

## Part 12

### A Foolish Vow and a Lame Excuse

#### 1 Samuel 14–15

Our task isn't an enjoyable one as we watch the character of King Saul steadily deteriorate. He has already demonstrated his unbelief and impatience (chap. 13), and now he will reveal further his disobedience and dishonesty. Saul's history will climax with the king visiting a witch and then committing suicide on the battlefield.

Sir Walter Scott was right when he wrote in his poem "Marmion,"

O what a tangled web we weave

When first we practice to deceive!

These chapters teach us three powerful lessons that we must heed and obey if we want the blessing of God on our lives and service.

#### **1. Faith in God brings victory. (1 Sam. 14:1–23)**

The focus in this chapter is on Jonathan, Saul's oldest son, who had won the first major battle against the Philistines, but his father had taken the credit (13:1–7). It's a remarkable blessing of the grace of God that a man like Saul should have a son so magnificent as Jonathan. He was a courageous warrior (2 Sam. 1:22), a born leader, and a man of faith who sought to do the will of God. As the account progresses, it becomes clear that Saul is jealous of Jonathan and his popularity, and this jealousy increases when Jonathan and David became devoted friends.

*Jonathan initiates the attack (1 Sam. 14:1–15).* The Philistines had sent a detachment of soldiers to establish a new outpost to guard the pass at Michmash (13:23), and Jonathan saw this as an opportunity to attack and see the Lord work. Saul was hesitating in unbelief (14:2) while his son was acting by faith. God had called Saul to begin Israel's liberation from the Philistines, but most of the time he only followed up on what others started. In spite of all that the Lord had done for him and all that Samuel had taught him, Saul was not a man of faith who trusted the Lord and sought to glorify Him. Saul had a priest of the Lord attending him, a man named Ahijah from the rejected line of Eli (v. 3), but the king never waited for the Lord's counsel (vv. 18–20). Saul is a tragic example of the popular man of the world who tries to appear religious and do God's work, but who lacks a living faith in God and a heart to honor Him. Unfortunately, church history records the lives of too many gifted people who "used God" to achieve their own purposes, but in the end abandoned Him and ended life in disgrace.

Why didn't Jonathan tell his father that he had a plan to rout the enemy? Because Saul in unbelief would have vetoed such a daring venture of faith, and Jonathan had no desire to disagree with him at such a crucial time. Jonathan may have been insubordinate to his father and commander-in-chief, but his plan was still the wisest approach to take. With their false sense of security, the Philistine troops at the new outpost wouldn't be afraid of a couple of Jews who managed to cross the pass and climb the cliffs. Maybe the guards would see them as two Jewish men who wanted to desert the Hebrew army and find refuge with the enemy. Jonathan wasn't about to let the enemy attack first.

You can't help but admire Jonathan's faith in the Lord. Perhaps as he climbed the rocks, he meditated on God's promises of victory stated in the covenant. "You will chase your enemies, and they shall fall by the sword before you. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight; your enemies shall fall by the sword before you" (Lev. 26:7–8, NKJV; see Deut. 28:7). Action without promises is presumption, not faith, but when you have God's promises, you can go forward with confidence. Jonathan may also have been thinking of Gideon when he told his armor-bearer, "Perhaps the Lord will help us, for nothing can hinder the Lord. He can win a battle

whether he has many warriors or only a few” (1 Sam. 14:6, NLT; see Judg. 6–7). “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31)

But Jonathan’s plan of attack differed from Gideon’s in at least two ways: It was not a surprise attack at night, and he and his armor-bearer deliberately let themselves be seen by the Philistine guards. It was the guards’ response that would give Jonathan the guidance he needed. Should Jonathan wait for the Philistines to come over or should he go over and meet them on their own ground? When the two men disclosed themselves to the enemy, the Philistines only laughed and mocked them. They treated them like frightened animals that had emerged from their burrows or like soldiers who were deserting the Hebrew cause and joining the Philistine army.

This kind of arrogant self-confidence was exactly what Jonathan wanted to see, because this gave him and his armor-bearer opportunity to get close to the guards before attacking. Who would fear one soldier and his armor-bearer? But these two men had Almighty God on their side! “One of you routs a thousand, because the Lord your God fights for you, just as he promised” (Josh. 23:10). The two courageous Jews quickly killed twenty men, and then the Lord honored their faith by sending an earthquake, “a very great trembling!” “But the Lord your God will deliver them over to you, throwing them into great confusion until they are destroyed” (Deut. 7:23). Terror and confusion gripped the enemy camp and prepared the way for a great victory of the army of Israel.

*Saul watches the battle (1 Sam. 14:16–19).* Saul and his 600 men were back at Gibeah where Saul lived, and the watchmen on the walls could see the Philistine forces retreating and couldn’t explain why. Did part of the Israeli army plan a sneak attack without Saul’s permission? Who was missing? Jonathan and his armor-bearer! This was the second time that Jonathan had acted on his own (13:3), and it probably irritated Saul that his own son should be so independent. As we study the life of Saul, we will see more and more evidence that he was what some people call a “control freak.” He envied other people’s success, he was suspicious of any strategy he didn’t originate or at least approve, and he was ruthless when it came to removing people who challenged his leadership or exposed his folly.

Saul asked the priest to bring him the Ark of the Lord and probably also the ephod. He was probably planning to take the Ark to the battlefield with the army, a foolish tactic that had brought judgment in Eli’s day (chap. 4); and the priest could use the ephod to determine God’s will in the matter. But the priest never had a chance to determine God’s will, for when Saul heard the noise of the battle increasing, he interrupted the divine proceedings and made his own decision. Once again, Saul’s impatience and self-confidence got the best of him and he acted without knowing God’s will or receiving God’s blessing (Deut. 20:4–5). He was desperately anxious to prove himself as good a soldier as Jonathan and he desperately wanted to avenge himself against his enemies (1 Sam. 14:24). It was to fulfill his own personal agenda, not to honor God, that he rushed into the battle spiritually unprepared.

*Israel enters the battle (1 Sam. 14:20–23).* As Saul and his army moved toward the battlefield, they were joined by Israelites who had deserted to the enemy camp (v. 21) and by men who had fled the battle and hidden away (v. 22). We wonder what kind of soldiers these quitters turned out to be. The fact that Saul accepted these men may indicate that he was trusting his army and not trusting the Lord. Six hundred soldiers don’t make a large army, so he welcomed even the weakest man to return. Yet in a few hours, Saul would be willing to kill his own son for eating some honey and breaking his father’s foolish vow! Saul’s emotional unbalance and contradictory thinking will show up again and again and do great damage to the kingdom. One day he will rush ahead like the horse, and the next day he will hold back like the mule (Ps. 32:9).

It was not Saul and his army who won the battle, but the Lord who used Jonathan and his armor-bearer (1 Sam. 14:23, see vv. 6, 12, and 45). The Israelite army followed the Philistines for the next

fifteen miles, from Michmash to Beth Aven, and the Lord enabled them to defeat the enemy. But Saul had joined the battle so late, and his men were so weak and famished, that he couldn't achieve the kind of victory that would have been decisive (v. 30). One of the marks of a true leader is knowing when to act, and Saul had wasted time watching the battle from a distance and failing to seek the mind of the Lord.

## **2. Foolish words bring trouble. (1 Sam. 14:24–52)**

The spiritual conditions of our hearts are revealed not only by the actions we perform but also by the words we speak. “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). When you read King Saul's words recorded in Scripture, they often reveal a heart controlled by pride, foolishness, and deceit. He would say foolish things just to impress people with his “spirituality,” when in reality he was walking far from the Lord.

*A foolish vow (1 Sam. 14:24–35).* Saul's heart was not right with God and he foolishly forced his army to agree to a vow of fasting until evening (v. 24). He didn't impose this fast because it was the will of God but because he wanted his soldiers to think he was a man wholly dedicated to the Lord. But this command was only more evidence of Saul's confused and superstitious faith. He thought that their fasting plus the presence of the Ark would impress the Lord and He would give them victory. But Jonathan and his armor-bearer were already enjoying victory without either the Ark or the fast!

No sensible commander would deprive his troops of food and energy while they were fighting the enemy. If the Lord commands it, then He would give the strength needed, but God gave Saul no such commission. Moses had fasted for forty days and nights when he was on the mountain with the Lord (Ex. 34:28), for the Lord sustained him. But Saul's soldiers were “distressed” (1 Sam. 14:24), “faint” (v. 28), and “very faint” (v. 31) because of this unnecessary fast. When we obey God's commands, we walk by faith, but when we obey unnatural human regulations, we only tempt the Lord. The first is confidence but the second is presumption. All of us need to heed the admonition given in Eccl. 5:2—“Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God” (NKJV).

When Jonathan and his armor-bearer joined the Israelite army in their march, they knew nothing about the king's foolish command, and Jonathan ate some honey from a honeycomb that had dropped to the ground. Then one of the soldiers told him that his father had put a curse on any soldier who ate any food that day. Why hadn't somebody warned Jonathan sooner? Perhaps they hoped that his innocent “disobedience” would open the way for all of them to eat! We wonder if Saul wasn't deliberately putting his son's life in jeopardy. However, Jonathan wasn't too worried, and he even dared to admit that his father's leadership had brought trouble to the land (v. 29).

Saul's foolish vow not only weakened the soldiers physically and hindered their ability to pursue the enemy, but it also created in the men an abnormal craving for food. When the sun set and ushered in a new day, the vow was no longer in force, and the men acted like animals as they fell on the spoils, killing the sheep and oxen and eating the meat with the blood. When Jews slaughtered their animals, they were required to drain out the blood before preparing the meat, for blood was never to be used as food (Lev. 3:17; 7:26; 17:10–14; 22:28; Deut. 12:23–24; see Gen. 9:4). A truly spiritual vow brings out the best in people, but Saul's carnal vow brought out the worst.

As he often did, the king assumed “spiritual leadership” and commanded the men to bring the animals to a great rock to be slain and the blood easily drained out. He then built an altar so that the animals could be offered as fellowship offerings (Lev. 3; 7:11–34), parts of which the people were allowed to eat in a fellowship feast. Saul was feebly trying to turn a gastronomical orgy into a worship service, but he didn't succeed too well. The men were famished and more interested in eating than in worshipping the Lord.

*A foolish judgment (1 Sam. 14:36–52).* Surely Saul realized that his delay at Gibeah and the imposing of the foolish vow had already cost the Israelites a great victory, so he tried to make

amends. He decided to move the army that very night and be ready to surprise the Philistines early the next morning. The army gave no resistance, but Ahijah the priest wisely suggested that they pause long enough to seek the will of the Lord. We aren't told what method Ahijah used to ascertain God's will, but whatever it was, God didn't answer. Even though Saul was not a godly man, his oath made in the Lord's name was legitimate; and if the Lord had ignored it, He would have dishonored His own name. Furthermore, the Lord was using this event to rebuke Saul as well as to honor Jonathan. Saul would discover that his men loved Jonathan and were prepared to defend him.

Saul already knew that Jonathan had been missing from the ranks (v. 17) and therefore he assumed that his son knew nothing about the vow. But if he had learned about the vow and still violated it, that made him an even greater sinner. Either way, Jonathan would be guilty and could be slain. We get the impression that Saul was almost determined that he would demote or destroy his own son, and it's clear that Jonathan didn't agree with his father's policies and practices. Hence, Saul made another oath (v. 39), and because his heart wasn't right nor his motive holy, he was taking the Lord's name in vain (Ex. 20:7).

This time they cast lots and the lot pointed to Saul and Jonathan. The second lot fell upon Jonathan. God could have changed the results (Prov. 16:33), but He wanted to bring the whole thing out in the open and humiliate King Saul, whose pride had caused the problem to begin with. The people praised Jonathan, not Saul, as the man who had brought the great victory to Israel, and if the Lord had used Jonathan in such a wonderful way, why should he be executed? By the time this matter was settled, it was too late to follow the Philistine army, so Saul and his men retreated. The victory did send the Philistines back home for a time, but they repeatedly threatened Israel (1 Sam. 14:52). This victory did enhance Saul's reputation and helped him consolidate his kingdom. In verses 47–48 and 52, the writer summarizes some of Saul's major victories and informs us that he drafted every good man he met.

The facts about the royal family are summarized in vv. 49–51, but when they are compared with other texts (1 Sam. 9:2; 2 Sam. 21:8; 1 Chron. 8:29–33; 9:39), they reveal some problems. Saul's grandfather was Abiel and his father Kish (1 Sam. 9:1–2). Ner was his uncle and Abner ("son of Ner") was captain of the army (14:51). Only three sons are mentioned (Jonathan, Ishvi, and Mal-chishua), while later texts speak also of Abinadab and Esh-Baal (1 Chron. 8:33; 9:39). He had two daughters, Merab and Michel, and all of these children were by his wife Ahinoam. His concubine Rizpah bore him Armoni and Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 21:8).

Jonathan, Malchishua and Abinadab all died with their father at Gilboa (1 Sam. 31:1–2), and Abner made Ish-bosheth king (2 Sam. 2:8ff). Ish-bosheth is probably the Esh-Baal of 1 Chronicles 8:33 and 9:39, for it wasn't unusual for Jewish men to have more than one name. But what happened to Ishvi? Was this also another name for Esh-Baal (Ish-bosheth), for the two names are not found together in any text. If so, then Saul had four sons by Ahinoam—Jonathan, the eldest, and then Ishhvi/Esh-Baal/Ish-bosheth, Malachishua, and Abinadab. Since the eldest and two youngest sons were killed in battle, this left Ish-Bosheth/ Ishvi/Esh-Baal, Saul's second-born, to claim the crown. Of course, it's possible that Ishvi had died earlier, and this would have left Esh-Baal/Ish-bosheth to reign, or if Esh-Baal died, then Ishvi/Ish-bosheth survived to rule briefly.

**Question** -- Is it surprising the lengths King Saul went to in order to present himself as a godly man?

Why or why not?

How is this sort of pretending an issue even in today's church?

What is so appealing about the appearance of godliness that makes believers lie in order to convince others of it?

### 3. Disobedience and deception bring judgment (1 Sam. 15:1–35)

This is a pivotal chapter in the story of Saul. The Lord gave him another opportunity to prove himself, but he failed again, lied about it, and was judged. Saul had a habit of substituting saying for doing and of making excuses instead of confessing his sins. No matter what happened, it was always somebody else's fault. He was more concerned about looking good before the people than being good before God. Consider the stages in this event that cost Saul the kingdom and eventually his life.

*Disobeying God (1 Sam. 15:1–11).* The Amalekites descended from Esau, the unbelieving brother of Jacob (Gen. 36:12, 15–16; Heb. 12:14–17) and the enemy of the Jewish people. The army of Amalek attacked the Jews shortly after Israel left Egypt, and they were defeated because God heard Moses' prayers and helped Joshua's army. At that time, the Lord declared perpetual war against Amalek (Ex. 17:8–16) and Balaam prophesied Amalek's ultimate defeat (Num. 24:20). See also Deuteronomy 25:17–19.

Some people find it difficult to believe that the Lord would command an entire nation to be destroyed just because of what their ancestors had done centuries before. Some of these critics may depend more on sentiment than on spiritual truth, not realizing how long-suffering the Lord had been with these nations and how unspeakably wicked they were (see 1 Sam. 15:18, 33; Gen. 15:16). God's covenant with the Jewish nation includes the promise, "I will curse him who curses you" (12:3), and God always keeps His Word. Nations like the Amalekites who wanted to exterminate the Jews weren't just waging war on Israel; they were opposing Almighty God and His great plan of redemption for the whole world. People are either for the Lord or against Him, and if they are against Him, they must suffer the consequences. Knowing God's covenant with Abraham, Saul allowed the Kenites to escape (1 Sam. 15:6) because they had befriended Israel. They were descendants of the Midianites, and Moses married a Midianite woman (Ex. 2:16, 21–22; see Judg. 4:11). History shows that nations that have persecuted Israel have been severely judged.

We admire Saul for being careful to protect the Kenites, but he wasn't careful to obey God's will. Everything that was vile and worthless he destroyed, but he permitted King Agag to live, and he allowed the Israelite soldiers to save "the best" of the flocks and herds. But if the Lord says something is condemned, how can we say it's "the best"? "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil" (Isa. 5:20, NKJV). Saul certainly had sufficient men to get the job done right, but he decided to do it his own way. The prophet Samuel knew about Saul's disobedience before the army returned from the battle and it grieved him. The Hebrew word means "to burn" and suggests a righteous indignation, a holy anger. For the remainder of his life, Samuel mourned over Saul (1 Sam. 16:1) and cried out to God (15:11).

Serving God acceptably involves doing the will of God in the right way, at the right time, and for the right motive. God had given Saul another chance and he had failed miserably. No wonder his mentor Samuel was angry and brokenhearted. Saul was God's choice for king and Samuel wanted him to succeed. In the end, Saul's failure to exterminate all the Amalekites resulted in his own death (2 Sam. 1:1–10).

In the matter of God's "repenting" (1 Sam. 15:11), there is no contradiction between this statement and verse 29.

*Saul lies to Samuel (1 Sam. 15:12–15).* In the eyes of the soldiers and the Jewish people, Saul had won a great victory over a long-time enemy, but in God's eyes he was a failure. Yet the king was so impressed with himself that he went to Carmel and erected a stone monument in his honor and then went to Gilgal, where he had previously failed the Lord and Samuel (13:4ff). Was he trying to avoid meeting Samuel? Perhaps, but his efforts were futile. It was fifteen miles from Samuel's home in Ramah to Gilgal, perhaps a day's journey for the old prophet.

Saul's greeting was sheer hypocrisy. He had no blessing to give Samuel and he had not performed the will of the Lord. First he lied to himself in thinking he could get away with the deception, and then he lied to Samuel who already knew the truth. He even tried to lie to God by saying he would use the spared animals for sacrifices! (See 1 John 1:5–10.) Saul blamed the soldiers for sparing the spoils, but surely as their commander-in-chief, he could have controlled them. "They" spared the best, but "we" utterly destroyed the rest! With Saul, it was always somebody else's fault.

*Saul argues with Samuel (1 Sam. 15:16–23).* Does Samuel's emphatic "Stop!" suggest that Saul was turning away, or does it mean "Stop telling lies"? Perhaps both are true, for Saul had no great desire to discuss his affairs with Samuel. But Samuel had a message from the Lord, and Saul knew he had better listen. The day would come when Saul would give anything to hear a word from the Lord (28:4–6).

Saul had once been a modest young man (9:21), but now for the second time he had willfully disobeyed the Lord's will and even erected a monument in honor of the event. He was to annihilate a nation that for centuries had done evil, but he ended up doing evil himself. Confronted with this accusation, Saul began to argue with God's servant and deny that he had done wrong. For the second time he lied when he said, "I have obeyed" (15:13, 20); for the second time he blamed his army (vv. 15, 21); and for the second time he used the feeble excuse of dedicating the spared animals as sacrifices for the Lord (vv. 15, 21).

The prophet rejected all three lies and explained why God couldn't accept the animals as legitimate sacrifices: the Lord wants living obedience from the heart, not dead animals on the altar. God doesn't need any donations from us (Ps. 50:7–15), and the sacrifice He desires is a broken and contrite heart (51:16–17). Sacrifice without obedience is only hypocrisy and empty religious ritual (Isa. 1:11–17; Jer. 7:21–26; Ps. 40:6–8). "For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6, *KJV*). The religious leaders in Jesus' day didn't understand this truth (Matt. 9:9–13; 12:1–8), although occasionally somebody in the crowd would see the light (Mark 12:28–34).

Samuel was a Levite and a prophet, so he certainly wasn't criticizing the Jewish sacrificial system. The Lord through Moses had established Jewish worship and it was right for the people to bring their sacrifices to the Lord. This was His appointed way of worship. But the worshipers had to come to the Lord with submissive hearts and genuine faith, or their sacrifices were in vain. When David was in the wilderness and away from the priests and the sanctuary of God, he knew that God would accept worship from his heart. "Let my prayer be set before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice" (Ps. 141:2, *NKJV*). Christian worship today must be more than simply going through a liturgy; we must worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24), "singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col. 3:16, *NKJV*).

But the prophet went on to reveal that the sins of rebellion and stubbornness (arrogance) controlled Saul's heart, and in God's sight, they were as evil as witchcraft and idolatry. (Later, Saul would actually resort to witchcraft.) Both sins were evidences of a heart that had rejected the Word of the Lord. To know God's will and deliberately disobey it is to put ourselves above God and therefore become our own god. This is the vilest form of idolatry.

*Saul is rejected by God (1 Sam. 15:24–29).* King Saul now moves from "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord" (v. 20) to "I have sinned." However, this was not a true expression of repentance and sorrow for sin, because when he repeated it later, he added, "Honor me now ... before the elders of my people" (v. 30). He was obviously more concerned about his reputation with the people than his character before God, and that is not the attitude of a man truly broken because of sin. Saul also admitted that he spared Agag and the animals because he feared the people instead of fearing the

Lord and His commandment. But this was just another indication that he was more interested in being popular with people than in pleasing God.

Samuel refused to join Saul at the altar because he knew the Lord wouldn't receive the king's worship because He had rejected him. In his previous disobedience, Saul forfeited the dynasty (13:14), but now he lost his throne. He was no longer the king of Israel because Samuel would anoint young David to be king. Saul had already been warned about this judgment and now it would be fulfilled. As Samuel turned away, Saul clutched at the tassels on the hem of his garment (Num. 15:38–39) and tore the prophet's robe (see 1 Kings 11:29–39.) Samuel used the occurrence as an object lesson and announced that God had torn the kingdom from Saul's hand. Samuel called the Lord "the Strength of Israel," a name that speaks of God's glory, eminence, and perfection. How could such a wonderful God be guilty of changing or of telling lies? The Lord had announced that Saul would lose the kingdom, and nothing could change His mind.

*Saul is rejected by Samuel (1 Sam. 15:30–35).* The Word of God simply did not penetrate Saul's mind and heart, and he continued to worry about maintaining his reputation rather than getting right with the Lord. Why Samuel changed his mind and decided to worship with Saul is a bit of a mystery, but the prophet's actions after that left no doubt where Samuel stood with reference to the king. Samuel publicly butchered King Agag and in that way let it be known that the king had failed to fulfill his commission. Samuel returned to his home in Ramah and Saul to his home in Gibeah, and Samuel made no more trips to see the king, either publicly or privately. Saul did visit Samuel once in Ramah (19:23–24).

Our hearts go out to Samuel who certainly suffered much because of the people and the king they so desperately wanted. When the kingdom was introduced in Israel, Samuel was replaced by a leader who was inferior to him in every way. Samuel did his best to advise the king and strengthen the kingdom, but Saul insisted on having his own way. Each time Saul was assigned a task, he failed, and when he was confronted, he lied and blamed others. When Israel experienced victories, it was usually Jonathan who led the way. It was a difficult time for Samuel, but God was still on the throne and had His true king waiting to be anointed.

King Saul had lost his dynasty, his character, and his throne and crown. He had also lost a godly friend. When David appears on the scene, Saul will lose his self-control and his good sense, and eventually he will lose his last battle—and his life.