

June 13, Ordinary 11B (1 Samuel 15:34-16:13)

God is moving on, but Samuel can't.

by [Matthew Johnson](#) in the [June 3, 2021](#) issue

It was really dead this time. Finally. I could tell when I first caught a glimpse of it sitting on the weather-checked asphalt of the Moose Lodge parking lot. It was sprawled out, horizontally, across the fading yellow lines of three spaces. Gravity had made it roll it that far, and from the way the rear end was lifted, gravity would have gladly taken it all the way to the chain-link fence at the end of the lot had the hand brake not been applied. It was the car my spouse was driving—one of two vehicles we then owned—a notoriously unreliable European machine that had a unique way of making me feel tremendous joy and regret almost simultaneously.

Purchased just before a crisis of calling pushed me into ministry, it became the car that ferried me more than 25,000 miles on trips between the seminary and my home. There and back was every part of 285 miles, much of which included twists over and around bluffs that led to scenic overlooks and sleepy little towns with churches-turned-antique stores—the kind with sale signs hand-painted on old bedroom doors.

It was that car which made the time comfortable and passable. When it was working, I would be cradled in the driver's seat, enjoying the vehicle's sporty feel and making hands-free calls to catch up on work. Though, given that those bluffs were lined with ore and the towns were few and far between, cellular service out there was spotty—so mostly I exchanged voicemails with people.

The first time the car quit on me out there, it went something like you would imagine in those movies with UFOs. It shut down mid-acceleration, everything went dark, and it rolled to a crunching stop on a gravel lane in a place with no phone reception. I walked up and down the highway for the better part of an hour, stretching the phone toward the sky as if its being a yard above my head would make any difference.

When the signal finally reached me, it carried with it voicemail notifications from one number I recognized and another I didn't. The first was that of a caseworker for a local assistance group I had talked to earlier in the day. They'd agreed to take in a person I referred.

"We have a problem, call me ba . . ." the recorded voice said on the first message before the signal dropped again. It was clear, even though the audio wasn't, that she was angry. By the time I was able to speak with her, I was a passenger in a tow truck and my notorious car was strapped to the flatbed behind me.

She told me the person they'd taken in had broken the rules and caused harm. They were kicking him out, and she encouraged me to be "more thorough" before I sent anybody to them again. I then checked the third message—it was from him. He had been arrested, said he'd done nothing wrong, and demanded I bail him out.

It was then I realized that what trailed me was remorse and what would be waiting for me when I finally made it back home was regret.

By the time Samuel makes it to Ramah, I imagine his regret is even more substantial. Saul, whom Samuel anointed as ruler, has lost the trust of God and is to now be replaced.

From the beginning, the choice of Saul for the throne has been controversial. The people clamored for a king, but they weren't excited about Saul in particular. Yet Samuel supported him. He kept vouching for the king even after Saul was so bold as to perform a priestly rite instead of waiting for Samuel.

But the king's failure to execute the battle plan as dictated by God—and his subsequent lying about it—is the last straw. God is sorry but has decided it is time to go for plan B in Bethlehem. There will be a new king there.

God is moving on, but Samuel can't. The text says he "grieved over Saul," but he seems more grieved by how entangled he's gotten in this. What began with the best of intentions now has the prophet wondering if he, too, will go down with Saul's administration. His grief is a statement about what (and who) he values the most. Has he, by association, lost God's trust too? Will he forever be linked with the failed rule of the first king?

So when God challenges Samuel, telling him the regret he continues to harbor is getting in the way of their relationship, God also renews the value of their covenant by reemphasizing the work they still need to do together. God rejects Samuel's argument that their work would be seen as a collusion or betrayal, telling the prophet his delay seems more like a kind of emotional procrastination—an inability to accept that he is still important and integral to God's mission. Because of God, Samuel is more than the sum of his actions in the past and certainly more than the mistakes of his friends and allies.

When the tow truck hauled away that car for the last time, I finally felt absolved of my remorse. But it took a little longer for me to let go of the regret that came from the voicemails that arrived on the first day it died. It was easier to disassociate my vocational identity from the former, but the latter was far too enmeshed—as are other perceived failures that have happened since. I still struggle to accept the kind of “moving on” grace God offers Samuel. It is quite comforting, though, to know it's there.