
Bible Studies in Our Time

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

In my weekly Bible studies, we have been reading through the dramatic stories of First and Second Samuel. We have already met the sturdy Samuel and the erratic Saul, and we are beginning the sagas of the engaging David. Still to come are the stories of the older King David and his scattered sons.

Most of us know these biblical characters by name, and some of us might even have a phrase or two that tags, or labels, these famous figures. We might remember Samuel as a young boy hearing the voice of Yahweh calling him. We remember something about King Saul not liking David. Of course, we remember young David slaying Goliath, the giant Philistine enemy.

But it is a different, and refreshing exercise, to read these old stories in context, and to wade through the plots, week after week. Reading the Bible straight through is a very different, and sometimes far more challenging, exercise, than simply studying small passages. In fact, the Bible comes alive when we read it several chapters at a time, straight through, and not simply selecting verses that might deliver a comforting moral.

What we have found is that there is not always a clear moral within a particular set of two or three chapters in these historical narratives! Indeed, the history of the ancient Hebrew people seeking and identifying leadership does not follow a level line. They seek leadership in judges, in prophets, and in priests. Some of that leadership succeeds, but then, within the same chapter, the same leader spectacularly fails.

The Hebrew people then beseech the prophet Samuel to anoint a king for them, like their neighboring nations seem to have. Samuel, and Yahweh himself, warn against that desire, but the people have their way. They find Saul, who enjoys a few moments of glory. But Saul quickly becomes paranoid and erratic. His moods swing psychotically low. He worries that others are more popular than he is. He especially envies David, and seeks to kill him. In some chapters, we read that Saul is simply present “with his spear in his hand.” He uses that spear, of course, to strike out reactively, without thinking, to whatever is irritating him at the moment.

His leadership will fail, of course, as we all foresee. Then again, it looks like no biblical leader—whether judge or prophet or priest or king—is without sin or error. Despite our human hope for pure and undefiled goodness, there seems to be little absolutism in the Bible. We even read various stories describing the same event from different points of view! Reading biblical history reminds us of how hard it is to discern the wisdom of God in the hilly terrain of human life.

And that, perhaps, is exactly the moral – the reason we continue to plow through these biblical narratives. They teach us something, but we have to take our time for it. Our wisdom does not come immediately and without effort. We have to study, we have to read, we have to take our time, we have to engage the stories. Only then do we begin to realize a larger picture, a picture of God guiding human beings who are just as volatile and inconsistent as we are in our time. It takes time; and then, then, we begin to see something bigger than ourselves.

Time and time again, sometimes after wildly bizarre events. God brings something good out of human error. But, in the Bible, God’s salvation never seems to use the same tools that we humans think we have to depend upon: things like spears

and horses and military strength. In the biblical stories, God is using the weak. God uses the looked over and the lowly. God honors the humble; and when humility is honored, God's leadership takes effort and it takes time. God is teaching a wisdom that is not of this world, no matter who it is that God's people are calling leader. Over time, there is one word that describes that wisdom well; that word is humility.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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