



2 TIMOTHY 2:8-13

# Portrait of a Faltering Leader: What Does It Take?

6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY – MAY 20, 2017 (AM)

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## INTRODUCTION

We begin today with the end of our story. In a moment I will read the third of three chapters we'll cover today, 1Sa.15, the closing account of the downfall of Saul as the king of Israel. There's much more to his story, but this encounter seals the deal. And our aim will be not only to trace out what happened to Saul, and why, but to gain some insight on how to avoid such tragic spiritual faltering. Let's read 1Sa.15, then let's answer three questions of this whole passage, 1Sa.13-15.

## WHAT HAPPENED WITH SAUL?

Just a quick comment on 131 as we get started: this seems to reflect a common form in Scripture to introduce a king and the highlights of his reign (Youngblood 134). But here the numbers are missing—1 Saul was ... years old when he began to reign, and he reigned ... and two years over Israel. Some versions insert numbers from other texts: NASV and NIV say: Saul was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty two years over Israel (NIV footnotes late versions of the LXX for the first number and Act.13:21 for the second). KJV says: Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel—strange, but technically accurate to the known Hebrew text. A newer ESV follows a similar pattern: Saul lived for one year (after the events of c.12) and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel—this seems close to the original meaning.

On to the action, we're introduced to Jonathan in v.2 (Saul's son [16]). He and Saul led different divisions of a select group of soldiers (2). Jonathan's command was half the size of Saul's, but he acted first (3). Then Saul took the credit (4). In last week's passage we saw some odd elements and wondered if they would amount to anything. Here, this just seems wrong. And we will quickly see that it does mean something. But it's not yet clear just what.

What is clear is that the Philistines were not at all happy with their defeat (4). So, they mobilized a huge, well-equipped army to crush Israel (5)—like the sand on the seashore (6), language from God’s covenant promise (Gen.22:17)—and this scared them into hiding in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns (6), as though they were buried! Some even determined to put the Jordan between themselves and the Philistines (7a). It was like a voluntary exile! (Leithart 81) This sounds just like the days when there was no king in Israel! (Jud.17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25)

The meat of c.13 comes in vv.8-15. Right after Saul was anointed king (10:1), Samuel had said to him: 108 ... Go down before me to Gilgal. And behold, I am coming down to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do. Whether this is that incident (Bergen 149, FN57) or just a similar one (Baldwin 112) is uncertain. But Saul was supposed to (wait) seven days at Gilgal for Samuel’s arrival (8). He did wait, but his army was deserting. 9 So Saul said, “Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings.” And he offered the burnt offering. 10 As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came. Of course he did! And Saul went out to meet him and greet him. 11 Samuel said, “What have you done?” And Saul said, “When I saw the people scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and the the Philistines mustered at Michmash, 12 I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the LORD.’ So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering.” Let’s see, in one sentence Saul blamed the people, Samuel, and the Philistines! And when he finally got around to admitting his own involvement, he pointed out that he was forced to act against his better judgment. Pretty impressive dodge!

13 And Samuel said to Saul, “You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the LORD your God, with which he commanded you. For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. 14 But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.”

Then Samuel left (15)—an image we’ll see again in 1534-35—and Saul’s army had dwindled down to about six hundred men (15). Three companies of (Philistine) raiders were wreaking havoc in all directions (17-18). And by (Philistine) decree, Israel was without weapons, except for Saul and Jonathan (22), because their oppressors wouldn’t allow any (black-smiths) in the land (19). What does this say about Saul’s strength as a

king? How were these different than the days of the Judges when Israel cowered under the oppression of one neighboring hoard after another? But what, then, usually happens with God's people look hopeless?

C.14 echoes the opening of c.13: Jonathan is on the move while Saul is sitting still—actually, hiding in a cave right near home (2). But it does seem like Saul is the only guy in this story so far with a faithful son! But now it sounds like he'll never be king (13:14). Jonathan's courage and trust in the LORD are center-stage in c.14. He and his armor-bearer alone, already having been seen and addressed by some Philistine soldiers, scaled a cliff and killed about twenty men, just the two of them, within... half a furrow's length in an acre of land (14), half a crop-row in a one-acre garden! His basis for heading off on this solo mission is one of my favorite verses in all of 1&2Sa.: 6 Jonathan said to (his armor-bearer), "Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the LORD will work for us, for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few." There is great faith!

And so it was! Following Jonathan's attack, 15 ... there was a panic in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. The garrison and even the raiders trembled, the earth quaked, God weighed in, and it became a very great panic. And now the Philistines started deserting! (16) The watchmen saw all this. Saul took a quick census, realized it was Jonathan who was missing (17), and immediately called the priest (18) to consult with God using the ephod. 19 Now while Saul was talking to the priest, the tumult in the camp of the Philistines increased more and more. So Saul said to the priest, "Withdraw your hand." Saul was calling on God, then hung up before he finished dialing! Israel's meager army came out of hiding (22) and pursued the Philistines! And even some Israelite defectors (21) joined in!

23 So the LORD saved Israel that day. ... What a statement that is! But look at v.24. We read that Israel had been hard pressed by the Philistines (13:6). Now, even in their victory, they're hard pressed (24) again! Saul's oath didn't allow them to eat until... evening, he said, and I am avenged of my enemies (24). So, they fought through that day with no food! And two things resulted: 1) Jonathan, who hadn't heard his father's oath, tasted some wild honey he found in the forest (25-28), and 2) 32 the people pounced on the spoil and took sheep and oxen and calves and slaughtered them on the ground. And the people ate them with the blood, violating the Law (Lev.3:17). When Jonathan heard of his father's oath, 29 (he) said, "My father has troubled the land. See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey. 30 How much better if

the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found. For now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great.”

Saul addressed the situation of eating blood (33-35). Then he wanted to mobilize again that night and plunder the Philistines until the morning (36a). The priest recommended consulting God (36c) So, they did (37a). But (God) did not answer him that day (37b). Saul immediately interpreted this as resulting from sin in the camp (38), and he vowed again, promising to find out who was responsible and put him to death (39). Well, he then discovered what Jonathan had done (40-43), and he actually planned to kill his son! (44) 45 (But) the people said to Saul, “Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel? Far from it! As the LORD lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.” So the people ransomed Jonathan, so that he did not die.

From there, we’ve heard the completion of this part of the story in our reading of c.15: Saul’s loss of the kingdom. So, let’s turn our attention to our second and third questions.

## HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

That’s the story. And it’s a tragedy with regard to Saul. Many ask whether he was genuinely converted. I can’t answer. In fact, we’re called in Scripture not to address that question. But we can learn from what we see. And we see here a portrait of a faltering leader. What did it take?

Saul wasn’t being faithful to his responsibilities as king. And it was showing up in so many ways. Some of the odd seeds we saw planted in last week’s narrative of his rise to power may be coming to full flower here—his not telling his uncle that Samuel said he would be king (10:16), then his (hiding) among the baggage at his coronation (10:22). It’s almost like he didn’t really want the job. And we see that again here. Remember what Samuel said when he anointed Saul? 101 ... You shall reign over the people of the LORD and you will save them from the hand of their surrounding enemies. ... But that surely isn’t happening here, as we’ve seen! Israel was oppressed by the Philistines in ways reminiscent of the period of the Judges when there was no king in Israel (Jud.17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The Philistines wouldn’t allow blacksmiths in Israel (13:19) so they couldn’t make swords and spears. What?! And the Philistine army was like the sand on the seashore in multitude (13:5), while Israel was trembling (13:7) and hard pressed (13:6) and (hiding) in caves and holes and tombs (13:6), and choosing self-imposed exile! (13:7) And when the people were called out to join Saul

at Gilgal (13:6), only about six hundred men showed up (13:15). Compare that to the 330,000 who showed up to fight Nahash! (11:8) Saul wasn't being faithful to his responsibilities as king, to his responsibilities before God. And you could see it reflected in the people. He wasn't reminding them that God is able to deliver them, from any oppressor! He wasn't trusting God himself, or modeling faith for His people, or stepping up to save them from... their enemies.

In short, 1) other people's victories were claimed as his own. 2) Disobedience was excused as unavoidable, or blamed on others. And 3) when God went silent, he pretended to be God! On this one, remember when he vowed that no one should (eat) food until evening (14:24), then at dusk when his army, famished from the day's pursuit, ate meat with the blood still in it? Saul built an altar and offered sacrifices (14:34-35), when one who eats blood should be cut off from among the people (Lev.17:10). But when Jonathan ate innocently, breaking Saul's word, he was to be killed! (14:44) Then there's also the incident we read with the Agag and the Amalekites in c.15. This, this is how it happened.

## WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM IT?

While we're watching Saul implode as king of Israel, we're actually receiving implicit instruction on what it looks like, and what it doesn't, to walk in covenant obedience to God. And while there are many words of instruction we could walk away with, the one in our theme verse this morning, on the front of the bulletin, is the one I recommend. 22 ... "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

## CONCLUSION

What do we learn from this word, correcting Saul, about walking in covenant obedience to God? We learn that Saul is once again putting himself above God. The Amalekites were under God's judgment. Sinful Israel were God's instrument of judgment, just like Assyria and Babylon would be God's instruments in their lives. When a people are devoted to destruction like this, they're being offered up to God, eternally set aside for the realization of His purpose. This images His holiness ultimately made most evident in the eternal, final judgment of the wicked. So, when 9 ... Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them, they're setting their evaluation above God's. They're making a mockery of His judgment! They're saying that what is no longer useful to God except as a sign of His holiness in being fully offered up to Him,

actually has use to His people! And it has use to them in their worship of Him! Think about that in light of the final sentence of v.9: All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

Beyond setting aside the LORD's instruction and exalting their own assessment of what has value above His, the net result is that they receive what they see as good, and God receives what they themselves evaluate as despised and worthless! (9) This is what makes a mockery of God's judgment! This is the line of thinking that opens us up to sitting in judgment of God's standard of judgment!

Saul wants to hold on to that which God has judged, which is bad enough. But he wants to hold on to it, just as he says here, in order to offer it back to God as a covering for his sin! How offensive is that?! But that's what we see in Saul, increasingly—the same thing we saw in Eli—a man more committed to his own glory, exaltation, will and purpose, than to God's. And this shows itself as one who elevates forgiveness over permission. That's what happened here. Saul prepared for forgiveness when he should have been striving toward obedience.

And that same thing can happen to us, over and over again, still today. We've heard it said that it's easier to get forgiveness than permission. And we chuckle. But this is precisely our modern-day cliché that lets us act like Saul and feel like we can get away with it! It's the mindset that lets us offer up to God what we believe is good—our abilities, some of our time, a bit of our money, etc.—but really we're using all of these to fulfill our own will and purpose while trying to give enough to God to keep Him happy. We're pursuing our own course through life and seeking His blessing on it, when we're called to just the opposite. I have no gifts except what God has given. And what He's given is for the fulfillment of His purpose in me and through me, not my purpose. The opportunities He's given me are for the advancement of His will, His mission, not mine. The financial resources are for achieving His ends, His aims, not mine. As for me, Gal.220 I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. All I have is His! And I am His! I am His for Him to use as He wills. And for that to happen, my will must be swallowed up in His!

Saul is a portrait of what it looks like when that doesn't happen. And Jesus is a portrait of what it looks like when it does! His will was perfectly aligned with the Father's. And it is only in Him that mine is also, enabling me, and you, to walk a different course than Saul.