

SESSION FOUR

THE REJECTION OF SAUL'S RULE

1 Samuel 13:1—15:35

I. INTRODUCTION

In Gen 12–15, the divine plan was revealed that God was going to establish a nation from the seed of Abraham through whom He could mediate His divine blessings. Israel was to be a light to the nations. This was to occur by Israel entering into covenant with YHWH at Sinai and adopting the Law that would instruct them in the ways of YHWH Elohim. By living in obedience to the Law, they would not only experience blessing but they would be a holy nation. As such, they would be a testimony to all the other nations of the world of the greatness of YHWH Elohim. God was faithful to give an obedient generation the promised land from which to carry out the divine program. They would succeed as they submitted to YHWH's kingship in humble obedience.

Despite all the gracious provision of YHWH for the nation, they failed under the theocracy. Rather than being a light to the nations, they became the "spoil" of the Gentile nations. This was on account of their disobedience, as YHWH had warned them (Deut 28). Eventually, the exercise of YHWH's rule over the nation by theocracy came to an end (1 Sam 4). Furthermore, the nation rejected His kingship (1 Sam 8:7), in favor of a human king from their midst. Despite the inferior nature of such an arrangement, God permitted the people to be ruled by monarchy. Nevertheless, His divine plan for the nation (Gen 12; 1 Sam 12:22) did not change; nor did their responsibilities to Him (1 Sam 12:14-15).

The three chapters of this session (13—15) serve to expose the nation to the consequences of their choice of Saul as king. Despite his great talents, natural strengths, etc., he failed to accomplish YHWH's intention for the nation. Despite his excellent credentials, his heart was not right ... his was a fearful heart that lacked faith. The nation would not prosper under him; they would only deteriorate. Saul serves to reveal the foolishness of the nation's decision to reject YHWH's kingship in favor of a human king. Saul is a divine provision, allowing the people to see what happens with a king who does not meet God's standards. Once this is demonstrated, God will raise up another king who will advance the divine plan for the nation (i.e., David). He will have the proper heart, and God will covenant with David to raise up from His seed one whose kingdom will endure forever.

To reiterate, 1 Sam 13—15 shows YHWH's rejection of Saul's rule, thereby exposing the nation to the consequences of their choice of Saul as king!

II. OBSERVATIONS

Despite the obvious failure of Saul in these chapters, we should note that he does bring great military victory for the nation. Note the summary statement of his military exploits in 1 Sam 14:47-48:

"Now when Saul had taken the kingdom over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side . . . and wherever he turned, he inflicted punishment. And he acted valiantly and defeated the Amalekites, and delivered Israel from the hands of those who plundered them."

This success is not a credit to Saul's faithful conduct, but to YHWH's purpose. This is reflected in 1 Sam 9:16:

". . . and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel; and he shall deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have regarded My people, because their cry has come to Me."

Saul's success stemmed from the promise of YHWH to raise up a deliverer in response to the cry of His people.¹ We must add this to our theology. While these chapters (13–15) reveal a rejection of Saul's kingship, YHWH accomplishes His purposes at the same time. Saul serves to expose the nation's foolish decision, while at the same time furthering YHWH's purposes. We might say that Saul was being used by YHWH but was not necessarily pleasing to YHWH.

Comment: this should be taken to heart. God uses many men in the ministry, but this is not necessarily a stamp of approval on their lives. "We have as our ambition to be pleasing to the Lord," but there are many who are not pleasing to the Lord—although they are being used to accomplish great things for God.

A further observation to make is the use of Jonathan (Saul's son) in the narrative. Jonathan stands in stark contrast to Saul. What Saul lacks, Jonathan possesses; all that Jonathan was, Saul should have been! In fact, Jonathan is used to bring out the weaknesses of Saul. This is first observed in 1 Sam 13:3ff. Jonathan makes an attack upon the Philistine garrison which launches the Israelites into a major skirmish with the Philistines. This sets up the scene in which Saul acts rashly in offering the sacrifice, and thereby is rebuked by Samuel. Once again, Jonathan is used in chapter 14 to initiate the Israelite victory in which Saul makes a foolish decree for the warriors. This decree comes back to him, however, with Jonathan's innocent trespass, and creates a conflict between the decree of the king and the will of the people. Saul is revealed as a weak and ineffectual king who does not command the total allegiance of his people; in short, he loses face and has not their respect.

III. SAUL'S RULE REJECTED BY YHWH (1 Sam 13–15)

A. Saul's First Great Failure (1 Sam 13)

Jonathan's attack on the Philistine garrison draws Israel into a major skirmish with the Philistines (13:1-7). This was not a foolish act on Jonathan's part. He probably knew of YHWH's intention to overcome the Philistines (9:16), and he might have felt that the time to strike was now, before the Philistines could establish themselves in the hill country. Saul established himself at Gilgal (close to the Jordan) and awaited Samuel's arrival as he had been instructed (cf. 10:8).

Saul grew impatient in waiting for Samuel and made the rash decision to go ahead with the sacrifices, in hopes of unifying the people and perhaps to seek God's will.² Possibly Samuel's

¹The terminology of 1 Sam 9:16 is strikingly similar to Exodus 2:23-25. In response to the Hebrews who cried out to Yahweh to deliver them from the afflictions of Pharaoh, God raised up Moses as a deliverer. In a similar way, Saul is raised up by God in response to the cry of God's people. In the Exodus passage, this action was specifically said to be taken in light of the Abrahamic Covenant (Ex 2:24), which is probably implied in 1 Sam 9:16.

²Heater feels that the issue was not that Saul himself had offered up the sacrifices. He writes, "Saul's failure was not that he intruded into the priest's office (he probably offered *through* priests) but that he failed to wait for Samuel and thus on the blessing of God" (Homer Heater, "A Theology of Samuel and Kings," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Chicago: Moody Press, 1991], 140).

late arrival was a test upon Saul's faith and obedience, for as soon as Saul makes the blunder of offering the sacrifice Samuel shows up.

Samuel's rebuke may have involved more than the fact that Saul offered up a sacrifice—which was ordinarily a priestly duty (cf. 1 Kings 3:4,15). It may have also been directed at Saul's impatience and his disobedience in not waiting for prophetic guidance. Saul tried to rationalize his decision (he offers three excuses in 13:11), but he never claims to have misunderstood the instructions previously given to him. He had disobeyed, and for this foolish act, Samuel pronounced YHWH's judgment upon him:

"But now your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart . . ." (13:14)

B. The Contrast of Jonathan (14:1-52)

This chapter plays on the strong contrast between Saul and Jonathan. Jonathan evidences faith, courage, and a zeal to carry out YHWH's will (14:6). He models the very qualities looked for in Israel's leadership. The last half of the chapter sets up the situation where Saul and Jonathan are brought into conflict before all the people. Saul's word (which stemmed from a foolish decree – 14:24, 29-30) brought him into an embarrassing encounter with the whole nation. Saul tries to uphold his word (14:44) but there is no choice for it to succeed—Jonathan is the national hero. Saul is left standing as a weak and ineffectual ruler before the eyes of the nation. He makes foolish decisions and lacks their respect to carry out his own decrees. He is unfit to rule . . . the people see it and realize their folly in desiring him as king. In chapter 13, YHWH had pronounced Saul as unfit to rule; in chapter 14, the nation must agree. God's silence in response to Saul's inquiry about attacking the Philistines was a signal that Saul was rejected in God's sight.

"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.' [i.e., he suggested they ascertain God's will]. And Saul inquired of God, 'Shall I go down after the Philistines? Wilt Thou give them into the hand of Israel?' But He did not answer him on that day" (1 Sam 14:36-37).

C. Saul Kingship Rejected (15:1-35)

The final scene in these three chapters is the most condemning of all upon Saul's rule. This failure in chapter 15 is far more serious than that of chapter 13. In chapter 13, Saul was under pressure, and perhaps he could say that he made a poor decision in light of his circumstances. In chapter 15, however, there is no excuse for his actions. He is revealed as one who is not fully concerned with doing YHWH's will. Chapter 15 confirms the rebellious nature of his heart that was evidenced in chapter 13.

The instructions are clearly given to Saul in 15:1-3. He is to carry out total destruction on the Amalekites (note the verb *ḥāram*). This command is not a cruel act of God, for it was the Amalekites who had attempted to prevent Israel from moving into the Sinai Peninsula (cf. Ex 17). As the Lord had promised on that occasion, Amalek and his descendants would be utterly destroyed (Ex 17:14). Now the promise was entrusted to Saul.

Saul carried out the command, but only partially. He spared the life of King Agag and allowed the best of the spoil to be taken rather than being totally destroyed as the LORD had commanded. The text underscores that this act was clearly willful disobedience: "Saul and the people . . . were not willing to destroy them utterly" (15:9). What is most nauseating about the

event is Saul's attitude. In 15:12, we are told that he "set up a monument for himself." This would be the only honor he would get, for the Lord would certainly not give him honor. Furthermore, when Samuel confronts him, he attempts to blame the disobedience on the people (15:15) and excuses the action with the cover-up that the animals were intended for sacrifice.

Samuel does not buy into Saul's story, and pronounces judgment on him (15:22-23). In stating that "to obey is better than sacrifice," Samuel is not inferring that sacrifices are of no concern to God. The point is that God delights more in genuine obedience than the mere slaughter of an animal. John J. Davis comments:

A true sacrifice was to be a genuine sign of faith and obedience. If sacrifices were offered in apostasy and unbelief, they were as worthless as the sacrifices of the Canaanites in the sight of a holy God (cf. Isa 1:11; 66:3; Jer 6:20; Hos 6:6; and Mic 6:6-8)."³

Samuel charges Saul with rebellion and announces that YHWH has rejected him from being king (15:23,26). Saul is not a fit representative to mediate God's will to the nation or lead them in their divine purpose. The conclusive rejection of Saul's rule in chapter 15 is a fitting commentary on the unwise decision of the nation to demand a king. Now that this has been substantiated, God will begin to raise up another king whose heart does desire to please the LORD. Although kingship is an inferior governing arrangement, God tolerates it and in His grace even continues to exercise His rule over the nation through it. From this point on in the narration, Saul remains a character in the story, though from a theological point of view he is clearly *rejected* in God's sight. The concluding verse to chapter 15 highlights this: "And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel" (15:35). From this point on, David would begin to take center stage.

A LESSON FOR OUR LIFE

"To obey is better than sacrifice!" Those words are still true for us today. Sometimes it is easy to substitute *religious formalities* for true obedience to God. That is, we can be active doing religious things or go through the motions of religious service, while at the very same time being disobedient to God. True "heart obedience" is what God wants, and nothing can ever be a substitute for that. Outwardly, we may *look obedient* to others, but God knows where our heart is at. Let's don't "fake it" as Christians. If there is any area of your life where you are being disobedient to God, why not confess that sin and forsake it? How much sweeter it is to be in fellowship with God!

³John J. Davis, *The Birth of a Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970), 63.