

== IN SEARCH OF A KING ==

Understanding 1 Samuel

Week Commencing 12th September 2022

Notes for next Sunday's sermon covering 1 Samuel 13-15, "The fall of Saul".

DAY 1: Read 1 Samuel 13

Saul's career so far has been something of a rollercoaster. It started, in a sense, with the people's demand for a king in ch 8. Samuel, spokesman for the Lord, warned of what it would really mean to have 'a king like the other nations have.' Saul has emerged from among the baggage to less-than-universal acclaim to be anointed king, and has gained the favour of his people by his liberation of the city of Jabesh Gilead.

As we come to ch 13, the Philistines – Israel's perennial enemies – have their foot on Israel's throat. Not only do they have garrisons in the Promised Land, they have outlawed blacksmithing (13:19) so that the Israelites cannot arm themselves. If they want to sharpen their farming equipment, they have to pay the Philistines to do it for them!

Against this backdrop, we meet Jonathan, and things flare up. Jonathan (who it later emerges is Saul's son) attacks the Philistine outpost at Geba, a gesture akin to kicking a hornets' nest. The Israelite army numbers three thousand men; the Philistines have that many chariots! Not to mention that the Philistines also have 'soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore.' The image is like the Polish cavalry shaping up against Nazi tank divisions. Overawed by the size of the Philistine army, the Israelites - responding to a rallying call - are terrified and begin to melt away, hiding behind anything big enough to cast a shadow.

Saul knows that he must wait for Samuel to come and make sacrifices before launching an attack (1 Sam 10:8). Samuel said he would be there in seven days, but will Saul even have an army left by then? With the seven days barely expired, Saul looks at his remaining six hundred men – a puny army – and makes the sacrifices without Samuel. As Samuel arrives moments later, he passes judgement on Saul:

"You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time.¹⁴ But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command."

Is that not a little harsh? Wasn't Saul just showing initiative and making the best of a bad situation? No, he was disobedient, failing to trust in God's power to bring victory from the jaws of defeat.

DAY 2: Read 1 Samuel 14:1-23

The focus now shifts to Jonathan, who at this stage is probably a teenager, and we notice some subtle but crucial differences between him and his father. With Saul is camping a very safe distance from the Philistines, Jonathan and his armour-bearer go for a closer look at the enemy. He comes across as rash. After all, wasn't his impulsive action of 13:3 the catalyst for this current crisis? But look at 14:6:

Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, "Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf."

He doesn't take it as a given that God will win victory for them ("perhaps..."); that would be presumptuous. Most importantly though, he recognises that God's power is absolute: *"Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few."* This is something that Saul, with his six hundred, glaringly failed to see. Had he not heard of the Lord's actions at the Red Sea? Didn't he remember the Sunday School lesson on Gideon? Jonathan, though, does recognise God's power, and puts his trust in it. After contriving a means for God to reveal the best course of action, he and his armour-bearer attack the Philistine outpost, two against dozens! God gives them victory: they kill twenty and the Philistines go into a blind panic, even attacking one another! 'It was a panic sent by God (v15).'

As Saul's lookouts saw the amazing spectacle, they brought word to Saul and he and his men joined the fray. Soon also did many who had slunk off to hide from the Philistines, or even joined their ranks, 'so the Lord rescued Israel that day (v23).'

Notice how at every point, Jonathan acknowledged God's power and authority. By contrast, Saul was slow to recognise these, and even when he briefly thinks of involving God in a decision (v18-19), it was quickly dropped when the excitement of battle beckoned. Saul is a king 'such as the other nations have.' He is physically imposing, decisive, and able to lead his men into battle. But he is not *God's* kind of king. God has promised in 13:14 to replace Saul with 'a man after his own heart.' Could Jonathan be the one?

DAY 3: Read 1 Samuel 14:24-52

We now learn of something that had happened earlier in the day which is having major consequences. Saul had bound his men with an oath, that none of them may eat any food until the battle is won and that any who did would be cursed. It was probably a means of preventing further desertions from his army (ie, if any deserted and went home, they would risk either curse or starvation should the army fail!) There were three problems with this: the first problem was that Saul's men were starving! Battle is a hungry business, and so 'the men of Israel were in distress that day'. This matter was not helped when they went into the woods and found honey oozing out of the ground! The second problem was that Saul's son, Jonathan, who by this stage had re-joined the rest of the army, was completely unaware of the prohibition and ate some of the honey. When one of the men filled him in with regard to Saul's oath, he saw not the threat to his personal safety, but the fact that his father's ridiculous oath had diminished Israel's victory! The third problem was that the men, starving as they were, did not have time for food regulations once victory had been achieved; they fell on the plundered livestock, slaughtered it immediately, and ate it with the blood still in it, directly contravening the command of Leviticus ch 7. When Saul is alerted to this, he takes it seriously and sets up the means for them to eat in obedience to the regulations, but fails to see his own stupidity was the root problem.

Later, he is confronted with a greater dilemma: he is made aware of the fact that Jonathan ate honey, unwittingly breaking Saul's prohibition. Perhaps now he would realise that his oath was taken rashly? But no, he is determined to go ahead and kill Jonathan, and is only prevented from doing so by the men of his army, who recognise the terrible miscarriage of justice that it would be.

While Saul would go on to have many military victories, he has already emerged in ch 13 and 14 to be deeply flawed, and worse is to follow in ch 15....

DAY 4: Read 1 Samuel 15

Samuel reappears on the scene and entrusts Saul with a mission from God, namely to wage war on the Amalekites, another of the traditional enemies of Israel. The crime of the Amalekites dates way back to the days of Exodus 17, when they had attacked the Israelites even as they fled from Egypt. This attack on his chosen people, God had never forgotten. Now Samuel reveals to Saul that God is raising him up to be the instrument of divine justice. God's sentence on the Amalekites sounds extremely harsh, but we must bear in mind that he is the Lord of heaven and earth, the creator of all and the one to whom every human being owes their existence and an accounting for their actions. It is hard for us to read v3: "Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys." It offends us, but remember that, like the Amalekites, we too have rebelled against the Almighty. We too could be in the crosshairs of his righteous judgment, and we would be! But praise God for his sacrificial mercy, our judgement he has visited instead upon his own Son - who took it willingly - that we might live.

When the time comes for Saul and his army to smite the Amalekites, their charter is clear: they are to destroy the Amalekites utterly. But this they fail to do! But it is not out of any desire for mercy that they spare the Amalekite king and the best of the livestock. When challenged by Samuel, Saul is evasive and claims that they have kept the best in order to sacrifice them to the Lord, but Samuel is not fooled. Saul's concern has been for his own glory (v12), and notice that he says the sacrifice would be 'to the Lord YOUR God,' not OUR God. As Samuel affirms in v22, sacrifice is no substitute for obedience before the Lord. Saul has listened to his men rather than the Almighty, fearing people, rather than the Lord. And so God pronounces his rejection of Saul through Samuel.

It is easy for us to read these chapters looking down our noses at Saul, but don't we see ourselves in his every act of disobedience, foolishness and self-sufficiency? This king 'such as the other nations have' is a disaster, because he is like us; the kind of leader people gravitate toward. But God in his grace had already promised a greater king, the kind of king God would choose, and to whom God calls his people. David will fulfil this promise in part, but his descendent, Jesus will bring this promise to its absolute and glorious reality.

(Notes prepared using John Woodhouse's 1 Samuel commentary. Some sentences and phrases used directly.)