

## STUDIES IN SAMUEL No. 12

**1 Samuel 10:1-27**

**April 9, 2000**

### Text Comment

- v.1 The anointing of Saul as the new king of Israel was a private affair and would remain so for some time thereafter (cf. v. 16: even Saul did not tell his relatives). “Leader over his inheritance” indicates that Saul’s role, and that of all subsequent Israelite kings, would be that of vice-regent. The Lord isn’t abandoning his claim upon Israel, his inheritance.

The mention of Samuel’s kissing Saul is interesting. There is little or no evidence that such a kiss had some role in the coronation of kings. The report of Samuel’s kiss may therefore be indicating to us that the good old man had immediately formed a real attachment to this young Benjamite. If so, it will make Samuel’s disappointment with Saul later more poignant.

- v.2 The “signs” that follow are all intended primarily for Saul’s own encouragement, for, as yet, no one else knows that he has been anointed as the leader of Israel.

Rachel’s tomb was near Ramah (cf. Jer. 31:15).

- v.3 The precise repetition of the number *three* followed by exactly *two* will be proof that none of this is coincidence.

- v.6 The third “sign” was the most impressive. Saul would fall under the control of God’s Spirit and join them in their ecstasy. Prophesying in this way often was a matter of ecstasy as a man fell under the powerful sway of the Spirit and became a channel through which the Spirit spoke in the world. Music is found to have played a role in other OT instances of this prophetic ecstasy. In 2 Kgs. 3:15 we read that “while the harpist was playing the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha...” Strangely, later in 1 Samuel (18:10) we read that “an evil spirit from God came upon Saul while David was playing the harp”! The phenomenon that Saul encountered here is, of course, not unlike what happened at Pentecost, when the believers, under the powerful inspiration of the Holy Spirit, communicated his truth in languages they did not even know. Now, it needs to be said that, in other religions, both ancient and modern, groups of devoted practitioners can whip themselves into an ecstatic frenzy, often with the help of the insistent rhythms of musical instruments. The difference, as so often in the outward forms of religion and religious enthusiasm, is that the biblical faith produced the authentic original, other faiths the imitations.

The reference to Saul being “changed into a different person” seems to refer to his emerging as a man made capable of deeds of valor, of great exploits worthy of the office that he will assume. This is what happened to Gideon (Judg. 6:34) and Jephthah (11:29) before him.

- v.8 The “seven days” is not reckoned from that moment, but from the time when Saul went to Gilgal at a point of crisis in Israel’s conflict with the Philistines. The actual time in which this requirement came to pass was sometime later.
- v.12 The sense of the proverb seems clearly to be an expression of some uncharacteristic behavior by someone (extreme incongruity, such as the English’ “bull in a china shop” Alter, *Com.*, 56). There seems to be some derogatory sense to the proverb and also the question, “And who is their father?” The prophets are insignificant, perhaps they lacked a reputable leader – the honorific sense of *father* was applied to prophets by their disciples (cf. 2Kgs. 2:12). The common attitude, especially in times of spiritual declension, was ambivalent about such prophets. They were viewed as vehicles of a powerful divine Spirit, but also as loonies (cf. Hosea 9:7: “Because your sins are so many and your hostility so great, the prophet is considered a fool and the inspired man a maniac.”).
- v.13 It is not unlikely that Saul sought some private devotions after such extraordinary demonstrations of God’s work in his life.
- v.18 This point is being made precisely because Israel’s request for a king demonstrated a lack of faith in God to deliver her from her enemies, even though He had just done so in a spectacular fashion.
- v.20 Supposedly the Urim and the Thummim were the means of discerning God’s choice. It is not known for sure precisely how they worked or how God’s will was discerned from them because we don’t even know exactly what they were, though they were small enough to wear in a pouch on the high priests breastplate.
- v.24 Samuel clearly has a positive view of Saul at this point.

Now, we have embarked on that part of 1 Samuel that regularly troubles the Christian reader of the Bible. You remember what happens from this point. Saul is anointed. He leads Israel in a successful battle against the Philistines in chapter 11. The Philistines then gathered to attack Saul and, as per instructions he received from Samuel, he waited at Gilgal the appointed seven days. When Samuel didn’t come, Saul took it in hand to offer the sacrifice himself and as he was doing so Samuel arrived. For that single failure, or so it has seemed, the kingship was taken from him and given to David.

That is the problem that faces the ordinary reader of Samuel. It doesn’t seem that Saul did anything that deserved such draconian punishment. He stumbled, to be sure, in 1 Sam. 13 by not waiting for Samuel, but David did worse things than that. And Saul wasn’t even given a second chance. Where is the grace and the gospel in that?

Biblical scholars likewise have often regarded the story as it stands as a demonstration of what one has called “God’s dark side.” [In Long, “Scenic...”, 41] They see Samuel as harsh, unfair, accusatory and Saul as more the victim than the villain. Very often they have tried to make sense out of what they have regarded as being a not very sensible story by chopping it up into its

supposed sources and explaining the final result as a mishmash of different traditions, different stories of Saul's rise to kingship, that are contradictory when stuck together.

Well, the attention being paid to the artistry and the sophistication of the biblical historical narratives has now led scholars to take a second look at the narrative of Saul's rise to power. And the key may well have been found in one of those verses that has often been thought to be superfluous, not important.

In 10:5 we read that the third sign that Saul was to be given – the most important of the three signs and the only one that is specifically mentioned again in the report of the fulfillment of the three signs – at Gibeah *where there was a Philistine outpost*. Concerning this reference to the Philistine outpost one scholar remarks simply that “this notice is immaterial at this point and probably secondary...” [McCarter cited in Long, *Art of Biblical History*, 212] But, what we have learned more and more in our studies of OT historical narrative – remember our studies in Genesis, for example – is that everything in the narrative has a reason and sometimes seemingly inconsequential references are key to the viewpoint of the narrator.

This is particularly true here where, in v. 7, Saul is told that immediately after his experience of ecstasy and the coming upon him of the Spirit of God he *should do whatever your hand finds to do for God is with you*. That biblical idiom means “do whatever is in your power to do.”

Now, remember, it was already explicitly said in 9:16 that Saul's first responsibility, his first summons as the King of Israel, was to deliver Israel from the oppression of the Philistines: “Anoint him leader over my people Israel; he will deliver my people from the hand of the Philistines.”

So, when we are told and when Saul was told that the third sign, the very sign that demonstrated Saul's empowerment by the Spirit of God, would take place right near a Philistine garrison, the implication seems clear that Saul should have attacked the garrison. That would not have eliminated the Philistine threat, of course, but it would have provoked them into battle where they could be destroyed by the power of God. That would then make sense of Samuel's second command in 10:8: for Israel should not go into battle against the Philistine army without first consecrating themselves to the task with worship and sacrifice. God's favor would still be absolutely necessary to victory.

But Saul failed to capitalize on the Lord's empowerment. He failed to take advantage of the proximity of a small Philistine garrison. He did nothing with what the Lord had given him; he made nothing of the opportunity the Lord had presented him.

As one commentator, more sensitive to the sophistication of Hebrew narrative, put it: “There is a tree of knowledge in Saul's Eden.” [Gordon, 118] Saul was given a test, right at the outset. He was handed both the opportunity to prove his readiness to be faithful to his calling and given the unmistakable demonstration that God was with him and would give him the ability to do the work to which he had been called – especially the work of ridding Israel of the Philistine menace. And from the get-go, Saul hesitated and temporized.

Florence and I have been watching again these evenings Ken Burns magnificent documentary on the Civil War. The other evening we were watching the episodes that deal with George McClellan, the Union general who first built the Army of the Potomac and then did so very little with it. It was of McClellan that Abraham Lincoln famously said, “If the General has no use for the army, I would like to borrow it for a while.” He had Lee in his grasp early in the war, outnumbered him two to one, had more and better equipment by far, but refused to attack, sure that Lee outnumbered *him*. Lincoln, in exasperation claimed that if he sent McClellan a million soldiers, the General would claim that Lee had two million and ask for still more. At Antietam, that bloodiest day in American military history, McClellan could have ended the war, but he refused to follow up the attack and let the enemy slip away once more. McClellan’s lieutenants grumbled about his incompetent generalship, some wrote home wondering whether it was cowardice or treason, and the poor privates who were ground up by the thousands for no purpose in McClellan’s half-hearted battles said there was no use fighting until the Union army got a general who knew what he was doing.

Well, that seems to be something of the image of Saul here in 1 Samuel 10, at the very outset. Saul had the equipment, the power of the Lord had come upon him, and he had the opportunity to strike. But he refused to commit to battle. But there was one difference. McClellan was happy to enjoy the public celebrity that came with being the commander of the Union army. Saul was even more hesitant, more reticent, shall we say it, more cowardly than that.

In v. 16 we read that Saul said nothing, even to his relatives, about what Samuel had said to him about the Lord’s calling, about Samuel’s anointing him the king, about the remarkable experience he had had at Gibeath – his being overtaken by the Spirit of God – and his “being changed into a different person.” All of this he kept to himself. Readers of the chapter have often taken this to be a sign of his humility, but it seems more likely now that it is rather a sign of his hesitancy, his unwillingness to step out and be counted on the strength of what the Lord had said to him and done for him. Take note of what we have seen often enough before. It is the narrator who tells us that Saul said nothing to his uncle about the kingship. The narrator wants us to know of Saul’s silence.

And, then, finally, we have another instance in v. 22. At the time of his formal coronation he has to be dragged out of hiding to be revealed to Israel as her new king. Samuel goes through the long process of casting lots for tribes and clans, perhaps he has to do that *precisely because Saul did not do what he might have done to distinguish himself and demonstrate himself the Lord’s anointed*. But, as Phil Long, Prof. of OT at our Covenant Seminary, suggests, “When the ever-reluctant appointee is finally dragged from his hiding place behind the baggage, it is with a measure of justification that certain troublemakers query, ‘how can this one save us’ (v.27).” [“Scenic,” 44]

A targum – an ancient Jewish commentary – suggests that Saul was with the baggage because he had slipped off for some quiet prayer and bible study. The narrator of 1 Sam. 10, I think, has made it clear that Saul was with the baggage because he didn’t want to be found.

The next scene has Saul leading Israel in battle against the Ammonites, though the Lord had to drop the battle in his lap. But, once again, as soon as he finds himself before the Philistines, in chapter 13, he betrays his cowardice. We will get to that in due course.

But, you see the point. We are seeing Saul for what he is *already here in 1 Samuel 10, at the very outset*. It is not for one sin that Saul is rejected in 1 Sam. 13. It is for a pattern of unbelieving refusal to heed God's summons and to take up the divine power that had been put at his disposal. Saul was a coward in the face of the enemy because he had no true faith in God. That point is not explicitly said. Remember we began our studies in Samuel with Phil Long's reminder that the narration would be "scenic – it would show more than it would tell – succinct – it would say a lot with very little – and subtle – the narrator would not always come out and explain himself, but leave the reader the materials with which to form his own impression of what was happening. Samuel requires careful reading and an attention to *everything* that is said as well as to things that are not said that might be said. We found this narrative style in Genesis as well.

Saul had been given his summons and, as Robert Gordon, the commentator says, he was given a "tree of knowledge" as well to test him. And Saul failed his test. He didn't do what his hand found to do, or, better, he could find nothing to do even though God had handed him both opportunity and the promise of certain success.

Do you remember Paul in 1 Cor. 11:19? "I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval." Tests are a necessary part of life, of Christian life. They reveal, they disclose the true from the false, the authentic from the inauthentic, true faith from spurious.

Do you remember James 1:2-3? "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that *the testing* of your faith develops perseverance." Testing faith is the means by which God strengthens it, purifies it, matures it.

You young people in junior and senior high school think that you are ill-used because you have to sit so many tests. But tests are a biblical form of intellectual and spiritual growth. That is what God uses. Tests that force you to summon up what you know and apply what you know to problems and questions are the way both in school and in life that you learn more – both in preparing for the test and in reckoning with your mistakes afterward – and learn better how to learn more, where you need to know more. What is more, doing well on tests is inspiring, it forms a habit of good, hard work, a habit of preparation and successful execution.

And that is true in all walks of life. A manufacturing company is always testing its product to be sure it is well made, to find out whether it can be improved. And by that testing it perfects its product and its method of making it. Doctors run tests on you to find out if you are healthy or if there is something that isn't right in your body. The test tells you how you are doing and if there is something else you ought to be doing or not be doing. Tests are the means to better one's health, to disclose problems, to discover what needs to be done.

Well, God gave a test to Saul and he failed it, and, far from learning his lesson, he failed the next one and the next one after that. And then he gave Saul a final exam in chapter 13 and, predictably, he failed that one big time! God tested Saul and but he neither passed the tests nor learned from them.

You know, the word “test” or “trial” and the word “temptation” is the same word. The difference is the source (God, on the one hand, or the world, flesh, or Devil on the other) and the purpose (to discover and/or strengthen faith and godliness on the one hand and to overturn faith and godliness on the other). It is the difference between a teacher who gives a test to a person in order to make them fail and to cause them harm and a teacher who gives a test to teach, even to force a student to work hard so as to succeed.

God tested Saul and he is testing you all the time. And when you are tested, when you are faced with opportunity to do what is right – and remember a Christian has the power to do what is right, for God never allows you to be tested beyond what you are able! – remember that nothing is more important to your growth, your safety, your fruitfulness, your happiness, your long-term faithfulness as a Christian than just your passing your tests, one after another. Look for them, see them for what they are, and be sure to pass them as you know the Lord would have you pass them.

As the old writers used to say, grace does not make leaps. The Christian life is built a step at a time, one test taken and passed after another. But, contrarily, tests failed one after another cause a life to be stuck in the deep ruts of spiritual failure. That was to be Saul’s unhappy lot. Tell the Lord that you do not want it to be yours. Ask him to help you recognize each test he sends and, with confidence in the power he has promised to supply, to pass those tests. Whether the test concerns your pride, or your purity, or your money, or your time, or your worldliness, or your selfishness, or your courage, as it was in Saul’s case. God will test you, count on it.

No one stands still in spiritual things because God always sends tests. Therefore, you are either passing them and getting better or flunking them and getting worse. Saul is a warning to us that we do not want to be getting worse!

The Lord’s Supper: the power that the Lord supplies.