about entirely different things. His own instinct, facing a new year and plans nobody can see the end of: ask for the footnote, and in any ambiguity err on the side of faithfulness to Yahweh rather than trusting his own gut about what love requires.

10. The faithful one who did it for us

► 1:47:53

Samuel foreshadows Christ, and precisely at the point the message has been making. In a season when the word was rare, what Samuel brought satisfied — even when it was harsh, it was exactly what needed hearing. Under his judgeship, in effect, the word was Israel’s judge. If only there were a way for the word of the Lord to be our judge generation after generation. There is: the faithful priest promised to Eli, risen in the line of David, who is himself the word of God and who is our king whether we recognize it or not.

► 1:49:50

And Matt closed by refusing the obvious application. The point is not that we gird up and be faithful this time, to Jesus. None of us could ever have done faithfulness one hundred percent, cradle to grave — which is part of why Scripture rings true. Israel did not invent flattering origin stories. They look terrible in their own book: a long, epic tale of a faithful God serving terribly unfaithful people.

So he is not only the God who rules justly, but the God who became man, joined our humanity to his, and lived that faithfulness perfectly on our behalf.

Baptized into Christ, you are baptized into his death and into his resurrection; you belong to him and you stand on the foundation of his faithfulness. We still fight and strive for faithfulness, and we give it to God as worship, because we are living offerings. But it is not the ground we stand on.

► 1:52:23

“That is far more important than saying, okay, new year, I’m going to try harder this time,” Matt said. “This is way different. Somebody did it all the way already.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Judges 1:1
- Judges 21:25
- 1 Samuel 2:26
- Luke 2:52
- 1 Samuel 2:34–35
- 1 Samuel 3:2–10
- 1 Samuel 3:19–20
- 1 Samuel 4:1–11
- 1 Samuel 4:18
- 1 Samuel 5:1–4
- 1 Samuel 7:3
- 1 Samuel 7:12
- 1 Samuel 8:3
- 1 Samuel 8:7
- Romans 6:3–4
- Romans 12:1

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Judges runs on the refrain that each man did what was right in his own eyes. Where does that sound less like ancient Israel and more like how you actually make decisions?
2. Samuel's first word from God was about the man who raised him. What has God given you to say that you keep finding reasons not to say?
3. Israel carried the ark into battle without ever consulting the Lord. What does reaching for God's power while avoiding God himself look like in your life?
4. Matt wants a footnote every time someone says "love." If someone asked you what you mean by it, what would you answer, and where would you show them in Scripture?
5. If the point is not trying harder this year, because someone already did it all the way — what does erring on the side of faithfulness look like for you this week, standing on his?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSMltxbjoKQ&t=4075s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.