

Failure at Giagal

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Date: 22 October 2023

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[0:00] So, let me start with a couple of quotations. First one's from Proverbs, and it's actually wisdom talking.

! And wisdom says, by me kings reign, and rulers make laws that are just. Proverbs remind us that the duty of the king is to be wise.

A New Testament quotation when Paul tells us to be transformed. Well, let me read the whole verses. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is. His good, pleasing and perfect will. That's what Saul failed to do, of course.

We've reached the point in the book which is a kind of watershed. The high point of the book, in a sense, is Samuel's speech that we looked at last week. Because here the narrator starts to describe the long decline of Saul's reign.

[1:09] The story goes on to show how that reign gradually unravels until finally Saul is defeated and takes his own life, which occupies the rest of the book. It's the last chapter.

He commits suicide. Nowadays we like to ask simple questions and expect simple answers, don't we? But of course in the real world, even simple questions do not always get simple answers.

I mean, just try asking the question, what is a woman nowadays and see what variety of answers you get. And the narrator of 1 Samuel understands this.

And we find that the book is actually full of subtlety. We've seen this already. Is the book, is 1 Samuel, is Samuel in favor of kingship or not?

Seems to be rather ambivalent, doesn't it? As we've already seen. The people have had a simple request, give us a king like the other nations. But they got a far from simple answer.

[2:15] They said you can have a king, but you're not to be like the other nations. The narrator now starts to expand on this answer as he contrasts the lives of Saul and David.

The thing is, of course, that Saul is not a particularly bad person. Was he? He wasn't even a particularly bad king. If you think about it, David would commit a much more grievous sin than anything that Saul did.

And yet it's David rather than Saul who is described as a king after the Lord's heart. And our author, our narrator here, is going to expend a considerable amount of ink explaining in detail why this is so.

Well, here's a depressingly familiar map. Even some of the names are the same. People have been fighting over this strip of land off and on for at least 3,000 years.

And they're still doing it as I speak. In chapter 11, Saul rescued the people of Jabesh-gilead from an Ammonite siege, a favor that would be repaid by the Gileadites when they retrieved Saul's body after his death in chapter 31.

[3:39] We now turn to the war with the Philistines with the battle at Michmash described at some length. We're going to look at it this week and next week.

The battle itself, in fact, we'll look at next week. But here we have the prelude to the battle.

Jabesh-gilead marked the beginning of Saul's reign and unfortunately, it turns out that was also the high point of Saul's reign.

From chapter 13 on, we have the description of how Saul's character flaws gradually led to his downfall. Samuel himself points out in verses 13 and 14, Saul was the king who nearly succeeded,

but whose reign in the end would be characterized by foolishness.

Now, if you read the passage from the... We read the passage from the New International Version. If you were following it in the English Standard Version, you're probably a little puzzled as the translation of the first verse is quite different.

If you happen to have a King James Version, it's different again. To be frank, nobody quite knows what this first verse means or what the correct text is or even what it's about.

[5:08] Is this a description of the time between Saul's confirmation as king and the next battle? Or is it an overview of Saul's reign? As I say, it's not even clear what the correct text is, to be honest, let alone what it means.

But one thing is clear. The author of 1 Samuel is not overly concerned with timelines. There's much personal detail. There's much geographical detail.

There's much geographical detail. But very little in the book about dates. The stories are arranged as they are, not so much for chronological reasons as for literary reasons.

We see here this sandwich structure which is beloved of Hebrew writers. So we get the description of the two battles at Jabesh Gilead and then at Michmash.

And they're set around that key speech of Samuel which is about the required integrity of the ruler. The narrator is asking the question does Saul match up?

[6:17] We also actually have the problem of the meaning and transmission of large numbers in the early Old Testament text. There's lots we could say about the actual meaning of some of these numbers and what the correct text is again.

But then, let's not get hung up on this. That's not the main point of the story. There are questions about the timing and the numbers.

The important issue here is the location of the battle. And the narrator tells us a great deal about this. Samuel, remember, had previously told Saul and this is in chapter 10, 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 are to do.

Now, whether this applied once or every year, again, we don't really know but this is clearly what Samuel is referring to here and Saul himself clearly understood that. What happens at Gilgal is crucial to the narrative.

[7:29] They say that what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, don't they? But what happens in Gilgal certainly doesn't stay in Gilgal. Gilgal is the religious center at the time. What happens there affects the whole life of the nation.

So, basically, in this structure, the narrator is asking us to compare the two campaigns. So, let's do that.

So, I've just put a little chart there of the comparison. Jabesh Gilead, the button of Jabesh Gilead was in the Jordan Valley.

Michmash is in the hills, which is certainly highly relevant to the actual tactics of the battle. Because the terrain, well, who were the enemy?

Well, at Jabesh Gilead, the enemy were the Ammonites who, of course, lived east of the Jordan. At Michmash, the enemy were the Philistines who occupied the coastal strip to the west.

[8:49] Saul himself is very different in the way he behaves in the two battles. At Jabesh Gilead, he was decisive. At Michmash, he seems to be dithering, not knowing what to do.

Who's the true hero of the battle? Well, at Jabesh Gilead, it was certainly Saul. He was the one who led the people, called the people together and led the campaign.

But actually, as we read on in the story, we find that the true hero of the battle at Michmash is actually Saul's son, Jonathan. What about the numbers?

Well, I say, without going into the details of the numbers, at Jabesh Gilead, Saul had called out all Israel. Whereas what we seem to have at Michmash is just a standing army.

And what about the morale? At Jabesh Gilead, the morale was solid. We read this in chapter 11, verse 8. They were all together.

[10:03] The battle belonged to the Lord. Chapter 13, they all start deserting. This was Saul's immediate problem. His troops were deserting. And this is an interesting comparison.

What about power? At Jabesh Gilead, we were told that the spirit of the Lord came upon Saul. This battle, there's no mention of the spirit of the Lord at all.

What we get instead is this interesting sidelight on military technology. We're told what sort of equipment the Philistines had. And we're told that the Israelites had to make do with farm implements.

A different way of looking at warfare, isn't it? Both relevant in a sense, but which is the right way to look at it.

And of course, what happens at Gilgal is different. At Gilgal, they give thanks after the battle of Jabesh Gilead. Saul's too impatient at Michmash and he doesn't wait for Samuel to come as he should have done.

[11:21] So, instead of thanksgiving at Gilgal, we have failure. As I said, if you look at the map, it's a bit small there, I'm afraid, but the Ammonites are east of the Jordan.

They obviously thought that Jabesh Gilead was going to be a soft target, but they were wrong. The Philistine threat is from the west, from their cities along the coast. And as I say, people have been fighting over this strip of land off and on for 3,000 years and they're still doing it today.

Samuel had already defeated the Philistines once, remember, we did that in chapter 7. And as I said, there is this issue of military technology.

There's no mention of this at Jabesh Gilead. The narrator there emphasizes that the power is the power of the Spirit of God. But at Michmash, there's much discussion of the Philistine technology, war machinery of the early Iron Age.

Chariots, particularly, cavalry, swords. The Philistines had 3,000 chariots and soldiers to man them.

[12:43] By contrast, we're told the Israelites didn't even have swords or even the blacksmiths to make them. This description of the well-equipped professional army in verse 5 is paralleled by the description of the Israelites as ill-equipped irregulars in 19 to 22.

And the Hebrews seem to have been intimidated by that. But as Jonathan was going to demonstrate in the battle, the advantage was not as great as it appeared. Chariots were decisive in battles fought on a coastal plain, but you can't use chariots in the mountains.

And of course, at need, farm implements could serve as weapons for hand-to-hand combat. Even if you don't have the best weapons, you can still attack the enemy.

I mean, Hammers have demonstrated that, haven't they, if nothing else. And perhaps this point had escaped the Philistine military planners.

They were relying too much on their technical advantage. But we can find weapons to hand if we have to. Just as today, a drone, a drone is essentially a toy, isn't it?

[14:09] But a toy can be used to take out a tank if you have to. The actual incident of Gilgal is also, there's also a bit of parallelism here because it's bracketed by those two raids carried out by Saul's son, Jonathan.

Jonathan is actually subtly presented here and in what follows as the real hero of the war. Verse 4, we get the first hint of Saul's problem.

Saul claims that the credit for Jonathan's raid seems he was jealous even of his own son. If you know the story, we'll see as we read on in 1 Samuel, that jealousy would poison his relationship with David.

In chapter 18, we read, the Israelites danced and sang, Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands. Saul was very angry. This refrain galled him.

They accredited David with tens of thousands, he thought, but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom? Jabesh Gilead, Saul was righteously angry.

[15:32] Soon Saul's anger would be turned in the wrong direction. And the leader affects the troops, of course.

Saul was right, at least in that sense. What the leader does, does affect the army. Saul's troops are afflicted with fear as a result of Saul's wavering.

As Jonathan's men, we find out in the next chapter, are inspired to remarkable bravery. victory. So at the center of all this, we have this incident at Gilgal.

What does it actually mean? What exactly was Saul's mistake? And why does Samuel condemn Saul so vigorously? And of course, does this have any relevance to us?

This is ancient history. What are we to learn from it? And it's worth noting that there's nothing wrong with Saul's actual motive.

[16:39] His aim was to encourage the army which was suffering a crisis of morale. And secondly, we can note that Saul was not actually an idolater. He didn't resort to the gods of his enemies.

Seems he knew that Israel's hope was in the Lord. But it was a lord or a god of his own making. His own imagination.

And his decision was foolish and soundly rebuked by Samuel. I think perhaps we shouldn't read verse 13 saying it was this particular incident that was the reason for God withdrawing his favor. We read other incidents later on. We all do foolish things sometimes. David certainly did. But what this incident revealed was that Saul's heart was in the wrong place.

He would be a king but he would be a king like the other nations. Not a king after the Lord's heart. Seeing that Saul lacked wisdom.

[17:44] In the next chapter we see that Saul lacked tactical wisdom. It was Jonathan who understood guerrilla warfare. But even worse Saul lacked spiritual wisdom. The spirit of the Lord came to him in righteous anger at Jabesh Gilead.

When it came to calm trust he was lacking. Saul was impatient. Samuel had told Saul he'd have to wait but Saul couldn't do it.

And the writer brings out the irony of this doesn't he? Seven days Saul had been told and he waited until the morning of the seventh day before his nerve failed.

Just a few hours longer and it would have been okay. So what was actually wrong with Saul's decision?

Well the first mistake of course is simple. He'd been told to wait for Samuel and he ignored God's command. But there's more to it than that because Saul didn't really understand.

[18:56] You remember right back in chapter 4 the Israelites had thought that the mere presence of the Ark of the Covenant would ensure the presence of God rather than taking the Ark as a sign of that presence.

But they found that you can't transport God in a box. And Saul was making a similar mistake here. In carrying out the sacrifices he was trying to coerce the Lord to his way of thinking rather than putting his thinking in the way of the Lord.

In fact this sacrifice demonstrated the exact opposite of what was intended. Instead of reminding the people of God's care and provision and sovereignty and showing thankfulness for that it was an act of magic a ritual intended to change God's mind or at least wake him up.

Rather than seeing the sacrifices and indications of blessing he seems to think they're a precondition for blessing. You find in verse 12 as if the offering was what guaranteed God's favour. It's a subtle issue but a crucial one. The offerings are a sign of God's favour and not what gives rise to God's favour. And the third mistake was that he thought as king everything depended on him.

[20:23] He was usurping the role reserved for the Levite priests. The result was a disrespect for divine law. He considered himself above the law even as it turns out later his own law.

He had put the witches to death but in chapter 28 he consults a medium. He didn't even respect his own law let alone the Lord's law. Reminds us of another politician we learnt of recently doesn't it? And what happens of course in 28 is that he consults a medium to call up Samuel after his death. So bizarrely Samuel's final rebuke actually comes from beyond the grave. Samuel said in verse 28, 16 and 17, this is his spirit, he's already dead by this time.

So why do you consult me now the Lord has turned away from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done what he predicted through me. The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbours, to David.

[21:33] That's the end of the story in a sense. Here is the beginning. Samuel's saying that you've taken the kingdom out of your hand. Amen.

Amen. Part of the problem here of course did lie in the separation of the roles of prophet, priest and king.

The king didn't have a direct line to God and so he acted foolishly. The true heir in the line of David of course is Jesus who always obeyed his father in the way that even Jonathan wouldn't obey his father Saul.

Paul. Okay, but that's all ancient history isn't it?

Does it have any relevance to us? As we've remarked, Paul was not a particularly bad king. In fact, the people got exactly what they asked for, the king like the other nations.

But the challenge for Israel was not to be like the other nations. They were supposed to exemplify a better way of living. And they need a leader who would make that happen.

[22:55] Sadly, many of the leaders in today's denominations fail to understand that. They think that by adopting the identity politics of the 21st century, they're making the church relevant to the 21st century.

The Methodists have forgot the reformist legacy of the Wesleys and espoused gay marriage and trans ideology. Anglicans are in danger of going the same way.

To take this route is for the church to sign its own death warrant. God's judgment. If there's no sin, there's no need of a saviour, is there? If there's no saviour, there's no gospel.

And there is no gospel here. If there's no gospel, there's no church. Jesus was perfectly clear on this point. Mark 8, 34 to 36 says, Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

[24:18] That verse is radically opposed to the identity crisis, the identity politics of today. In a sense, Saul had an identity crisis, didn't he?

At Jabesh Gilead, the spirit came and said, Well, you think you're a ploughboy. Well, I want you to be a king. But at Michmash, Saul said, Okay, I'll be a king.

But I'll be a king on my own terms, not your terms, Lord. Identity politics works in exactly that way, doesn't it? It says, I've looked inside me, I've seen what I am inside, I'm going to be that person, and you have to accept it and honour that.

That's how identity politics works. Jesus says the gospel is exactly the opposite to that. Sorry, I shall I mention it, I'm going to be a source of truth in identity politics.

Your truth, my truth is what I find inside me, and it has to be your truth too. You have to accept it.

Jesus says the exact opposite, doesn't he?

[25:35] He says, you have to look inside yourself and see who you are and say, but I'm going to deny that.

That's not my truth at all. I'm going to adopt a different truth and a different identity. He must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Another version of this verse says he must take up his cross daily and follow me. Which is a quite bizarre metaphor if you think about it.

You see a person carrying a cross in Roman society and you don't invite him to the barbecue. That person is a dead man walking. Actually, you can only take up your cross once.

But Jesus tells us to take it up every day. And if identity politics has done anything, at least it's made clearer what it means to deny yourself.

[26:50] Denying yourself is not giving up sugar for Lent. Denying yourself is saying, I look inside me and I find something that I don't want to be.

Not that I find something I do want to be, but that I find something I don't want to be. I want to deny that and find a different way forward. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world?

You might persuade everybody in the world, but if you lose your soul, what use is it? There's much to be learned here from Jonathan as well.

We note that Jonathan is brave, but he's not foolhardy. He doesn't rock up to one of the Philistine cities and call on God to knock it down. God told Joshua to do that, but not Jonathan or Saul.

That would be putting God to the test. He acts with sound tactical principles here. Fight where the enemy is weakest, where he can't deploy his chariots and his infantry because of the terrain.

[28:14] Yet Jonathan also understands that if you're going to win a war, you can only maneuver for so long. At some point, you have to engage the enemy.

I suppose Hamas has decided that, and now the Israelis know it too. You can only maneuver in a war for so long. At some point, you have to engage the enemy.

Yet our King Jesus presents us with a greater challenge, doesn't he? Because he tells us in our spiritual battle, we need to fight without violence, which is hard enough.

But more than that, he tells us we need to fight without hate. And that is far harder. If there's anything that characterizes the wars of today, it's hate, isn't it?

Hate, everything the opponent stands for. One of the modern hymns says, we fight with the sword that makes the wounded whole.

[29:22] Again, if you thought what that means, because a sword is meant for killing people, but the sword of the spirit is meant for bringing life. love. And so we don't oppose the wisdom of this world out of pride or hatred.

We don't appear to be holier than thou because we're not. We look inside and see that, like as Paul said, I see that I'm the chief of sinners. The church engages this world out of love, but it needs to do so wisely as well.

We can't achieve wisdom or sound apologetic by mouthing half understood texts and inherited prejudices. Jesus certainly quoted Old Testament texts, but he argued calmly and logically.

If we're going to address identity politics, first we need to understand it. We need to confront its fundamentally irrational and self-contradictory nature.

I would suggest to you, brothers and sisters, that if there's going to be a return to faith, there first needs to be a return to reason. What we see today is that people thought that with technology and science, there would be an increase in rationality.

[30:48] What we find out in the internet is that people can believe the most absurd and bizarre things. I think G.K. Chesterton said, stop believing in God and you don't believe nothing, you believe anything.

Brothers and sisters, let's not follow Saul's indecisiveness, but press the battle. Let's do it with Jonathan's tactical insight. Let's engage the enemy where he's vulnerable, understand the enemy, and realized that he can't fight, that the Philistine way doesn't work on the top of a cliff.

Jonathan had a sword, he was one of the only two people in the army who did have a sword, and I'm sure he was glad of it, but he faced a well-equipped army with chariots and chained soldiers.

Paul goes on to remind us, doesn't he, that we have weapons that in the end are more powerful than any chariot or any tank or any guided missile. Paul writes, for though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets up itself against the knowledge of God.

[32:23] And we take captive every thought. We take prisoners, yes, but we take captive not just the bodies, but every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

There's no point, you can't force people to become Christians. People have been trying that for the last 2,000 years, one way or another. It just doesn't work. work. You can only make people become Christians by the word of God.

It's the only way that the Christians can be made. We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. Christ. we need a wiser king than Saul.

He wasn't a bad king, but he lacked wisdom. You're familiar probably with those verses of Isaiah. See, my servant will act wisely. He will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. And kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were told, they will see.

[33:33] What they have not heard, they will understand. What Jesus taught was wisdom. wisdom. Jesus taught him parables, didn't he?

Where does the idea of a parable come from? Well, he's channeling proverbs. Proverbs chapter 1 verses 5 and 6 talks about wisdom and it says, let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the

wise.

Mark comments on that. With many similar parables, Jesus spoke the word to them as much as they could understand.

He did not say anything to them without using a parable. When he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything. parables make sense, don't they, to those who are prepared to think them through.

We're perhaps used to thinking of Jesus as prophet, priest and king. We'll be thinking about the Reformation in the evenings for a bit and I think probably that formulation comes from the Reformation. But it is incomplete.

[34:55] We shouldn't be thinking of Jesus just as prophet, priest and king. He's prophet so that he can speak the words of God. He's priest so that he can order the sacrifice. He's king so that he can lead us into battle.

But he's also sage. You only have to read Jesus' teaching to see that there's more wisdom literature in it than there is prophecy. You do find both of course but Sermon on the Mount is firmly embodied in the wisdom tradition.

So let's turn to help to the king who always acts wisely. Who is that king? That king is Jesus and he calls us to war.

He calls us to engage the enemy. He calls us, as our last hymn will ask the question, who is on the Lord's side? Who will serve the king?

Who will leave the world's side? Who will face the foe? The wise king calls us to war. Are we up for it? Thank you.

[36 : 04]