

United Kingdom - Saul

Saul, David, and Solomon - The First Three Kings



By Isaac Humphrey

Summary

Saul began life as a Benjamite farm boy who had no ambitions in life other than running a farm. He was not prepared for the kingship and depended on others to guide him. When he acted on his own accord, it was usually for the worse.

Saul's Early Reign

Israel's first experience of a king was not what they were expecting. The tall, handsome, young man they had dug from hiding may have looked like a king; but he did not feel like a king. He was more embarrassed than elated by his new dignity. A few weeks before being anointed king he was a simple, unambitious, Benjamite farmer. He had stopped to consult the great prophet Samuel on a trivial personal matter, but when he met the great prophet, he found that Samuel wished to consult him on a matter of national consequence. At the end of his visit, Samuel told him that he was to be the first king of Israel.

He was the last man in Israel who was expecting this dignity, so when the nation assembled for the ceremony of choosing a king, their king was nowhere to be found. He was located amid everyone's luggage and was brought before the people to be anointed king.

Saul's awkwardness and embarrassment did not inspire confidence, and he immediately had critics: "Shall this man save us?" they asked incredulously. They had been hoping for a great warrior-king; brave, daring, kingly.

After his anointing, Saul seemed to justify his critics by going home and back to his farm. The nation had a king, but what that meant was yet to be decided.

At last, came a chance for Saul to prove himself. The Ammonites had attacked the Israelite city of Jabesh Gilead. The inhabitants of that city sent messengers for help. They did not send messengers to Saul or take notice of him at all. They were using the old system¹ - the system of sending messengers to each tribe and region of Israel independently. They could not command the aid of their fellow Israelites, only beg it. When the messenger from Jabesh Gilead came to Saul's area, he did not go tramping around the fields in search of the farmer king, he went told his tale to Saul's home city (Gibeah); Saul only learned the news when he came in from the pasture.

Saul boldly asserted himself in the leadership position - making sure to associate Samuel with him. He sent out messengers of his own and made it known that he had the right to punish those who did not come out to the battle. Times were changing; Israel was going to be unified, and the central authority asserted. There would be no more messengers begging for aid; there would now be messengers commanding attendance. Israel had changed from "tribal anarchy" and judges to a monarchy.²

He, together with Samuel, assembled Israel, ambushed the Ammonites, and rescued Jabesh Gilead. The prompt action Saul took, and the brilliant success that resulted, silenced his critics. Saul was ready to be king, and the nation was ready for his military leadership; at Samuel's request, Israel assembled again, and the monarchy was renewed.

Saul had proven himself to be a fine leader, but then again, he had Samuel at his side and Israel at his back. How would he function when placed in a more difficult situation?

Saul's Fall

The next military crisis Israel faced placed Saul in a position where his military and spiritual leadership would both be tested.

The Philistines had been arch-enemies of Israel for a long time. These technologically superior foes thought of themselves as Israel's overlords and felt threatened by Israel's new unity.

The Philistines prepared to take care of Israel once for all; they assembled a large army equipped with chariots, horseman, and iron weapons. The Philistines had a monopoly on iron and blacksmithing.³

Even for a simple service like sharpening a plow - the Israelites were at the mercy of the Philistine blacksmiths. Iron weapons were out of the question. Only the king and his son had a sword or a spear; the rest of Israel would fight with whatever primitive tools they could lay their hands on.

As the massive Philistine forces drew in sight of the Israelites, and they realized their situation, Saul's army began to evaporate. The Israelites hid in caves, pits, or fled the area. As the Philistines came nearer and nearer, it appeared that there would be no battle at all - the Israelites were disappearing! Saul became panic-stricken: Israel was not at his back, and Samuel was not at his side. Saul needed someone stronger to lean on (that was obvious from his first days as king), and he was not a good leader when left to his own devices.⁴

Samuel's presence was needed to perform the pre-battle sacrifice and had arranged with Saul to be at the scene at a particular date and time. But Samuel did not arrive when the time came, and Saul began to panic. His army was dwindling fast, and he wanted to do the religious ceremony before fighting. Perhaps Saul decided the sac-

rifice itself was more important than Samuel's prerogative and God's law. Perhaps to Saul, the performance of the ritual had the power.

When Saul completed the sacrifice himself, he was acting under extreme pressure. He did what most of us probably would do in a similar situation. At the same time, his actions did not factor God into the picture. Sure, he offered a sacrifice, but he did pay attention to the deeper principle. His actions were prompted by panic and fear; an Israelite leader must be an example of faith to the nation. God must have a man with the right heart towards him at the helm of his people Israel.

Saul had just got through completing the noncompliant sacrifice when Samuel arrived. The great prophet had heavy news for Saul: the consequence of this rash sacrifice was the rejection of Saul's dynasty. God had found a man after his own heart who would be a better ruler for his people Israel.

This news came as a crushing blow to Saul, who now felt more defeated than before. The Philistines despised the remnants of the Israelite army and began ransacking the countryside in search of spoil - the fruits of victory.

While Saul was trembling under a tree with a few hundred men at his back, his son Jonathan was not. Jonathan's character was, in many ways, opposite of his father's. Weakness, indecision, fear, disobedience, and depression all characterize Saul under the tree: courage, faith, bravery, confidence, hope, and optimism all characterize Jonathan in the rocky crag. With the belief "the Lord can save by many or by few" he, and his equally brave and faithful companion, attacked the conceited Philistines and routed one of their garrisons. As was the case in so many ancient battles, an unexpected route of one part of the line, gave rise to army-wide panic. The Philistines, who had not been expecting a battle at all, fled at their unexpected route, the panic spreading rapidly. The rest of the Israelites began to notice. All of a sudden, the barren, deserted countryside became alive. Israelites started to pop up from the pits, and out from the rocks where they had been hiding. Saul realized that the tide had turned, and he took charge of the Israelite counter-attack.

Jonathan's attitude had been the attitude that Saul should have had, it was the attitude God wanted in his leaders; it was the attitude that first characterizes the next young man who God was going to make the king of Israel.

The effect of this terrifying day and the news of his rejection all had a negative impact on Saul's psychology. He took the lead, but it was not for the better. He wanted revenge on the Philistines, and so refused to allow his army to taste food under pain of breaking a solemn oath. Jonathan, returning from his heroic exploit, innocently and ignorantly broke this oath by tasting some much-needed food. When this breach came to light, Saul's reaction was strangely rigid. It was as if he was trying to make up for his weakness in offering the sacrifice by enforcing his oath. He declared his intention to kill Jonathan, the hero of the hour, for his harmless violation. If Saul could not see clearly, at least his army could, and they stepped in and prevented Saul from carrying out his

foolish intent.

Saul was now showing signs of the weakness and mental instability that would characterize his later reign.

When given another chance to prove his obedience and show spiritual leadership, Saul again fell prey to weakness and fear.

This opportunity was a military commission against Israel's enemies the Amalekites with clear and absolute directions as to its execution (see 1 Samuel 15 for details). Saul failed to complete God's instructions. He allowed the people to lead him instead of leading them; worse still, he blamed the people when confronted with his error by the disappointed Samuel. When Samuel told him of his final rejection from Israel's leadership, Saul's response was, "I have sinned. But please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel. Go back with me so I may worship the LORD your God." (1 Samuel 15:30 NET Emph. Added).

His foremost thought was his status ("honor me"), and his attitude towards God had changed - he distanced himself from God ("the LORD your God").

The question that invariably arises when we read of Saul's rejection is why? It appears that Saul's failings were very trivial when compared to the great sins of the days of the judges and later kings of Israel. This episode touches on deep areas of God's nature and judgment, and this article cannot do the question full justice. We must look at a few points that bear on the "why."

Firstly, we need to remember that Saul's rejection was due to his failure to fit into the Theocracy, his failure to obey God's injunctions, and his failure to demonstrate spiritual leadership.⁵

Secondly, we must remember that we can only see a few scenes and a few facts about Saul while God saw the whole picture. It seems that there was something about Saul's heart that was not pleasing to God. The principles were deeper than ritualistic form; the sin was not just a momentary weakness. Maybe God saw in Saul's heart the makings of the tragic figure he would become and thus raised up another leader for Israel. There was a problem: the problem of kingship in a theocracy. The ideal Theocracy is when a nation stays faithful to God, and he appoints the ruler that is most pleasing to him in every generation (as with the judges). Though God might choose the first monarch, successors would gain power by the hereditary principle - independent of divine appointment. In the future, as God could see, these kings would lead Israel astray.

Footnotes

1. See Judges 19:29. During the anarchy of the later period of the Judges, there was no central authority. It appears that all Israel had to be appealed to region by region. Jabesh Gilead acts as if there was still no central authority to appeal to.

2. Now all Israel will know that there is a king, and he means business. The king will send out mes-

sangers and summon all Israel to him. This exercise of a royal prerogative seems to be the point of transition between the administration and period of the judges and that of the kings. See also Gill on 1 Samuel 11:7.

3. See Cambridge Commentary on 1 Samuel 13:9. The Philistine monopoly was the result of their control of Israel. They viewed Israel as their subjects and would not allow them access to superior technology.

4. When Saul takes the lead on this day, it is only for the worse. First, he takes over the priest's function, next he tries to kill the hero of the day. His leadership in the future was often bad - killing the priests at Nob, chasing David instead of defending against the Philistines.

Editor Footnote: When Israel demanded a king, God gave them one. The man he gave them, however, does not seem to have had the same leadership and preparatory training that the great leaders such as David and Moses had.

5. See Cambridge, Pulpit, commentary on 1 Samuel 13:13. When you are God's commander - decisions work differently. Expect to be placed in 'impossible' circumstances, because that's when God works.

References

A. F. Kirkpatrick, (1896) 1 Samuel, Cambridge Bible Commentary Edited by J. J. S. Perowne
The Pulpit Commentary, Edited by Exell and Spence-Jones