

# A Clash of Kingdoms

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[0:00] Okay, good. Thanks, Craig. Well, it's a delight to be here. Thank you for the invitation. The invitation came during a very busy term, as most of our regent terms are.

But when I heard that I had a chance to talk about King Saul, I simply couldn't resist. Because as Dan indicates, King Saul has been an enduring interest of mine for about three decades now, since the time I was 12.

That was not intended to get a laugh, but there you go. All right. One of the things that really provoked my interest, and I do mean provoked my interest in King Saul, was this little book by David Gunn entitled *The Fate of King Saul*.

And there are many things in the book I like and could commend. But I feel in some ways that this book, at least in terms of its understanding of who God is and how he treats Saul, is profoundly misguided.

Let me give you an example. Page 129, I think it is. Yep, 129. If you have your pocket copy with you. This is what he says.

[1:05] Yahweh, that is God, manipulates Saul mercilessly. And he does so for what on most men's terms must count as less than honorable motives.

He, again God, is insulted, feels jealous, is anxious to justify himself. It is tempting to say that this is the human face of God, but to say that is perhaps to denigrate man.

And that is not something this Old Testament story does. Rather, we might say that here we see the dark side of God. I see a few jaws dropped.

And that is good. Because it is astonishing that he could say this. He later confided to me that he may have changed his view. But he has not actually printed another book. I love it when people do that to my books.

You know, hold them up and point out the one really bad thing in it. But I am concerned about this kind of reading of Saul. I think it misses a great deal. I think it is wrong headed.

[2:08] And I think it arrives in the wrong place. It says, Saul as victim, God, or at least his prophet Samuel, as villain, yea, criminal.

This kind of reading charges God with a crime. And I want to propose to you, because I think we also have our troubles understanding Saul's story.

If you read it the way I have read it for much of my life, those earlier 12 years, if you've read it the way I've read it, we are perplexed by what happens to Saul.

He's elected, and no sooner is he elected than he's rejected. And the grounds of his rejection appear, at first, not to be so grave. They seem to be almost trivial.

So I want to propose to you, though, that because God, the King, is to be respected, we must trust Him, even when His ways and His words don't immediately make sense to us.

[3:09] We must hang with Him and let Him vindicate Himself and His words over time. And the way we express this trust, and I'm going to make these two points throughout the talk today, the way we express this trust is by listening closely, listening closely, sticking with the text, and by responding courageously once we've understood.

So, as I say, I think this story has been misunderstood. So here's the plan. I want us to begin by listening closely, and I want us to treat it almost like a mystery novel.

Polly and I, my wife Polly and I, love watching mystery shows, Miss Marple, Poirot, and so forth and so on. And a couple of years ago, we were watching one of these, I think it was Miss Marple, with Polly's mother, who was 86 at the time.

And I don't care what they say about older brains slowing down. She had the whole mystery figured out long before Polly and I did. And she explained herself, and she said, you know, I've watched a

lot of these, and I know how to watch for the clues.

So as we go to the crime scene, the purported crime of God against Saul, I want us to watch for clues that maybe will help us understand what actually is going on.

[ 4 : 28 ] Now, the crime scene, if you will, is 1 Samuel 13. Now, wait a minute, you say, you didn't read that. No, I know. I'm stealing a little of his text with his permission for next week.

But I want to just describe to you this very important event at the crime scene in 1 Samuel 13. It's the occasion of Saul's first rejection, if you will.

So just turn on your imagination and listen as I describe to you what happens. Saul, at the beginning of chapter 13, is finally on the throne. He has become king.

He's arrived. He's not actually on the throne in this instance. He's out in the field with 2,000 troops. His son, Jonathan, is in a nearby village with 1,000 troops. The first thing, the first bit of action we hear is that Jonathan strikes a Philistine garrison.

He attacks a Philistine garrison at a little village called Geba. Now, you know, the Philistines were Israel's neighbor and they had expansionist tendencies and occasionally, occasionally when they were strong, they would press into Israel and station garrisons in Israelite territory as a sign of their domination.

[ 5 : 38 ] So, Jonathan attacks one of these signs, one of these garrisons, and the reaction is predictable. The Philistines aren't defeated, but they sure are mad.

Jonathan's attack made them angry and Saul sends out the report that Saul, he has the trumpet blown, he says Saul has struck the Philistine garrison, which is a little bit odd that he's taking credit for his son, but, you know, commander-in-chief, maybe so.

But the reaction of the Philistines is predictable. They come out in force, well-armed, angry as hornets. Saul's response is a little more puzzling.

He goes down, he leaves his militarily strategic position in the hill country and goes down to the valley. And some have wondered, why would he do that? Well, we're going to discover. That's one thing we want to watch for.

Why would he do that? We read then, as Saul is waiting in the valley, that he waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal and Saul's men began to scatter.

[ 6 : 45 ] So you get the picture? Jonathan attacks a garrison, Saul goes down to Gilgal to wait for Samuel and to gather further troops. In the event, Samuel is late in coming, the text tells us.

And this disturbs Saul and puts him under great pressure. So under great pressure, he finally decides, you know, I'm going to have to get the ball rolling.

I'm going to have to offer sacrifices. I cannot wait any longer for Samuel to come. My troops are scattering. The Philistines are breathing down my neck. I need to get going. So he begins the sacrifices himself and then Samuel arrives.

And Samuel asks him a simple question. What have you done? Saul has his answers. He says, Okay, I have answers.

Let me explain why I've done this. My troops were deserting. You were late. And the Philistines are gathering in force and are about to pounce.

[ 7 : 47 ] Everything was falling apart. You were late. Everything was falling apart. At least I did what I had to do. I pulled myself together and did what I had to do. Samuel's response, You've acted foolishly.

You have not kept the charge the Lord your God gave you. If you had kept the charge, He would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure.

The Lord has sought out a man of his own choosing and has charged him to lead his people because you have not kept the Lord's charge. Now Samuel's reaction strikes many people as an overreaction.

I don't know how you hear it. Samuel, Saul's excuses do carry some weight, do they not? He's losing his troops. Samuel is late. Philistines are gathering in force.

They do carry some weight. We have some sympathy for Saul. And Samuel says, You've acted foolishly. And he rejects Saul's dynastic hopes. And this to some people seems as an overreaction.

[ 8 : 51 ] Walter Brueggemann, for example, in his commentary on Samuel, defends Saul's behavior towards Samuel as, I quote, properly and guilelessly deferential.

Samuel, by contrast, according to Brueggemann, is harsh, unresponsive, accusatory. And Brueggemann is particularly troubled about Samuel's rebuke of Saul in verse 13 of chapter 13

where he says, You have not kept the charge the Lord your God gave you. And Brueggemann comments, This is a remarkable statement because Samuel cites no command that has been broken, nor can we construe one. So for Brueggemann, Samuel is just a posturing, I'm quoting here, a posturing, peevish prophet who plays a daring, brutal game with Saul's faith, Saul's career, and eventually Saul's sanity. Indeed, Brueggemann continues, the narrator invites us to wonder, as Saul must have wondered, about Samuel, who appears here to be unprincipled, and about Yahweh, about God. So we're back very close to the dark side of God. God the criminal, Samuel the petulant prophet, Saul the victim. But when I think about it, this kind of approach sounds a lot more like Star Wars, light side, dark side, than the God we know from the Bible.

[10:17] When we read the Bible and take it seriously, we discover things like what we find in Deuteronomy 32, 4, where it says of God that He is the rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just, a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He.

That's the consistent biblical witness. And that is, I would suggest to you, the consistent experience of Christians who trust God. We find Him to be a just and righteous God.

Now, that doesn't mean that we're not confused sometimes. That doesn't mean that there aren't things that are happening in and around us that we don't understand. And that's why we need to press all the more closely to listen carefully and see if we can't understand what is happening. I believe we can understand this passage that I've just described to you in a different way than Brueggemann or Gunn has described it to us. I think there are clues in the passage that will help us and that's what we want to look at right now.

The first clue is suggested by Brueggemann's puzzling over what this command, what is this charge that Saul is accused of not keeping. He says, we don't know what, Samuel doesn't say what it is and we can't construe it.

[11:36] We have no idea. So the first challenge to us is, let's see if we can't figure out what that charge is. There's a second clue in chapter 13 that will help us in the right direction.

And that comes in verse 8 that I quoted before where it talks about Saul waiting seven days, the time set by Samuel. Now when we read something like that, we ask ourselves, well, set where? Where did that happen? Where was that described? That's what I want to know. Well, as we go back and we consider the readings, what was already read this morning and as we scour those earlier texts, we discover that this command to go to Gilgal and wait comes at the time of Saul's initial anointing, his anointing and his initial commissioning.

In verse 8 of chapter 10, Samuel says just that. He says, 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 and tell you what you're to do.

It's a clear link between Saul's waiting for Samuel in chapter 13 and the command to wait in chapter 10. But still we have problems because there's this big separation of several chapters, actually four chapters, between that command and Saul's fulfillment.

[12:58] And there's also a problem with verse 7 in chapter 10 which comes right before the command to go to Gilgal. Verse 7 says, once these signs have been fulfilled, do what your hand finds to do.

And here's the problem. People say, well, here's Samuel commissioning Saul, giving him his first charge, if you will. And he says, once the signs take place, I want you to do what lies at hand, do what your hand finds to do.

Oh, for God is with you. Oh, but go down to Gilgal and wait for me and I'll come down and tell you what you're to do. So which is it? Am I to do something or am I to go and wait? Again, seems to be a problem, but if we persist, if we stick with the text, I think we can figure this out.

And it will become crucial for understanding the severity of Saul's failure in chapter 13. So let's think about this for a moment. Here's what happens in the anointing episode, beginning of chapter 10, which was our first reading.

Samuel anoints Saul and then he says, so that you can know that I am authorized to do this, that God is enabling me to do this, I am going to make three predictions that will come true.

[14:13] The third prediction is the one we want to focus on. It says, in verse 5, it says, after the first two predictions, then you will come to Giv'ath Elohim where there is a garrison of the Philistines.

And then he goes on to describe how Saul will encounter a band of prophets, the Spirit of God will come upon him in power, he will be changed into a different person and he will begin to prophesy, doing something kind of out of character for Saul.

That's the way I understand that. And it's at the end of that, we come to 7 and it says, so when all these signs are fulfilled, do what your hand finds to do for God is with you.

Now my question is this, is Samuel just saying do whatever your hand finds to do because that's what some translations say. The ESV I think gets it right where it says do what your hand finds to do.

As if Samuel has something particular in mind. So my question is what might that be? What might that be from this context?

[ 15 : 23 ] We're trying to look closer, we're trying to honor God's word by giving it our closest attention. Where is Saul when all the signs are fulfilled? He's at Giv'ah Elohim.

What do we know about Giv'ah Elohim? What do we know about it from this text? I'm a teacher so I ask real questions not just rhetorical questions.

But since this is a big crowd I'll go ahead and answer it. We know that there's a Philistine garrison there, right? We're told that explicit. You'll come to Giv'ah Elohim where there is a Philistine garrison.

So, when all these signs are fulfilled, do what your hand finds to do. Do what lies at hand. What should Saul do? Attack the garrison. After all, Saul has been anointed.

He's been chosen to free Israel from Philistine oppression. We read that back in chapter 9. So, that's what Saul should have done and if he had done that what would that have accomplished?

[ 16 : 25 ] It certainly wouldn't have defeated the Philistines but it would have provoked them. It would have started a war. And so, that's how verse 8 fits. Samuel then says, so then go down to Gilgal and wait for me.

I will come down to you. We'll offer sacrifices. Seven days you should wait till I come and tell you what you are to do. This is very important because you see, God is okay with Israel having a king, I believe.

He wasn't against kingship per se but He was against a king like all the nations. He didn't want to give Israel a king who would rule independently of Himself, the great king.

And so, God knew that it would be important if there were to be a king in Israel, a human king in Israel, that He be a vice regent, that He continue to allow God to reign through God's authorized representative dispenser of the authoritative word of God.

And that's what is set up at the time of Saul's first charge. He's anointed and Samuel says, okay, you're anointed when the signs confirm that, then do what your hand finds to do for God is with you, then go down to Gilgal and wait for me because you still need to hear from God.

[ 17 : 50 ] You're not autonomous. You're authorized but you're not autonomous. You still need to hear from God. So it's a two-stage charge. Remember Brueggemann said, we don't know what charge, what command it is that Saul has broken nor can we construe one.

Well, I think following these clues, that's the charge. That's what Saul failed to do and we'll come back to that in just a moment. Now, the reason I think people have missed this so often is that in fact Saul doesn't do anything.

He doesn't attack the garrison back in chapter 10. Instead, he experiences the fulfillment of all three signs and instead of then doing something brave that would have demonstrated that he was God's anointed and that God was working through him, he simply goes home.

And he gets into a conversation with his uncle and his uncle says, you know, so where you been? He said, I've been out looking for some lost livestock. What happened? Well, we ran into Samuel and the uncle said, oh, really, Samuel, what did he have to say?

Well, he told us the livestock had been found. That's really the big news of the day, isn't it? You know, newflash, the livestock. But the narrator then points out, but Saul didn't mention anything about the kingship.

[ 19 : 11 ] Now, traditional interpretation of that has been that Saul is in his good phase. He's being humble. He's been chosen for something great and he doesn't want to brag about it, so he doesn't even mention it.

I want to suggest to you that in keeping with Saul's overall character, Saul is shrinking back even now in fear. The next episode has Samuel convening an assembly and he sorts out who the next king is to be by lot.

Why does he do that? Well, because Saul has not demonstrated anything to the people and he realizes if I don't do something the people will never know that God has chosen Saul.

So the lot falls on Saul or at least Saul's name but Saul himself is nowhere to be found. God says, you know, actually he's hiding behind the baggage. So they go and pull him out from behind the baggage and Samuel's impressed.

He's big and tall and impressive. But some troublemakers say, how can this guy save us? He's done nothing to show us that God is working through him.

[ 20 : 17 ] He's a big guy but he was just crouching behind baggage. How can this guy save us? Well, in the next chapter he does win a great victory and the naysayers are silenced and the kingship is renewed.

That is, Saul's path to the throne is put back on track and at the end of chapter 11 it says, Saul and all the Israelites were celebrating.

Saul and all the Israelites. who else is an important character in this story? Well, Samuel. And Samuel apparently is not celebrating and in chapter 12 Samuel moves right into a warning.

A big long speech saying, you know what folks, this kingship thing, your request for a king was sinful. But now God has given you a king. And if you and the king continue to follow the Lord, it can work.

But if you don't, both you and the king will be swept away. So Samuel, as we come back to the crime scene in chapter 13, is concerned. Kingship has not been fully established.

[ 21 : 25 ] Saul still has a major test to stand, a test to demonstrate whether he is a suitable king in Israel or not. When Saul fails, when Saul refuses to wait, he demonstrates that he is not an Israelite kind of king.

He didn't wait for God. He didn't listen to God's word. Now, his surface offenses are going ahead with sacrifices, not waiting for Samuel. He'll do some other surface things. But I think we need to look below the symptoms to the heart of the disease.

And my impression is, from studying Saul and the Saul narratives for a good long time, is that in his heart, Saul had no real faith in God.

I don't think the true God was a reality for Saul. He was willing to go through the religious motions when convenient. But when push came to shove, God was not his ultimate concern.

Other things were much more pressing upon him. So when tested, Saul fails and is rightly rejected. So who's the criminal?

[ 22 : 42 ] Is God the criminal? Has he mistreated Saul? Has he played a daring, brutal game with Saul's faith? Or has Saul not rather demonstrated that he is precisely what the people demanded?

They wanted a king like all the nations had, and that's what they got, a king who really didn't know Yahweh. Now God in his grace will not leave them there. He will soon find a king for himself.

He said, I have found a king for me, and he will anoint David. But you know, even David and his descendants would ultimately fail. So it was in the long run that God raised up the one true king, the true king that we can trust, King Jesus.

Now what are we to learn from all this? Well, what I learned, you know, I began working on these texts a long time ago, and when I first began, I was really troubled by them. They didn't seem to make sense.

All these intervening episodes seemed way too much. I didn't know what to make of it all. But because I was working on a dissertation, I had to stick with it. And so I did, and my wife prayed for me.

[ 23 : 43 ] And I had that wonderful experience of discovering that even when God's ways and his word seem confusing, if we'll just hang with it, if we'll just keep listening, if we'll look closely, and when we discover things, if we'll respond courageously, his word and God himself will vindicate himself.

It begins to make sense. So that's one thing I want us to take away. God the king deserves our respect, and since he deserves our respect, we must trust him even when his word and his ways don't make sense.

Now I know that I'm preaching to the choir here, preaching to St. John's, because as one from the outside looking in, we've watched as you have honored God, given respect to God, followed God even when the way was difficult, even when some things didn't seem to make sense, even when some things were won and other things were lost.

And I want to thank you for that. I want to thank you for the faithfulness that you have modeled to many of us who have watched. That is what God calls us to do. He can be trusted.

He is the king. His ways are perfect. He is just, even if on the surface it doesn't seem so to us.

That's the encouragement. Now, you as a community have gone through some things.

[ 25 : 08 ] You as individuals may also be in passages in your life where you're thinking, well, I don't understand what God's doing. This just doesn't make any sense to me at all.

The challenge is continue to trust. Continue to trust. Wait on God. Don't turn your back on God. Turn your face toward God. And He will turn His face toward you.

Let's pray together. Father, we recognize that careful listening and courageous response is not possible without the help of Your Holy Spirit.

And so we pray that You would fill us anew with Your Holy Spirit, that whatever we're facing, whatever confusions with Your way or Your words are troubling us right now, that You would, by Your Spirit, help us.

Help us to listen well. Help us to respond rightly. Saul experienced something of Your Holy Spirit, but it seemed that his actions on Saul were external and temporary.

[ 26 : 14 ] You, by sending King Jesus and King Jesus sending His Spirit, have provided an indwelling Spirit, an indwelling Spirit who is permanently with us.

Lord, may we trust Him. Lead us by Your Spirit this day. And as we understand Your Word, may You be honored and even when we don't understand it, may we continue to trust.

In Jesus' name, Amen. Thank you.