



1 SAMUEL 13 - 15
A KING IN PLACE OF THE KING
Week 29 – Jonathan's Faith and Saul's Fear

Introduction

Chapters 13-15 narrate the story of the sad downfall of Saul, Israel's first king.

While Saul's son, Jonathan, shows great faith and courage, Saul displays much fear and foolishness. (This is the 3rd consecutive character in 1 Samuel where father-son issues come into play: Eli with Hophni/Phinehas; Samuel with Joel and Abiah; Saul with Jonathan.)

While there have been hints of an inferiority complex within Saul, the events of chapters 13-15 bring into full light the deep, deep insecurities within him. He shows an incessant need for the approval of men.

Ultimately, this would lead him to heed the voices and desires of men over the voice and decree of God. The king cannot bring himself to submit to THE KING, thus, he is unworthy to continue as God's vice-regent.

War with the Philistines: 13:1-5

Saul and his son Jonathan had a force of 3,000 men; 2,000 with Saul and 1,000 with Jonathan. The Philistines were very much in control of Israel at this time. They had military units stationed throughout Israel, while Israel was unarmed and vulnerable. In this context, Jonathan took bold action against the Philistine unit in the city of Geba, thus provoking a war. Jonathan attacked and defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it.

Then Saul blew the trumpet throughout the land, saying, "Let the Hebrews hear" (13:3).

It is interesting to note that the text says, *"All Israel heard that SAUL had attacked and defeated the Philistines"* (13:4). **This is the beginning of a pattern with Saul: If there is a victory, he will somehow pin his name to it. If there is a defeat, it will have every name but his on it.**

The Israelites tremble: 13:5-7

In response to Jonathan's attack, the Philistines rallied a massive army, *"30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen and people like the sand on the seashore in abundance"* (13:5).

At the sight of this force, the hearts of Israel's warriors melted in fear:

"When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical (for the people were hard-pressed), then the people hid themselves in caves, in thickets, in cliffs, in cellars, and in pits. Also some of the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the land of Gad and Gilead. But as for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling" (13:6,7).

Fear is a common emotion; but it can take us down two very different paths.

On the one hand, fear can cause us to HIDE. This is what the Israelites did in the face of the Philistine threat. This is also what Saul did when he felt insecure about being anointed king.

On the other hand, fear can cause us to TRUST. *"When I am afraid, I will put my TRUST in You. In God whose word I praise, in God I TRUST. I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?" (Psalm 56:3,4).*

It all comes down to how you process your fear. If you sit before the Lord with your fear, He can transform your fear into the faith to walk forward with Him at your side.

Saul's sins by acting like a priest: 13:8-14

Previously, Samuel had specifically commanded Saul to “wait seven days” for him to come down and offer burnt offerings and sacrifices prior to engaging the Philistines at Gilgal (see 10:8).

Yet, as Saul saw his troops scattering from him, he panicked and made a fatal decision to make offerings that only Levitical priests were allowed to make.

So Saul said, “Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings.” And he offered the burnt offering (13:9).

Sadly, Samuel arrived immediately after Saul had made the offerings! Saul tried to justify his unlawful actions in light of the extenuating circumstances; but there was no excuse for compromising God's holy standards and acting like a priest.

Samuel said to Saul, “You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you” (13:13,14).

It would be several decades before David would take over the kingship from Saul; yet, the Lord had already “appointed him” to be that next ruler.

A 'WAIT' TEST?

Samuel did come on the 7th day, just as he had promised he would. The fact that he came late in the day seems to indicate that God was testing Saul to see if he would wait in faith and prayer, and continue down the path of OBEDIENCE.

Often God shows up “in the last hours of the night” (note Jesus doing this with his disciples – Matthew 14:25).

He tests us to see if we are willing to wait on Him to show up, rather than taking matters into our own hands and “acting foolishly” out of fear, shame or impatience.

Is there an area of your life where God is testing your obedience by making you WAIT?

If you are tempted to run away and take matters into your own hands, don't do it!
Keep waiting and obeying. God will come to you . . . in His time.

A desperate situation: 13:15-23

The Israelites were severely outnumbered and out armed. Saul's force had dwindled to just 600 men. To make matters worse, the Philistines had disarmed Israel (13:19-23). Only Saul and Jonathan had weapons. The Philistines, on the other hand, had a massive, well-armed force (13:5) divided into three separate companies coming at Israel from all directions (13:17,18)!

Yet, Israel's sacred history was full of stories of God's mighty deliverances in similar situations. Moses overcame Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. Joshua overcame forces much greater than his own. Gideon fought with just 300 men, and prevailed. Samson single-handedly defeated the Philistines. Deborah led Israel in triumph over Sisera. Most recently, Samuel had called forth God's mighty hand against this very same Philistine army (ch.7).

Will Saul summon his faith and add another major God-victory to the Israelite record book . . . or will he remain paralyzed by fear?

Jonathan's step of faith: 14:1-15

Jonathan decided to move by faith (14:1) while his father sat under a pomegranate tree in fear (14:2). Why did Jonathan not inform his father of his intentions? Likely because he knew his father would want to get involved in ways that would thwart the plan.

Then Jonathan said to the young man who was carrying his armor, "Come and let us cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; perhaps the Lord will work for us, for the Lord is not restrained to save by many or by few" (14:6).

Jonathan exhibited deep FAITH in Yahweh's ability to bring about a victory, regardless of the daunting circumstances. He may have recalled Samuel's words spoken the last time Israel defeated the Philistines:

"If you direct your hearts to the Lord and serve Him alone, He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines" (7:3).

Jonathan was certain of God's abilities to do something amazing, IF He determined to do so. So, Jonathan decided to "set a fleece" before the Lord. **He offered himself as a servant through whom the mighty current of God's power might flow, IF God so willed.**

Then Jonathan said, "Behold, we will cross over to the men and reveal ourselves to them. If they say to us, 'Wait until we come to you'; then we will stand in our place and not go up to them. But if they say, 'Come up to us,' then we will go up, for the Lord has given them into our hands; and this shall be the sign to us" (14:8-10).

It is impossible to steer a ship that is anchored to a dock. But when the ship begins to move, the captain is able to steer it in the direction he chooses.

Saul was sitting under a pomegranate tree trapped in fear. God could not 'steer' Saul toward something special.

Jonathan, in contrast, was moving by faith in a direction that he believed would honor God. At the same time, he left room for God to open or close the door in front of him. God could 'steer' Jonathan according to His will.

Faith (trust) pleases God (Hebrews 11:6). We cannot "tell God what to do." Yet, we can try to discern His will and His movement in a given situation, and then "step out by faith" in the direction we believe He wants us to go. Then, we can trust Him to direct our steps and open or close doors as we move.

How about you? Are you sitting in fear of your challenges; or moving by faith toward God-given victories?

As it turned out, God was ready to use Jonathan to destabilize the Philistines. He and his armor bearer struck down 20 enemy warriors (perhaps with slingshots – 1Chronicles 12:2). The Philistines panicked thinking that Israelites were about to appear from everywhere!

"When both of them revealed themselves to the garrison of the Philistines, the Philistines said, "Look, Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they have hidden themselves" (14:11).

But God did something even bigger in that moment:

"And there was a trembling in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. Even the garrison and the raiders trembled, and the earth quaked so that it became a great trembling" (14:15).

Recall earlier when Samuel prayed and God "thundered with a great thunder against the Philistines" causing them to lose heart (7:10). Now, God made the earth quake beneath the feet of the Philistine army and they melted away in dread!

God is always looking for hearts that are fully surrendered to Him, through whom He can display His glory. *"For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His" (2Chronicles 16:9).* On the other hand, a divided heart will hinder His movement. *"Their heart is divided. Now they are held guilty" (Hosea 10:2).* Has God been speaking to you about any ways that your heart is divided?

Saul's reaction to the Philistine's flight: 14:16-23

Saul was shocked to see the Philistine army suddenly melting away in fear. He quickly numbered his troops to see who was absent, and found out that his son, Jonathan was gone.

Then Saul said to Ahijah, "Bring the ark of God here." For the ark of God was at that time with the sons of Israel. While Saul talked to the priest, the commotion in the camp of the Philistines continued and increased; so Saul said to the priest, "Withdraw your hand" (14:18,19).

Saul's impatience thwarted even his prayer to discern God's will. He moved into battle with his small force, bolstered by all who had previously fled and those who were slaves to the Philistines.

"So the Lord delivered Israel that day, and the battle spread beyond Beth-aven" (14:23).

Recall the people's plea for a king: "Give us a king who will fight our battles for us" (8:20).

Here, Israel was reminded again that it was still THE LORD who fought their battles for them.

Saul's foolish oath: 14:24-30

Prior to the battle, Saul had placed all of his troops under an oath. *"Cursed be the man who eats food before evening, and until I have avenged myself on my enemies" (14:24).*

The emphasis on "my enemies" reveals Saul's self-focus. This battle was about him, not the Lord. Furthermore, placing fighting men under a food ban until Saul had his day, was an unwise move. Jonathan was not present to hear about his father's oath; thus, he ate some honey in order to strengthen himself (14:27).

When informed of the absolute ban on food, Jonathan responded with words that reveal a deep divide between father and son.

Then Jonathan said, "My father has troubled the land. See now, how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. How much more, if only the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now the slaughter among the Philistines has not been great" (14:29,30).

Saul's oath causes the people to sin: 14:31-35

Because of the severe hunger of Saul's troops, they killed animals and ate raw, bloody meat in direct violation of God's laws.

"The people rushed greedily upon the spoil, and took sheep and oxen and calves, and slew them on the ground; and the people ate them with the blood" (14:32).

Eating bloody meat was forbidden from Noah's day onwards (see Genesis 9:4). Under Moses, this rule became part of the Laws of Israel, based on the fact that "life" was associated with "blood" and was very sacred in the sacrificial system (Leviticus 17:11,12). Saul's rash "no food" command caused Israel to sin against God's "no blood" command! Yet, he never acknowledged his part in this transgression.

Then they told Saul, saying, "Behold, the people are sinning against the Lord by eating with the blood." And he said, "You have acted treacherously; roll a great stone to me today" (14:33).

He tried to remedy the situation by setting up his own 'food preparation station' and, following this, by erecting an altar to the Lord (14:34,35). Saul appears to be scrambling as a leader to fix a massive offense to God; though he seems blind to his own self-sins that caused put the people to stumble.

Saul had an uncanny ability to find fault with everyone else; but not with himself. Jesus warned against focusing on the sins of others instead of our own sins:

"First remove the LOG out of your own eye; and then you will see clearly enough to remove the SPECK out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:3-5).

Be slow to point the finger at others. Learn the habit of asking first: What have I done to contribute to this situation. Become "self-aware" as you live and relate with other people.

Saul attempts to execute Jonathan: 14:36-46

Saul proposed that Israel should pursue the Philistines and totally destroy them. Notice the 3 'voices' telling Saul what to do.

Then Saul said, "Let us go down after the Philistines by night and take spoil among them until the morning light, and let us not leave a man of them." And they said, "Do whatever seems good to you." So the priest said, "Let us draw near to God here" (14:36).

- Saul said: Let's just DO IT!
- The people said: Do what YOU want to do.
- The priest said: Let's ask GOD what we should do.

The 'self voice,' and the 'crowd voice' always try to drown out the 'God voice.'

It takes a determined effort to make sure this DOES NOT happen when facing major decisions.

Who have YOU been listening to lately?

Are you making a concerted effort to LISTEN to God's voice before you move forward?

When Saul inquired of God, he heard nothing but silence, indicating that **there was unconfessed sin that was blocking God's movement** toward Israel.

Saul inquired of God, "Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will You give them into the hand of Israel?" But He did not answer him on that day (14:37).

This silence from God led Saul to look for more sin in other people. He decided that it was the sin of his son, Jonathan, in violating the ban on food that caused God's voice to be silent. Thus, Saul sought to have Jonathan put to death so that God would remove His hand of judgment Israel.

In one of Saul's lowest moments as Israel's leader, he declared before all the people that Jonathan must die for his great sin of tasting a little honey (14:44). But the people overruled him, honoring Jonathan as God's instrument of victory.

But the people said to Saul, "Must Jonathan die, who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Far from it! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day." So the people rescued Jonathan and he did not die (14:45).

Summary of Saul's wars and his family: 14:47-52

While Saul's "personal issues" stand out in the detailed narratives, this summary indicates that he was successful in freeing Israel from the oppression of many enemies.

“ . . . he fought against all his enemies on every side . . . wherever he turned, he inflicted punishment . . . he acted valiantly and defeated the Amalekites, and delivered Israel from the hands of those who plundered them” (14:47,48).

Like other flawed leaders before him (Gideon, Samson, Jephthah), God used Saul in spite of himself, for the good of Israel.

The list of Saul's family members (14:49-51) reads like one big happy family portrait. Yet, when read against the backdrop of the wider story, it is a tragic and sad collection of lives that would be destroyed because of their connection to Saul:

- Saul's sons die with him in battle against the Philistines, because the Lord had pronounced judgment against their father (31:2).
- Saul's older daughter, Merab, bore 5 sons, all of who were hanged by the Gibeonites because of her father's sins (2 Sam.21:8).
- Saul's younger daughter, Michal, became King David's 1st wife, but was estranged from him after mocking him and, thus, was childless to her death (2 Sam.6:20-23).
- Saul own wife, Ahinoam, was labeled by him a "perverse and rebellious woman" (1 Sam.20:30).
- Saul's cousin and army captain, Abner, was vengefully murdered by Joab, captain of David's troops (2 Sam.3:27).

In short, if you were in Saul's family portrait at 1Samuel 14, you might have thought you were riding the wave of greatness and glory; but the reality was that you were riding on a ship destined for total calamity.

A prayer for my family: "God, when I look at my 'family portrait' I see a group of great people with tremendous God-given potential. Help me to live and lead in this clan so that the longer-term picture for everyone will bring honor and glory to You, and great joy to everyone involved, including future generations not yet in the picture. Give me, God, the grace to walk more closely with You, so that my life might be an instrument of family blessings, not a conveyor of family curses. In Jesus powerful name, Amen."

Saul's disobedience with the Amalekites: 15:1-35

The events recorded here are not only decisive for Saul as a king, they are also incredibly revealing about Saul the man.

God's decision to punish the Amalekites: 15:1-3

To understand the severity of Saul's sin in this matter, we must first understand the history and severity of God's curse upon the Amalekite nation.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey'" (15:2,3).

The Amalekites were the first to attack the infant nation Israel just after they had come out of Egypt into the desert of Sinai (Exodus 17:8-16). God rescued weary Israel from the Amalekite attack; but He also pronounced His intention to wipe out the Amalekites at some future time.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" (Exodus 17:14).

God's resolve in this matter was made even clearer when Moses, near the end of his life, brought up the Amalekite issue again.

"Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall come about when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget" (Deuteronomy 25:17-19).

Israel was faint and weary. Amalek moved in for the kill. God did not take this lightly. Now, in Saul's day (some 400 years later), God had determined that it was time to call the Amalekites to account for their actions. Saul was God's chosen instrument to bring judgment upon the Amalekites. It was critical that Saul do exactly what God had commanded him to do.

Saul's partial obedience: 15:4-9

Saul did make war and defeat the Amalekites; but he did not utterly destroy them as God had commanded him to do.

"But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (15:9).

Saul's motto was: **"THY will be done ... as it seems best to ME."**

Partial obedience was his undoing. The sad irony of this whole story is that Saul's partial obedience evoked the same consequence as the Amalekites' total disobedience to God – LIGHTS OUT!

Are there areas of your life where you have 'negotiated' a partial obedience to what God has asked of you? Learn from this story about Saul that partial obedience is no less offensive to God than total disregard of His will and word.

Judgment pronounced upon Saul: 15:10-23

How odd that Saul would be setting up a monument in his own honor (15:12) on the very day he would experience the greatest dishonor of his entire life!

Samuel confronted Saul on his failure to obey God's orders fully; but Saul (as usual) acted as if he had obeyed, but the people were the ones who had compromised God's command.

Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the Lord! I have carried out the command of the Lord." But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed" (15:13-15).

Samuel's rebuke and Saul's response gives us great insight into the inner-life of Israel's first king.

Samuel said, "Is it not true, though you were small in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the Lord anointed you king over Israel, and the Lord sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord?" (15:17-19).

What a summary of Saul's career. A self-declared 'small' man was given the 'big' honor of being called by God to be Israel's first king; yet, he squandered that honor by failing to fully live in submission to the GREAT KING. True to form, however, Saul tried to shift the blame to others.

"I did obey the voice of the Lord, and went on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal" (15:20,21).

Saul is now brought to the end of his clever excuses and well thought-out rationalizations. Samuel calls him on his root sin and tells him that it will cost him the kingship.

"Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king" (15:22,23).

Rebellion and insubordination: These sins were, in God's eyes, as bad as consulting demonic spirits or worshipping idols (especially for Israel's leader/king!). Thus, since Saul could not bring his heart into submission to the GREAT KING, he was no longer fit to serve as the vice-regent over God's people.

God prefers obedience to burnt offerings and sacrifices. In other words, He is not impressed by our acts of religious observance when our obedience to His Word is faltering. This is precisely what Jesus meant when He said to the religious people of His day:

"This people honors Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me" (Matthew 15:8, in citation of Isaiah 29:13).

Don't ever try to 'go through the motions' with God. He sees right through it . . . and doesn't like it at all.

Saul's response: Please honor me! 15:24-35

Saul finally cracks open his heart a tiny bit and reveals his greatest fear:

Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice" (15:24).

Saul craved the approval of people. This caused him to heed their voice over God's voice. Like a later group of flawed leaders, he *"loved the approval of men more than the approval of God"* (see Jesus' indictment of the Pharisees, John 12:43).

Even in this sad and solemn moment, facing his own sin before Samuel, his greater concern was to 'save face' before the elders. He immediately kept demanding that he been seen publicly with Samuel so that the people would not think poorly of him.

"Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I may worship the Lord." But Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel." As Samuel turned to go, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore. So Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you. Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind." Then he said, "I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and go back with me, that I may worship the Lord your God." So Samuel went back following Saul, and Saul worshiped the Lord (15:25-31).

"Honor me now before the elders ..." Sadly, that pretty well sums up Saul's life – desperation for validation.

Samuel personally executed God's judgment against the wicked Amalekite king, Agag (whom Saul had spared). His remark to him before killing him reveals something of God's justice:

"As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women" (15:33).

Finally, Samuel departed from Saul for the last time.

"Then Samuel went to Ramah, but Saul went up to his house at Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord grieved that He had made Saul king over Israel" (15:34,35).

Final thoughts on Saul's decline

Saul's value had never become rooted in God's love and approval. Thus, he spent much energy manipulating people and situations in order to cover his fear and shame, and to appear confident and competent.

Often, such 'self-protective strategies' are not so obvious to acquaintances. They can feel intimidated by the person, believing that they are strong, confident and 'in control.'

In a family, however, it is more difficult to mask this sort of self-validating behavior. **Jonathan**, Saul's son, was well aware of his father's insecurities and strategies. He was not threatened, even by his own father, because his worth and value was firmly rooted in his God. Thus, his faith remained active and strong, unimpeded by the opinions or actions of others.

"The unexamined life is not worth living" (Socrates).

Who do you see yourself more like – Saul or Jonathan?

If you are more like Saul, then ask God to reveal the roots of your hidden insecurities.

Ask Him to show you the strategies you use to subtly manipulate in order to 'gain honor' in the eyes of others. Invite God to take you on a journey to the place where HIS love and affirmation are the foundation of your self worth.

If you are more like Jonathan, then ask God for increasing humility and faith to 'live for an audience of One.'

Invite Him to unleash the power of His Spirit within you to bring about another great God-victory in your life. God is ready to steer . . . when you are ready to move.