

Part 11

A king's irresponsibility

1 Sam. 13:1–14

The narrative in chapters 13–15 focuses on Saul's early reign, especially his relationship to God and to Samuel. We see Saul making foolish and unwise decisions and trying to cover his disobedience with lies. It was the beginning of that tragic decline that ended in a witch's house and Saul's suicide on the battlefield. At chapter 16, David will come on the scene and the book will describe Saul's deepening conflict with God, himself, and David. We can trace the downward steps in his tragic failure.

Pride (1 Sam. 13:1–4). Saul had reigned two years when he began to establish a standing army. Over 300,000 men had volunteered to deliver the people of Jabesh Gilead (11:8), but Saul chose only 3,000 and divided them between himself and his son Jonathan. Saul's camp was at Michmash and Jonathan's was about fifteen miles away in Gibeah. The fact that Israel was mustering an army put the Philistines on the alert. They had garrisons in different parts of the country and monitored the situation carefully.

It is as a brave and victorious soldier that Jonathan is introduced to us. When he attacked and defeated the Philistine outpost at Geba, it was a declaration of war, and the Philistines were quick to respond.

This was the beginning of Israel's war of liberation, although it wasn't finished until after David became king. But who blew the trumpet and seemed to take the credit for the victory? Saul, son of Kish! As commander-in-chief, he was calling for more men, because he knew that many battles lay ahead, but we wish he had given proper credit to his courageous son.

Unbelief and impatience (1 Sam. 13:5–9). The Philistine forces gathered at Michmash, less than twenty miles west of Gilgal, and it was obvious that Saul and his army were greatly outnumbered. Saul's men began to hide and even deserted the army by crossing the river, and those who remained were paralyzed with fright. As Samuel had commanded, Saul waited for seven days (10:8), and the longer he waited, the more concerned he became. His army was melting away, the enemy was mobilizing, and the situation was hopeless.

Why did Samuel tarry? Was he deliberately trying to make Saul fail, or was he just reminding the new king who was still in control? Samuel had nothing to gain if Saul failed on the battlefield, and Samuel knew that God was in control, even in the appointment of the new king.

Further-more, this meeting had been planned some two years before (v. 8), and no doubt Samuel had reminded Saul of it more than once. *This rendezvous was the Lord's way of testing Saul's faith and patience.* Without faith and patience, we can't receive what the Lord promises (Heb. 6:12), and unbelief and impatience are marks of spiritual immaturity (James 1:1–8). Until we learn to trust God and wait on His timing, we can't learn the other lessons He wants to teach us, nor can we receive the blessings He's planned for us. Saul may have been handsome, strong, and taller than the other men, but if he didn't have a heart that was right with God, he didn't have anything. It's one thing to be victorious when you're leading an army of over 300,000 men (1 Sam. 11:8), but quite another thing when you have only 600! (v. 15) But this is where faith comes in.

Saul didn't want to go into the battle without first offering a sacrifice to the Lord, which in itself may have been a subtle form of superstition, like carrying the Ark into the battle. Later Samuel would remind Saul that God seeks obedience and not sacrifice (15:22). Without waiting for God's appointed priest, Saul offered the sacrifice, and just then Samuel arrived in the camp. If Saul had waited just a few minutes more, everything would have been all right; but his impatience cost him dearly.

Deception (1 Sam. 13:10–12). As Saul decays in character, we shall see him deceiving himself and others more and more. His first deception at Gilgal occurred when he greeted Samuel cordially and expected Samuel to give him a blessing. Saul was playing the hypocrite and acting as though he had done nothing wrong.

“If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth” (1 John 1:6, KJV).

His second lie consisted in blaming Samuel and the soldiers and not himself. It was Samuel’s fault for arriving late and the army’s fault for deserting their king. His words, “I saw” indicate that Saul was walking by sight and not by faith. He lied a third time when he said that he had to force himself to offer the sacrifice. Could he not have “forced himself” to pray or to call together some of the officers to beseech the Lord for His help? The will is the servant of the mind and heart, but Saul’s thinking and desiring were totally out of the will of God.

People who are good at making excuses are rarely good at anything else, and those who are quick to blame others shouldn’t complain if others blame them. Throughout his career, King Saul was adept at minimizing his own sins and emphasizing the faults of others, but this isn’t the way a man of God leads God’s people.

Folly (1 Sam. 13:13–14). It was foolish of Saul to think that he could disobey God and get away with it, and that his disobedience could bring God’s blessing on himself and his army. “Let us do evil that good may come” (Rom. 3:8) is the logic of hell, not the law of heaven. He was foolish to conclude that the sacrifice of a king at the wrong time was as good as the sacrifice of a priest at the right time. He was foolish to walk by sight and not by faith in God’s promise, “for whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23, KJV). Saul had the same kind of superstitious faith that Eli’s sons had when they carried the Ark on the battlefield. He knew nothing of “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:26).

Saul’s pride, impatience, disobedience, and deception were all seen and judged by the Lord, and Samuel announced the sentence: the crown would eventually be taken from Saul and given to another, in this case, David. Saul would continue as king, but he would not establish a lasting dynasty, and none of his sons would succeed him and rule over Israel. But even if Saul had not sinned, how could his dynasty continue “forever” (1 Sam. 13:13) when Saul was from the wrong tribe and God had already chosen David to be king of Israel? One answer is that Saul’s eldest son, Jonathan, could have served with David, which in fact is what David and Jonathan had planned (20:31, 42; 23:16–18).

Saul’s sin at Gilgal cost him the dynasty, and his sin involving the Amalekites cost him the kingdom. He eventually lost his crown and his life (see 15:16–34, especially 23, 27–29; 16:1). God wanted a king with a heart that was right toward God, a man with a shepherd’s heart, and He found that kind of heart in David (13:14; Pss. 78:72; 89:20; Acts 13:22). “This man [Saul] in his governing of Israel was as a warrior and nothing more,” said G. Campbell Morgan; “he was never a shepherd.” But David had a shepherd’s heart, because the Lord was his Shepherd (Ps. 23:1). David was under authority, so he had the right to exercise authority.

4. An army’s insecurity (1 Sam. 13:15–23)

Saul had failed miserably, but in chapter 14 we will read about Jonathan’s great success as a commander. This passage describes the sad condition of the army of Israel, which reveals how poor Saul’s leadership was and how remarkable Jonathan’s victory was. Saul walked by sight and had little faith, but Jonathan walked by faith and did exploits for the Lord.

A dwindling army (1 Sam. 13:15–16). Saul had mustered over 300,000 men to rescue the people of Jabesh Gilead and then had cut it down to 3,000, but now his forces numbered only 600. The Philistine army was “as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude” (v. 5), a simile also used

for the army Gideon faced (Judg. 7:12)—and Saul’s army was twice as large as Gideon’s! The difference wasn’t so much the size of the army as the strength of the leader’s faith.

Gideon trusted God for victory and God honored him; Saul disobeyed God and God punished him.

Saul had mustered that huge army by means of fear (1 Sam. 11:7), so when his men began to fear the enemy instead of the king, they began to desert the camp and go to places of safety.

Jonathan knew that the Lord didn’t need great numbers to accomplish His purposes (14:6), but He did honor great faith.

A threatened army (1 Sam. 13:17–18, 23). The Philistines repeatedly sent out “raiding parties” to protect the roads and passes that the Jews might use if they attacked, and at the same time the Philistines kept any residents from helping the Jewish army. There were three such groups: one went north toward Ophrah, a second west to Beth-horon, and the third east toward Zeboim. A fourth detachment went south toward Gibeah to prevent the Jewish army from moving up to Geba (v. 23). With all these Philistine soldiers moving about in the area, what hope was there for the Jews? No matter which way Israel turned, they would meet the enemy! And yet the Lord was going to use Jonathan and his armor-bearer to win a great victory, for with God, nothing is impossible.

A deprived army (1 Sam. 13:19–22). It was bad enough that Saul lacked men, but it was even worse that his men were not properly equipped. When the Philistines moved in and subjected the land of Israel to their rule, they deported all the ironworkers so that the Jews couldn’t make weapons or even repair their farm implements. They even had to pay exorbitant prices to have their implements sharpened. The Benjamites were skilled at using slings (Judg. 20:15–16), but slings were not practical in close combat, and what about the vast number of Philistine chariots? The Jewish army was small in number and had small supplies of weapons, but they had a great God, if only they would trust Him. All of this sets the stage for Jonathan’s thrilling victory described in chapter 14, and that is contrasted with his father’s sad defeat in chapter 15.

In the way it functions or doesn’t function, the church of Jesus Christ today may sometimes resemble Saul’s army, but if we do, it’s our own fault. Through His great work on the cross, our Lord has defeated every enemy, and His power is available to His people. We have the armor and the weapons we need (Eph. 6:10ff), and His Word tells us all we need to know about the strategy of the enemy and the resources we have in Christ. All He asks is that we trust Him and obey His orders, and He will help us win the battle.

“Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might” (Eph. 6:10, KJV) for “the battle is the Lord’s” (1 Sam. 17:47).