

## STUDIES IN SAMUEL No. 15 1 Sam. 13:1-22 May 14, 2000

### Text Comment

The next section of Samuel extends from 13:1 to the end of chapter 15 and amounts to the account of Saul's reign as King of Israel. To be sure, Saul continues to be king until the end of 1 Samuel, but from the beginning of chapter 16 the focus shifts to David and the narrative concentrates on Saul only as he attempts, with behavior more and more bizarre, to hang on to the throne God had taken from him. These next few chapters do chronicle some victories that Saul won over Israel's enemies, but the narrator is not much interested in that. He wants us to know why the Lord rejected Saul and gave the throne to another. In this it is not unlike the narrative of the reign of Ahab in Kings which neglects to mention at all Ahab's greatest military achievement, his leadership of a confederation of kings that stopped the Assyrian advance into the Levant at Kharkar in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The author of Kings isn't interested in Ahab's accomplishments as the world might measure them. He is interested in Ahab's catastrophic spiritual failure and its devastating consequences for Israel. The Bible teaches us what to think is important and what not. And never, from the beginning to the end of the Bible, are we ever taught to think, *It's the economy, stupid!*

- v.1 We have a good example of the fact, for fact it is, that numbers have often been corrupted in transmission. The Hebrew text of verse 1 [MT] reads that Saul was one year old when he began to reign and reigned for two years. What you have in the ET is found in some much later manuscripts of the LXX. The earliest LXX texts are missing the entire sentence.
- v.2 In other words, Saul laid down the foundations of a standing army. During the period of the Judges, Israel depended upon volunteers, her "citizen militia" if you will, for her military engagements. Remember we said some time ago that there is evidence that the term "thousand" in this context may mean "military unit" of some particular size, not necessarily literally a thousand men. The immediate problem was to expel the Philistines from Saul's own home territory. All the places mentioned were in Benjamin.
- v.3 A point of some importance, as we will see. Jonathan takes the initiative, not his father. The word translated "outpost" could also mean "governor." It is not possible to tell for sure which is meant. Is this an attack on a small garrison, as in chapter 14, or is it effectively the assassination of a Philistine official. Either way, it is an act obviously designed to provoke a reaction from the Philistine army? Jonathan enters the narrative without introduction.

"Hebrews" is usually the term used by foreigners for Israelites. So Saul's use of it here – a term used in contempt by Israel's enemies such as Pharaoh and the Philistines – is designed to arouse Israel's pride and fortify her will to resist. [Fokkelman in Alter, *Com*, 71]

- v.4 The mention of Gilgal takes us back to 10:8 and the specific instructions Saul had been given for just such a situation. Samuel told him, “I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do.” The whole question of Saul’s reign and his fitness to rule Israel would be linked to his obedience to God’s commandments as given through his prophet. And this would be the same throughout Israel’s monarchy.
- v.5 The MT has 30,000 chariots; the LXX has the much more likely 3,000.
- v.7 Interestingly, this is just what happened when the Midianites oppressed Israel during the days of Gideon. They too came like swarms of locusts – so great was their number – and Israel hid in caves and thickets. But God delivered them then and could do the same now!
- v.14 Saul would have sons – we already know of Jonathan – but they would not succeed him as king because of his disobedience. The narrative of Saul’s reign has scarcely begun and the die is already cast. As one commentator puts it, Samuel’s announcement that Saul had been rejected is put before the account of Saul’s reign as king, “like a clef on a music stave.” [Hertzberg, 106]
- v.15 That is, 1,400 of the original 2,000 had deserted in fear.
- v.21 This background material gives us a sense of the abject status of Israel under the Philistines. They weren’t allowed the technology by which to make weapons that would enable them to rebel. Israel had been effectively disarmed. The text says that the price was a *pim*, which appears only here in the Bible. But archaeologists have found stone weights marked *pim*, which was the equivalent to 2/3 of a silver shekel. Not only did the Philistines not allow the Israelites their own smiths, they made a profit from their vassals who had to come to Philistine smiths to get their farming implements sharpened. Not unlike, for example, the Roman occupation of Judea in the first century or the German occupation of France in WWII. The conqueror ruled the country with an iron fist and made the conquered pay for the cost of their own occupation and oppression, which made their subjection even more galling.

Now, the question posed by this narrative has probably been felt through the ages by almost every sympathetic reader of the Bible. Exactly how did Saul disobey. The narrative seems to say that he waited the prescribed seven days (v. 8). If his sin was in taking to himself the priestly duty of offering sacrifice, nothing is said to that effect by Samuel or the narrator. Indeed, in Chapter 14 we have mention on several occasion of a priest who accompanied Saul. It is not impossible, perhaps it is likely, that Saul himself did not perform the sacrifice, he simply ordered it done.

William Foxwell Albright, the great orientalist and archaeologist saw in this narrative not an error on Saul’s part, but Samuel’s “harshness and refusal to compromise” which he

chalked up to some unhappy experiences that Samuel had had as a boy at Shiloh. [Gordon, 134] Another commentator speaks of Samuel's "prophet's tantrum" and suggests that Samuel set Saul up for this failure because he would never have been content with any but a puppet king, someone he could control and through whom he could continue to exercise rule in Israel. [Alter, *Com*, 73]

It is clear that Saul had disobeyed. That is what Samuel says explicitly in vv. 13 and 14. But in what way had he disobeyed. To begin, it is not clear that Saul waited *the entire* seven days. Reading vv. 8-10 it is quite possible that we are to understand that Samuel waited till the end of the last day, the seventh day, as a test of Saul's fidelity. Robert Alter, one of the new breed of commentators on the biblical historical narrative, thinks that the wording of v. 10 suggests that Samuel delayed on purpose and that he was not absolutely late, only that he waited until the last possible moment. Alter translates v. 10 this way: "And it happened as he finished offering the burnt offering that, look, Samuel was coming, and Saul went out toward him to greet him." [*Com*, 72]. In that case, Saul simply did not obey, at least he proved himself a man who would obey only when conditions were favorable. He would not prove his loyalty when tested. That seems to be the sense.

But, what is absolutely clear in this account is that Saul's failure was a *failure of faith*. **Saul's disobedience was primarily and essentially a failure to trust in the Lord.** The Bible often mixes obedience and faith, disobedience and unbelief together in this way. True obedience is always an act of faith, it is faith in action. Disobedience is always, fundamentally, a failure of faith, an act of unbelief.

And this is the point of this chapter. And it is demonstrated in several ways.

**I. First, there is the comparison of this situation with that of Gideon, a comparison any Israelite would have immediately appreciated.**

If you compare 1 Sam. 13:5-7 with Judges 6:2-5 you will see the distinct parallels. In both cases a powerful enemy approached in great numbers. It wasn't as many as the sand on the seashore, it was in swarms like locusts! The Israelites hid from them in caves then as they did now. And, what is more striking still, the Israelite army, such as it was, was whittled down to an ever smaller size in both cases. Remember, Gideon, at the Lord's instruction, finally went into battle against this great host with just 300 soldiers. Saul, even after all the desertions, had a force that was still twice the size of Gideon's! But Saul never says, "The Lord delivered Israel through Gideon with half the size of an army that I have left to me. He can certainly deliver Israel from the Philistines with my six hundred." Saul said nothing of the kind.

The entire section, from v. 16 to the end of the chapter, is designed to demonstrate that, humanly speaking, Israel had no hope of victory in battle against the Philistines. We are treated to an account of her human disadvantages. She hadn't the armor or the weapons with which to defeat a well equipped army such as the Philistines had. But, that is exactly the point! It will not be the army or its equipment that will win the day for Israel,

but the Lord fighting for her. As Paul would later say, we are to glory in our weakness, because it is in weakness that the Lord reveals his strength and his strength is made perfect in our weakness. That was all Saul had to know and believe. It had been enough for Gideon, who brought the Midianites down with trumpets and empty jars, for goodness sake! But for Saul, the disturbing situation, the weakness of his army, the strength of the enemy was the great thing, the principal thing. [Hertzberg]

So, in the first place, the narrator places Saul in the same situation Gideon faced, but Saul does not believe, does not trust the Lord, as Gideon did. Instead he resorts to superstition, imagining that a sacrifice would gain God's favor even if it were wrongly offered and in disobedience to the instructions he had received.

## **II. Second, and most emphatically, Saul's son Jonathan does show the faithfulness that Saul so conspicuously lacked.**

We have not yet read the passage in question, you find it in 14:4-6. Remember, back at the beginning when Saul was first summoned to be king, and particularly given the commission to deliver Israel from the Philistines, and was given the promise of God's help and an opportunity to strike at a Philistine garrison, he did nothing. That is in 10:1-7. Now with six hundred men he remains unprepared to act boldly. He does not trust the Lord to give him victory over an army that, in human terms, is much more powerful than his own.

But Jonathan doesn't think that way. Compare what Jonathan says in 14:6 – “Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few” – with Saul's timidity in 13:11 – “When I saw that the men were scattering...” The comparison between the two men, their state of mind and their consequent action – a comparison the narrator expects the reader to make – amounts to a devastating indictment of Saul's lack of faith in God.

The problem with Saul, therefore, was not that he had to live up to the impossible demands of an irascible old prophet. The problem with Saul was that he had no faith in God! His son did. Gideon had years before. But not Saul. His disobedience at Gilgal was precisely as consequential as it was, it was adequate reason for stripping the throne from him, *precisely because it demonstrated the really significant fact about Saul: he was an unbeliever!*

As Phil Long puts it, summarizing the entire history of Saul in 1 Samuel:

“In the end, Saul, like Eli, is rejected for failing to give due weight (honor) to the Lord. Unlike Eli, however, Saul does not respond with ‘He is the Lord...’ (3:18), but drives himself crazy (literally?) trying to maintain his grasp on a throne no longer rightfully his.” [“Scenic...” 45]

And that is what you and I are taught to think about obedience from the beginning to the end of the Bible. What is most important about obedience is what it says about faith. Faith obeys, unbelief does not. That is why the Bible can so easily mix faith and

obedience in speaking about salvation, because the one flows from and is the demonstration of the other.

The one thing no Bible believer should ever imagine – and I suspect there are some here tonight who are imagining this very thing – is that you can disobey the Lord, refuse to honor him with your obedience, and still be a believer. Our obedience may remain deeply imperfect – of course it will – but true believers are committed to obedience, they acknowledge their wrong and repent when they disobey, they commit themselves to keeping the commandments of God, they never show themselves indifferent to God’s will, and, over and over again, they are found doing what God commands even though that obedience is difficult, scary, or painful. This is not the only place in the Bible where a seemingly small difference in obedience betrays a vast difference in faith. Think of the foolish virgins. They waited for the Bridegroom, they went out at night to meet him, they had oil in their lamps. All they lacked was the extra oil and while they went to find it, the Bridegroom returned, the banquet was begun and the door forever shut against the foolish virgins. That apparently small lapse was a matter of eternal consequence because it revealed unbelief that had before been hidden.

Disobedience showed Saul up for what he was, an unbeliever. Commit yourself to obey, to what God tells you to do, however hard, however great a change that will mean for you. If you are unwilling to do that, then accept the implication: you don’t really believe in God or Christ. And listen to what God says to you in that case:

“You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you...now your kingdom will not endure...because you have not kept the Lord’s command.”