

I need to start off with a confession: I'm one of those modern persons who's wholly unequipped to live any time more distant than 200 years or so ago. I don't possess some of the basic skills that made survival possible in the age before cars, advanced medicine and stuff like that. I don't like to hunt (though I'm a pretty good shot with a 30.30). I know enough about cars to get myself in trouble. I can build a fire, but I can't start one without a lighter or some matches. I can't make my own clothes. And when it comes to medicine, my philosophy is if it's anything more than an annoying headache, I head straight to the doctor. No spoons full of sugar or herbal remedies for me.

I'm like many of you - I grew up in what many call a professional culture. Everything is done now by professionals. Few of us are even jacks and jills of all trades anymore, let alone masters. Now we have a few things we're particularly skilled at, and everything else we leave to the professionals.

That culture of Professionalism influences the Church as well. I have worked for a local church for a decade now, which means I've been a Professional Christian for about ten years. During that decade, I've felt the weight of the Professionalism. Why do we bring our cars to mechanics? Because we don't know what to do with them, or we're too busy or whatever. Why do I go to the doctor when I'm sick? Because I don't know what will make me better, or I have too much to do to wait for the slow (or slower-than-I-want) process of healing.

So too with our faith. As a youth pastor, I had many parents who brought their teens to me to be spiritually formed. The parents saw me as the primary spiritual teacher in their teens lives - after all, I'm the professional! Many of them didn't know how to lead their teens in faith, or didn't have time. So they outsourced it to me.

As a teaching pastor, I encounter the same problems - Many people come to me for spiritual guidance, for spiritual leadership because they don't know what to do, or they're too busy. My job is to keep them spiritually healthy, spiritually strong. After all. I'm the professional.

If you recognize that attitude, you know the problem with it: it doesn't work. Human beings aren't like cars. We're not machines that run fine most of the time and only break down occasionally. Our souls require constant attention. God desires to be as near to us as our next breath. As consistent as our next meal. And we don't breathe once a week. We don't eat once a week.

That's why so many of us feel frustrated or inadequate in our spirituality. We've assumed we can outsource our faith to professionals but it turns out we can't. Religion that is true, beautiful and life-affirming is a consistent, daily and personal phenomenon. It's not something you can farm out.

I want to show you today that God created you for a real personal relationship, that you have everything you need to own your own faith. That doesn't mean it's easy or automatic. But it does mean that the solution to your feelings of inadequacy, shallow faith and disconnectedness is in *your* hands. It's not about finding a better church or a better preacher. It's about you becoming the person God created you to be.

And I know you're thinking, Well sure, JR. That's why I'm here, listening to you. I am expecting you to feed me, for you to make me better.

But what I'm telling you is that my job is to help you get to the place where you don't need me.

Remember that scene in *The Matrix* where Neo says, "Are you telling me I can dodge bullets?" And then Morpheus goes, "I'm saying, when you're ready, you won't have to."

That's us. You're Neo. I'm Morpheus. You're Luke Skywalker. I'm Master Yoda. The whole point is that this is *your* faith. *Your* story. Not mine. My job is not to be the star of the Jesus show. It's to help you discover your place and learn how your relationship with God is *your* relationship. Not mine, not Keven's, not any other pastor or person's.

Learning what that looks like brings us to our Big Event today. We're in a series right now called Ordinary Phenomenon that looks back at some of the extraordinary events in the Old Testament, some of the big miracles and wow moments. And what we've seen each week is that where we truly experience God is not in the big events but in the ordinary, everyday moments.

Today's Big Event is a little different in that it's not a miracle God initiated. This is a major turning point in Israel's history that was initiated not by God, but by the people themselves.

If you have a Bible, turn with me to 1 Samuel 8. If you grabbed one of our bibles off the rack on the way in, you can find 1 Samuel 8 on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, we'd love for you to keep that one, consider it a gift from us.

As you're turning to 1 Samuel 8, let me give you a little background on this passage: God has rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt - they crossed the Red Sea into freedom. And after spending 40 years in the wilderness (eating manna God provided for them), they've finally entered the land God promised to them. They conquer the land - which Keven talked about last week, and then they settled it.

When Israel settled in the Promised Land, they organized themselves by tribes - each tribe got a portion of the land. [Let's find a good picture of this that shows the 12 tribal allotments and some of the neighboring threats - Philista, Midian, Moab, Ammon, etc.] And they didn't really have a strong central government. After Moses and then Joshua died, each tribe mostly kept to itself. For you American History nerds, their relationship looked a lot like the 13 states just after the Revolutionary War, under the Articles of Confederation. The individual tribes were sovereign, and related to the other tribes only loosely.

This period of time is chronicled in the book we call Judges because during this period, Israel was under constant threat of attack from neighboring tribes. And God constantly promised that if Israel would be faithful, God would protect them. And so it was. All through the book of Judges we see the same cycle: Israel forgets God and some of the tribes are conquered by those neighboring kingdoms. They repent, call out to God and God raises up a hero - called a Judge - to rescue them. And then the cycle starts all over.

1 Samuel is the book that follows Judges chronologically. Samuel, the title character, has the dubious honor of being Israel's last great judge. And at this point in the story, we're nearing the end of Samuel's life. He's been well-loved by Israel, but now they're beginning to wonder: what happens after Samuel's gone? What the succession plan? Let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

As Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons to be judges over Israel. Joel and Abijah, his oldest sons, held court in Beersheba. But they were not like their father, for they were greedy for money. They accepted

bribes and perverted justice. Finally, all the elders of Israel met at Ramah to discuss the matter with Samuel.

“Look,” they told him, “you are now old, and your sons are not like you. Give us a king to judge us like all the other nations have.” -- 1 Samuel 8:1-5

Samuel has two sons who are corrupt. The people don't trust them and don't want them to serve as leaders in Samuel's absence. So they come together - all 12 tribes - and demand Samuel give them a king.

They're asking for a centralized government. With a king, you have power and authority consolidated into one place. And most importantly - a king has a standing army. A king can protect the people from outside threats. That's one of the king's primary responsibilities.

What's fascinating is how Samuel responds:

Samuel was displeased with their request and went to the Lord for guidance. “Do everything they say to you,” the Lord replied, “for it is me they are rejecting, not you. They don’t want me to be their king any longer. Ever since I brought them from Egypt they have continually abandoned me and followed other gods. And now they are giving you the same treatment. Do as they ask, but solemnly warn them about the way a king will reign over them.”

Both Samuel and God take great offense to this request. Which should strike you as odd. After all, why should Samuel care what happens when he's gone? And why should God care whether they have a king or not?

In the ancient world, the king was more than just a political ruler. The king was also a representative of God on earth - many cultures, including Egypt and Rome, referred to their rulers as the Son of God, or even as gods themselves. [I’m getting a sense for the visual: sort of a map or something where there is us, God and then something between (King/pastor)]

People saw the king as an earthly embodiment of God's rule. The king showed the people God's way. And if the king ruled well - followed God's way, then the nation prospered. But if the king was wicked - if he didn't follow God's way, then the people suffered.

Either way, if they had a king, the people always had someone else to blame. It was never their fault. And now that's exactly what Israel wants. They're tired of trying to be faithful on their own. They're tired of shouldering the responsibility for the relationship God has called them into. They want someone else to live it for them.

No wonder God is disappointed and insulted. So God instructs Samuel to explain to Israel exactly what this choice will cost them. Let's read it:

So Samuel passed on the Lord’s warning to the people who were asking him for a king. “This is how a king will reign over you,” Samuel said. “The king will draft your sons and assign them to his chariots and his charioteers, making them run before his chariots. Some will be generals and captains in his army, some will be forced to plow in his fields and harvest his crops, and some will make his weapons and chariot equipment. The king will take your daughters from you and force them to cook and bake and

make perfumes for him. He will take away the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his own officials. He will take a tenth of your grain and your grape harvest and distribute it among his officers and attendants. He will take your male and female slaves and demand the finest of your cattle and donkeys for his own use. He will demand a tenth of your flocks, and you will be his slaves. When that day comes, you will beg for relief from this king you are demanding, but then the Lord will not help you. -- 1 Samuel 8:6-18

Samuel says, here's the cost of having a king. Here's the cost of letting someone stand between you and God: he'll draft your kids into his armies. He'll make them his slaves. He'll rob you of the prosperity God wants for you. He'll take the best of what you have for himself. You'll trade the freedom you have under God's rule for slavery under his. (And all the Libertarians in the room said "That's right!")

Samuel is outlining the consequences of Israel's choice for them: God desires for them to remain free, to bear the full responsibility of following him themselves, but also to enjoy the full freedom God desires for them. If they shrink back, if they settle for a mediated, lesser relationship with God than they could have, they're also settling for a lesser freedom, a lesser life than God created them for and called them to.

You can probably guess how they responded:

But the people refused to listen to Samuel's warning. "Even so, we still want a king," they said. "We want to be like the nations around us. Our king will judge us and lead us into battle." So Samuel repeated to the Lord what the people had said, and the Lord replied, "Do as they say, and give them a king." Then Samuel agreed and sent the people home. -- 1 Samuel 8:19-22

How sad is that?! God offers them freedom and invites them to live in it and they reject it. It's too hard. It costs too much. They'd rather pay the slave-master than live in freedom.

And yet we understand them. Freedom is terrifying. Because with freedom comes responsibility to wield that freedom well. That's why we abdicate in our own lives.

Just like God did with Israel, God calls us to have unmediated relationships with him. And just like Israel, we shrink back from that responsibility, afraid of what that freedom would cost.

It takes time and intention - daily - to be responsible for my own spiritual formation. It's easier to settle for shallow spirituality and blame the Church when we don't feel fulfilled.

It takes hard work, creativity and patience to act as the primary spiritual caregiver for our children. It's easier to make it the Youth and Kids pastors' jobs, to blame them when our kids don't seem to be getting it, or when they leave the way of Jesus as they grow up.

It takes study and practice to get good at reading the Bible, at praying or fasting. It's easier just to say those practices are for more spiritually-minded persons and rely on the Sunday morning worship gathering to provide them for you.

It's scary and risky to practice financial generosity. It's easier to blame the Church for always talking about money or the obvious abuses we all know about from various church leaders.

It takes an enormous amount of planning and discipline to implement Sabbath as a practice in your life or the lives of your family. It's easier to shrug your shoulders and decide you're too busy.

It's painful and unnatural to choose to be a peacemaker, to refuse to meet violence with violence. It's easier to give in to our baser instincts to respond to violence with greater violence, to sharp words with sharper words.

It's scary to take responsibility for your own spiritual life. It's a lot of work and it's wildly counter-cultural and it doesn't feel natural.

When we hear these things, we want to throw our hands up and say, It's too much! We just want to be like everyone else around us. Everyone who just goes about their lives and is fine.

We would rather farm our faith out to the professionals. Trust our pastors to tell us what the Bible means and pray for us and teach our kids what it means to follow Jesus and... Well. You know.

Because we don't think we're smart enough. Or we're too busy. Or any of the other excuses we use when we hire out to the professionals.

But God called us to live in freedom. God created us for an unmediated relationship with him. You *can* have a full, vibrant relationship with God. So can your kids. So can the people sitting around you, behind you, in front of you. We all can. And in fact that is what God *wants* for us. [the picture of the unmediated relationship]

The problem isn't with God. It's with us. We choose to believe we can't, that there's something just basically wrong or inadequate with us. A good number of you right now are hearing what I'm saying and it's hitting that wall of insecurity you keep up and deflecting.

I say, "You are fully capable of having a full, vibrant relationship with God" and you hear "He doesn't mean me. He means everyone else in the room. I couldn't."

No. I mean *you*. God created you. God knows how your brain works, how your spirit engages the world. And God created you with the capacity to have a full, free spirituality.

It takes practice. It takes growth. That's why the bible so often compares spiritual life to biological life. Kids aren't born able to walk and talk, much less to do arithmetic or text and tweet. We have to learn those things. And it's a slow, painful process with lots of crying and falling and getting back up and practice.

So too with our spirituality. You don't decide to follow Jesus and then suddenly receive a magic dump of information overnight. It's a process.

Spiritual formation is always a process. Any mature Christian, anyone you'd look at and say, I wish I could pray like them. Or give like them. Or fast like them. Or parent like them. Any of them will tell you the same thing: it's a process. You try. You fail. You try again. You succeed. You learn. You grow.

That's what the path to the freedom God offers looks like. But it begins by refusing the path Israel took. Refusing to farm your faith out to someone else.

It begins by insisting that you will be the captain of your own faith. You will bear the responsibility for your relationship with God. By refusing to outsource your spirituality.

It's harder. It's messier. But in the end, you're healthier, more whole and more mature. You have a freedom you couldn't have imagined before because you are living in the freedom God created you for.

So where will you begin? What will be the first step on your journey? [[Spiritual Formation worksheet](#)]

Prayer of Examine

1. What areas of your spiritual life have you farmed out to professionals?
2. What areas of your spiritual life have you taken ownership of?
3. What is one area of your spiritual life you can take responsibility for this week?
4. What will you do this week to take responsibility for your relationship with God?

King Jesus

Israel settled for a king, and what God warned them about came true: the kings took everything from them and eventually led them to defeat. God's people began to dream of a future king, one who wouldn't fail like the others. One who would be a perfect ruler.

They got that in the person of Jesus. When no less than the very God they had rejected left heaven to live among them. And this king was different than the other kings before him. This king didn't take anything. Instead, he gave everything.

Jesus is our king because Jesus gives his life to restore us to that original, unmediated relationship with God. As we sing these songs celebrating who Jesus is, will you respond to his invitation? Will you accept the full responsibility and freedom of your relationship with God?