

Saul's failure

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[0 : 00] So Saul, of course, was the first king of Israel. And he's presented to us in 1 Samuel as the nearly king, the king who nearly made it, but in the end.

! We need to put in a bit of historical background. So Saul had been chosen and anointed by Samuel.

We find way about that in chapters 9 and 10. And crucial to this present chapter is 1 Samuel 10 verse 8, where Samuel says to Saul, Go down ahead of me to Gilgal.

I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you should do. That's obviously what is being referred to, although the chronology is far from clear, and we'll come back to that in a minute.

But after chapters 9 and 10, we read of, well, in chapter 11, we read when Saul rescues the people of Jabesh-Gilead from an Ammonite siege.

[1 : 16] And that was a favor that the Gileadites would repay after Saul's death when they went out and retrieved his body from the Philistine, where the Philistines had put it up on the wall.

It was after this incident that Saul was proclaimed king by the people. And then the main history of his reign is taken up in this chapter, chapter 13. Unfortunately, this victory in chapter 11 turns out to be more or less the high point of Saul's reign right at the beginning.

And after that, it's all pretty much downhill. In chapter 12, Saul was proclaimed king over all the people after this victory, although he had been anointed by Saul.

The people didn't really appoint him. And yes, they will have Saul as king. So he was anointed by Samuel until after the victory at Jabesh-Gilead.

And so in chapter 12, they proclaim him king. But we do need to tell you something about the interpretation of the numbers and the chronology in 1 Samuel, because it's not easy.

[2 : 38] And it's not helped by problems of translation. It's not helped by problems of textual accuracy. There seems to be a long gap between the Samuel's words in 1 Samuel 10.8, when he said, go and wait seven days at Gilgal to this actual event.

And yet, clearly, that is what is being referred to. It seemed to be some years later. So whether Samuel's words were actually given later, it's not entirely clear. And in fact, there are textual problems with this chapter.

13, chapter 1, according to the commentaries and so on, is almost impossible to translate, apparently. The text is almost certainly corrupt. And the translators have tried to reconstruct what is meant from other passages of Scripture.

So that's why all the different translations you look at all say something different. Many of them say something different. Exactly what is meant here is far from clear. But what is clear is that it's a description.

This is the key fact we're coming to in this chapter of Saul's reign. Because that's when we're told how long Saul became king and how long he reigned for.

[3 : 59] And there are problems with the numbers as well. But, to be honest, the Hebrew text says that the Philistines had 30,000 chariots. But that number is hardly plausible.

And the Septuagint has a more plausible 3,000. And so most people think that the Hebrew text is probably incorrect. There is, of course, hyperbole here.

It says the army was like the sand on the seashore. Well, of course, they haven't got quite as many troops as the sand on the seashore. But still, it does seem to be suggesting that there was enormous cavalry.

Even the number 3,000, though, seems rather large. If you remember that Pharaoh, even Pharaoh, the king of a much larger nation, Egypt, his cavalry was only 600 chariots.

And there are other problems with the numbers. Why were they reduced, apparently, from 330,000 in chapter 11, verse 8, to apparently just 3,000 in chapter 13, 2, when the Philistines were on the warpath?

[5 : 07] That, again, seems rather odd. And there is a translation issue here, it has to be said. The Hebrew word *elef* can mean 1,000.

But it can also be a word for a military unit. So, in fact, 13.5 could, in fact, be saying that the Philistines had three divisions of chariots, or perhaps 30 divisions of chariots.

And when it says Saul had 3,000, the rest of the text, indeed, seems to suggest that what is meant here is the army was divided into three divisions, as the rest of the verse suggests that two of the divisions stayed with Saul, and one went with Jonathan.

So, there are problems, I say, of translation here, and these issues are obviously of interest to biblical scholars, but we may have to wait the result of further studies to clarify some of these matters.

And so, we need to be careful, I think, that we don't get too hung up over these, because to do that, we'll miss the main point of the chapter, because the narrative is put here for a reason.

[6 : 22] And the reference to Saul's reign in verse 1 is here for a reason. And this incident at Gilgal is presented to us here as the defining point of Saul's rule.

It's the point that sets the tone for the rest of his reign, even if it was 42 years. And Samuel himself points out in verses 13 and 14 that Saul was the king who nearly succeeded.

If he'd just waited a little bit longer, if his faith had just held out a little bit longer, then his kingdom would have been established. But Saul's reign in the end would be characterized by foolishness and unbelief.

It's worth noting the use of the parallelism here, and the sort of sandwich structure that we often get in Hebrew literature, although in some ways the parallelism here is contrast, rather than just repeating itself.

So, we get three divisions of the Israelites in verse 2, and that somehow parallels the three Philistine raiding parties in verse 17.

[7 : 38] There's perhaps some connection here. We have the description of the well-equipped professional Philistine army in verse 5, because it tells us how they were well-disciplined horsemen, chariots, disciplined seasoned troops in verse 5.

And we get that paralleled by the description of the Israelite army in verses 19 to 22 as a bunch of under-equipped irregulars. I think that contrast is deliberately bracketed there.

And this incident at Gilgal is actually bracketed, you may have noticed, by the two raids carried out by Saul's son Jonathan. We read of that in verse 3, the first one, where it says Jonathan attacked a Philistine garrison.

And then in chapter 4, or the whole, most of chapter 4, certainly the first part of it, sorry, chapter 14, chapter 4, is a description of Jonathan's campaign and how he laid the ground for victory.

And so these two... So the Gilgal incident is bracketed by these two descriptions of Jonathan's attack.

[9 : 02] And actually we find that subtly Jonathan is presented here as the real hero of the war, not Saul, although Saul wanted to be the centre of attention.

It was always his problem. It was his problem. Saul's troops, in verse 7, you noticed, were afflicted with fear as a result of Saul's wavering.

Whereas, as we'll see next week when we go into chapter 14, Jonathan's men are inspired to bravery by Jonathan's own actions. So at the centre of all this, we have this Gilgal incident.

What does it mean? What are we to learn from it? What exactly was Saul's mistake? And how can we, in one way or another, avoid that same mistake that Saul made?

So let's have a look at it. And the first thing to notice, I think, is that the army was not acting unwisely. The problem wasn't one of tactics.

[10 : 15] The geography of the Holy Land is interesting. Of course, there is a coastal plain. And then, as you move away from the coast, it moves up into hills and mountainous country.

And the Philistines controlled the coastal plain. We're told their army consisted of chariots and horses. That's an army designed to operate on flat territory along the plain to control their hinterland, as it were, of their cities along the plain.

The Israelite territory was hilly. And choosing to fight in the hills and the poor terrain, among the tombs, even if it's described in verse 6, and again in chapter 14, verse 4, actually makes sense. This was the sensible strategy. The strategy, in fact, was entirely sound. And, in fact, if you look into chapter 14, verses 4 and 5, we find that Jonathan is aiming for a secret strike, and he makes very careful to leave his main force on the opposite side of a ravine to the Philistine armies that the Philistines couldn't get at him with their cavalry.

Jonathan understood how to conduct a guerrilla war in the sense that his father perhaps did not. Saul's thing was much more the pitched battle, as he had conducted in chapter 11, verse 8, at Bezek.

[11 : 56] And, of course, it's the nature, isn't it, of this kind of warfare that it's a waiting game. Saul's seven-day delay is not arbitrary.

There is a reason for it. Would the decisive battle be fought on the Philistine terms? Or would it be fought on Israelite terms of harassment and surprise commando attack?

And that was a tactic that had saved the Israelites well since the time of Gideon, whose nerve would crack first? Would Saul be tempted out into a suicidal battle against a vastly superior force, or would the Philistines be forced to fight in the hill country?

Now, in the end, the Israelite strategy was successful. The Philistines made the mistake of splitting their forces and ventured up into the hill country, which didn't suit their army at all.

And that was, in human terms, what led to their defeat. We read in chapter 14 of Jonathan's daring strike, which caused panic in the Philistine army.

[13 : 07] So there would be, in fact, an Israelite victory. But the point of this section, this middle part, is that Saul very nearly blew it.

And he very nearly blew it because of his own arrogance and impatience. And it's these flaws in Saul's character that the historians bring to our attention.

And so it's well to take note of them carefully. So what exactly is Saul's problem? Could somebody get me a glass of water, do you think?

A bit of a sore throat. Coughing a bit here. So what exactly is Saul's problem?

Why does Samuel condemn Saul so vigorously? And if so, does this actually have any relevance to us? It's ancient history, isn't it? As I said, it's at the end of the Bronze Age, thousands of years ago.

[14 : 15] Does it have any relevance to us, really? But all scripture is profitable for doctrine, Paul says. And we are meant to learn from this ancient history.

So let's have a look and see what Saul's problem was. And I think the first and most obvious problem Saul had was impatience. Samuel had told Saul that he had to wait.

But he wouldn't do it. He couldn't do it. And the writer brings out the irony here, doesn't he? Seven days, he'd been told. And he waited until the seventh day before his nerve finally gave out.

Just a few hours longer and it would have been okay. But the unbelief got to him. He was impatient. But the reason for this impatience is more complex.

Centuries later, another prophet, Isaiah, would write the following. Isaiah 30, 15. This is what the sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says. In repentance and rest is your salvation.

[15 : 41] In quietness and trust is your strength. But you would have none of it. Well, as I say, this was written centuries later and it wasn't particularly applied to Saul.

Yet it's a very good analysis in terms of Saul's shortcomings. Let's look a bit closer to the character of this nearly king who had a lot going for him but in the end fell short of the mark.

And so notice first that there's a certain arrogance in Saul's attitude. Saul had to be the centre of attention, claiming victory for himself.

That's why he liked the big battle thing. We find in chapter 4 that he announces his victory. In verse 4, he announces his victory even though it was actually Jonathan doing the fighting.

Later, if you're familiar with the story of Saul, you'll know that this would poison his relationship with David who had originally been his protege. In chapter 18, we read the following.

[16 : 50] As they, that is the women of Israel, danced, they sang, Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands. Saul was very angry.

This refrain galled him. They credited David with tens of thousands, he thought, but me only with thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom? That would skew Saul's, this attitude would skew Saul's life throughout his reign.

And in our current passage, this arrogance was skewing his tactical sense. For the army to hide in verse 7 and fight a guerrilla war was obviously was the best strategy and the Israelites clearly saw that.

But to Saul, this seemed like fear and cowardice. He was confusing, wasn't he, bravado with courage. Courage is to act appropriately, to act with decision and not to fear the outcome.

But Saul was confusing, bravado with courage. And so it became a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy because the troops who were still with Saul, we were told, really were scared.

[18:05] Verse 17. What should Saul have done about that? What he should have been, surely, is encouraging them to trust in the Lord, to inspire them by his courage.

But he said, instead, he let their fear take over him. He wanted an army, perhaps, to match the Philistine one to achieve some sort of glorious victory.

And hiding in caves didn't suit him at all. It was quite unlike his canny and very brave son, Jonathan, who was wise enough, you may have noticed, in chapter 14, verse 1, not to tell his father what he was doing.

But even this arrogance, perhaps, wasn't the worst of it because throughout his reign, Saul was rash and impulsive. He was always unable to make a decision and run with it.

He was always changing his mind. And that's what he did here. He knew the right thing was to wait the seven days Samuel had proposed.

[19:18] But he failed to sell this plan to his army. And so when his troops started to desert in verse 8, instead of calming them down and encourage them, as I say, he panics and reacts without thinking.

And so Saul makes the offerings. Although he was not a priest, he wasn't entitled to do that. That was Samuel's job. And in this, he betrays again his arrogance, doesn't it?

It seemed that everything had to depend on him. That's how it seemed to Saul. It seemed that it was all his show. And therefore, if offerings to the Lord needed to be done, then he'd better do it.

He had this tendency not to trust others, didn't he? That was another weakness. He was a king. He could do whatever he liked and only what he did mattered.

And he didn't trust his fellow Israelites. He didn't trust, it seems, those who had crossed the Jordan to come back when it was time for the battle. Certainly, he didn't trust Samuel to turn up when he said he would.

[20:39] And so, in carrying out the sacrifices, he was trying to coerce the Lord to his own way of thinking, wasn't he?

In fact, this sacrifice demonstrated the exact opposite of what it should have done. Instead of reminding the people of God's care and provision and showing thankfulness for that, it was a kind of act of magic.

This ritual had to be gone through to ensure the Lord's favour. Instead of being thankful for the Lord's favour, he was trying to buy it, coerce it. And we find, actually, as we'll see when we look at chapter 14 next week, there's more of that attitude there.

He has to have the Ark of the Covenant there before he will go into battle as though it was some idol or, you know, as though he's coercing the Lord to be there by bringing the Ark. But the worst thing of this incident, as far as Saul is concerned, is what happened when Samuel did turn up.

That, in a sense, was the death blow, the coup de grace. Of course, we might contrast these events, again, with what happened later. You're probably familiar with the story of Nathan coming to accuse King David of adultery and of arranging the death of his rival in battle.

[22:13] Now, if you look in objective terms, David's sin surely was far worse than Saul's. I think it's probably fair to say in a sense it was. But what was the difference?

The difference was the way David reacted to Nathan compared to the way that Saul reacted to Samuel. David found forgiveness because he repented, whereas Saul didn't, did he?

It was David's kingdom that would be established, not that of Saul. Why was that? Not because David was a perfect king and Saul was, you know, awful, because neither of those things were true, but it was because of Saul's complete lack of repentance, wasn't it?

Saul wouldn't admit he was wrong. He couldn't admit he was wrong. Instead, he tried to spin the situation as if he was actually seeking the Lord's favor. Do you see that in verse 12?

He said, oh, I thought, you know, I realize we have to have the sacrifices done, so I thought I'd better get on with it. What was his reaction to Samuel's rebuke of verse 13?

[23 : 24] And again, it wasn't to repent and put his trust in the Lord, but it's, in fact, put what trust he had in the men with him in verse 15. Fortunately for the Hebrews, Jonathan was made of better stuff, and we'll look at that next week, but Saul didn't repent.

Well, we may not be kings or military commanders, but I think there's a lot of us that we can learn from Saul. So Saul wasn't a bad, all bad, by any means.

He did make an effort to unite the Hebrews. He did show courage and win an important victory at Jabesh. But the sad story of Saul was that, well, you know the old saying, power corrupts.

And the sad story of Saul was that he was corrupted by that power. As he grew in power and influence, his flaws gained the ascendancy over his strength. As his sense of self-importance grew, he became unable to trust either God or men.

His rashness increased as his courage declined. His sense of justice that he'd started with became replaced by tyranny, by his arbitrary fiat.

[25 : 01] We'll read that later as a totally arbitrary treatment of David that he had and other rash oaths and rash promises that he made.

So what's at the centre of Saul's failure? What is the mistake that we all need to learn from and avoid? David? It was the Lord who had anointed him as king, or at least who had commanded Samuel to anoint him as king.

It was the Lord who had chosen him out. If he had trusted God, he would doubtless still have made mistakes. David made plenty of mistakes, didn't he?

Saul was rash and impulsive by character. But if he'd trusted in the Lord, then grace would have enabled him to rise above his failures, and he would have moved perhaps onto a better place, learning even from his mistakes, learning to trust and to follow God more carefully next time.

But he didn't do that, because he wouldn't remember that the battle belongs to the Lord. He wouldn't put his trust in God, he thought it all depended on him.

[26 : 35] It's been said many times, I think, that we become like the thing we worship. And the worst problem of worshipping yourself, which is what we're so much told to do today, is that your God isn't up to the job.

Saul trusted in himself, and what happened was that his weaknesses and his failures gained the mastery of him.

Instead of putting to death the deeds of the flesh, he found that they, in a sense, put him to death. That is Saul's mistake.

At the centre of it is a lack of faith. I'm not going to say any more than that. It's quite a short talk, but I think it's worth just making that point.

So let's let Samuel have the last word here. What did he say in chapter 13, verse 13? David was the king after the Lord's own heart, whose kingdom would be established, but of course even David failed in many ways.

[28 : 07] The true king after the Lord's heart. The true son, David's greater son, as the hymn says, was the Lord Jesus himself.

He is the true king after the Lord's heart. But we're thinking here about Saul and Saul's failure. And let's not do what Saul did.

Let's not panic when the crunch comes. Let's act with wisdom, but not trusting in our own wisdom, but rather trusting in the Lord's wisdom, remembering that the battle belongs to the Lord.

He is the one who fights for us. And as I say, it's not a matter of acting foolishly, tactically, they were more or less on the right track, at least Jonathan was. Wisdom doesn't mean that you just act stupidly, but it does mean that you remember that it is the Lord who wins the battle, as another scripture says, unless the Lord builds the house, the workmen work in vain.

And that's what Saul had forgotten, isn't it? So let's sing this hymn and then we'll ask Chris to come out.