

THE MORNING OF THE MONARCHY
STUDIES IN FIRST SAMUEL
LESSON 6

"A KING...LIKE THE OTHER NATIONS"

I Samuel 13 - 15

I. PHILISTINE SUPREMACY 13:1-7, 15b-23

A. Their Dominant Presence

It is clear that the Philistines were free to march into Israelite territory when and where they chose, and this time they marched into the heart of the country, close to Saul's hometown, Gibeah. Apparently they were able to do this by maintaining strategically placed garrisons. The word translated "garrison" in verse 3 could mean "governor," and the presence of a Philistine governor would demand a garrison to support and defend him and enforce his authority.

B. Their Greater Number

Whether you take the numbers at face value or not, Israel was at a grave disadvantage proportionately. In verse 5, some texts say 3,000 and some say 30,000. Since the Hebrew letters for both look almost alike, there could be a copyist error in transmission. Either way Israel had only three infantry units totaling 3000 men against a vast array of Philistine infantry and chariots of their powerful standing army. Though a larger nation, Israel was but a nation of farmers with no regular troops at all.

C. Their Superior Equipment

Thus the Israelites faced a much bigger and better equipped army. They had no swords or spears (13:22) and used bows and arrows and slingshots instead. They did not have chariots until the time of Solomon (1Ki.4:26). Quite apart from the horses and chariots they possessed, the Philistines had far superior personal weapons, due to their foresight in gaining a monopoly in the trade of blacksmiths throughout the whole region (13:19-22). The Philistines were afraid that with a knowledge of metallurgy Israel would be able to make spears and swords. Consequently, Israel had to depend on them alone for iron weapons and only Saul and Jonathan had iron weapons (13:22). How could they win against such odds? Those with Saul "followed him trembling." As it was, Saul's army seems to have dwindled considerably, if one compares verse 2 with verse 15. It took a real act of faith to believe in an immediate victory. Nevertheless victory was to be the outcome -- not because of Israel's inner unity but because God was not on the side of the big battalions.

II. SAUL'S FIRST MISTAKE: PRESUMPTIVE DISOBEDIENCE 13:8-15a

Saul's first mistake in his reign is here. Remember that in early Israel, they were convinced that their wars were waged not only with God's guidance and protection, but indeed under His banner and for His purposes -- He marched with them. It was vital that proper sacrifices should be offered. If not, God's anger could be expected. Samuel's instructions were given earlier in 10:8, "...behold, I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings. You shall wait seven days until I come to you and show you what you should do."

A. The Reasons for the Sin 13:8-12

1. A lack of faith

When Samuel did not show up on time, Saul was so anxious that he took it upon himself to offer up the sacrifices. He was trusting in the size of his army, small as it was; and perhaps too he was trusting in military strategy, planning in some way to wrest the initiative from the Philistine invaders. At any rate, he showed a real lack of faith and a distrust of both Samuel and God, yet Israel's only hope was in God.

2. A lack of courage

Saul later rationalized to Samuel the reasons for his actions (13:11):

- a. The people were scattering.
- b. Samuel did not come.
- c. The Philistines were assembling.

3. An abuse of his office

Saul was not a priest, he was a king, and as king had no right to officiate in sacrificial offerings. He offered quite an excuse in verses 11 and 12, evidently believing that as king he could, under the tyranny of the urgent, seize and undertake any role he chose. His sacrifice was a mere ritual and it expressed his own self-will instead of an obedience to God's will.

4. A lack of responsibility 13:12

Saul's rationalization was followed by a pious hypocrisy. He claimed the old excuse that he had no choice.

B. The Reality of the Sin 13:13

The objection to Saul's action which Samuel expressed was neither lack of faith nor abuse of royal power but disobedience to God. To disobey Samuel was to disobey God, the real King of Israel, who gave His instructions through His prophet. Saul owed the same duty of obedience to God through Samuel that his subjects owed to Saul. His self-centered egotism had already asserted itself in his taking credit for Jonathan's attack (13:3).

C. The Result of the Sin 13:13-14

1. Saul's dynasty would end 13:14

Saul had by a single act demonstrated his self-willfulness and thus his unfitness to rule. Without more ado Samuel predicted Saul's loss of the kingdom he had only just won. The remainder of 1 Samuel will show that while Saul was often a good soldier he was a poor king.

The immediate denunciation of disobedience to God was intended as an object lesson to the nation and its leaders. The only hope of Israel as a small nation in the ancient Near East was for God to control it absolutely. Just as God rules all of history, God ruled Israel and He desired to rule Saul. Sadly, however, only Saul and circumstances ruled Saul.

The severity of God's judgment must be seen in the light of God's holiness. Just as Israel had carelessly handled the ark at Beth-shemesh, so Saul had now violated the holy standards of the Lord by disobeying the Law of Moses (Lev.6:8-13) and the word of His prophet (1 Sam.10:8).

2. God's new king would be sought 13:14

III. SAUL'S SECOND MISTAKE: RASH WILLFULNESS 13:16 - 14:52

A. The Circumstances

1. The raids of the Philistines 13:16-18

The Philistines were able to plunder and harass the Israelites unchecked. During this time in history, God's purposes for Israel could only be brought to fruition if she were rescued from Philistine domination and permitted to develop into independent nationhood.

2. The defenselessness of the Israelites 13:19-22

The Philistines had successfully disarmed Israel by controlling the use of iron and the skill of the blacksmith. (Disarmament left the weapons in the hands of the crooks.)

3. Jonathan's victory 14:1-15

Jonathan showed the sort of faith in God which his father had lacked by saying to his armor bearer, "Come and let us cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; perhaps the LORD will work for us, for the LORD is not restrained to save by many or by few" (14:6). They undertook a secret mission to the enemy camp. Finding a very narrow passage between two cliffs, they were able to pick off a Philistine detachment of twenty men as they advanced one by one. Jonathan's heroic encounter shocked and frightened the Philistines and they panicked, and then an earthquake increased their panic. Jonathan by faith attributed the victory to Jehovah (14:12; cf.14:23).

4. Saul joins the battle 14:16-23

a. The discovery of Jonathan's victory 14:16-17

The ensuing Philistine confusion could be seen across the valley from Gibeah. Assuming that this must have come about because of some Israelite involvement, Saul ordered a count

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of his forces to see who was missing and the absence of Jonathan and his armor-bearer was discovered.

b. The discernment of God's will 14:18-23

A puzzling verse in this passage is verse 18: did Saul call for the sacred ark of the covenant? According to the Septuagint he called for the ephod, not the ark, and many scholars think this is correct; the two nouns are rather similar in Hebrew and could have been confused by a scribe. The ark was used to lead the armies into battle (1 Sam.4:3-11) but 1 Samuel 7:2 suggests that the ark was never moved from Kiriath-jearim during many years.

"Ephod" may be the correct word because the ephod was a priestly device by which the will of God could be discerned with the Urim and the Thummim, and the priest was with Saul at Gibeah (14:3). If Saul wanted to consult the ephod, he must have been puzzled by the situation and wanted to know what action he ought to take. Perhaps both the ark and the ephod were present. In ordering Ahijah to withdraw his hand, the will of God seems to have been made clear to him. (Another interpretation is that Saul was again too impatient to wait for a word from God.) Rather than march in solemn and stately fashion into battle (with the ark), Saul wisely wasted no time in pursuit of the routed enemy and in verse 23 we read, "So the LORD delivered Israel that day...." Three groups join the battle: the army, the deserters, and the cowardly (14:22; cf. 13:6). It was not Saul who brought the victory, nor the whole of Israel's army, but God Himself. A timid few can achieve miracles if God is with them, as Jonathan was aware (14:6).

B. The Mistake Itself 14:24-46

1. Saul's foolish vow 14:24

In this parenthesis of verses we learn that the victory was less complete than it might have been (14:30) and the fault was Saul's. He forbade his men from eating anything before nightfall, basically commanding them to fast until they had defeated the Philistines. The picture here is of a man struggling to do the right thing towards God but in fact out of touch with both God and human needs. Although hungry from the battle, they refused to eat anything, even some honey in the forest, for they feared the curse that attended their vow to fast.

2. Jonathan's innocent breaking of the vow 14:25-30

Jonathan had not known of the vow, so when he came across the honey he ate it and was immediately refreshed ("his eyes brightened"). His men, who abstained, told him of his father's decree. Jonathan was alarmed at his father's folly in depriving his soldiers of strength for fighting the enemy.

3. The hungry soldiers' breaking of the Law 14:30-35

After the victory the army was so famished that they took the Philistine animals, slaughtered them and in their hunger ate them without proper draining of the blood according to the ritual law (14:32-33; cf. Lev.17:10-14). This so alarmed Saul that he hastily built an altar on which to offer a propitiatory sacrifice to the Lord (14:35). He seems to be unaware of his own fault in creating the desperate hunger which had led them into this breach of the law! Verse 35 seems to indicate that Saul had not previously been interested in religious observances.

4. Saul's "justice" and the soldier's intervention 14:36-46

Saul then determined to pursue and plunder the Philistines further but could not get an answer from the Lord (14:37). This meant to Saul that someone had violated the fast. He could only think in terms of his own "honor" and taboos, not in terms of God's will and law. He was like the Pharisees who Jesus accused of tithing minute products but ignoring justice, mercy and faith (Mt.23:23). Saul had strained at the gnat and swallowed the camel (Mt.23:24). It was his own son Jonathan who had unwittingly broken his father's ban on eating. Jephthah-like, Saul thought he had no option but to do what he thought would please God first by fulfilling his own solemn oath, even at the cost of his son's life. But his own men defy and defeat him. Jonathan's exploits had made him a popular hero; the people intervened and rescued Jonathan, and he was not put to death.

C. The Irony of Saul's Mistake

In the previous chapter, Saul had disobeyed God of his own volition, but now, when he was determined to obey every religious propriety, he found himself frustrated from doing so. His fitness

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to rule thus comes into question once again; no man who creates unjust situations which cause his own subjects to overrule his decisions can be a proper ruler. Saul is shown to be out of touch, not only with God but with the needs and feelings of his own army.

Verse 46 may be simply factual, signaling the end of this particular battle; or we may take it as an ironic comment on the whole passage, implying that due to Saul's less than sensible actions, the Philistines escaped relatively lightly on this occasion. The story is an interesting example of the way in which God overrules in human affairs: Israel won a victory because God had determined this in advance, but God allowed the victory to be diminished because of Saul's action. The event was double-edged.

D. Saul's Achievements and Family 14:47-52

In spite of some personal failings, Saul was certainly no failure as a soldier and general. In battle after battle, we now learn, he was successful, and Israel must have benefited enormously. Verses 49-53 give us some details about the royal family.

The list of names is informative and many of these individuals came to play a part in the story of David. Ish-bosheth and Abner obstructed David's rule over the whole of Israel for a limited period. Saul's daughter, Michal, married David, and Jonathan became his best friend. Saul was in control of the nation of Israel, but he could not foresee the rise of a rival, nor his own family's attitudes to that rival, and above all he could not govern his own fate.

IV. SAUL'S THIRD MISTAKE: ARROGANT REBELLION 15:1-35

A. The Command by God 15:1-3

A campaign against the Amalekites was to be the occasion of a major clash between the king and the prophet. Samuel's instructions to the king strike us as extremely harsh. "Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Sam. 15:3). Long before the time of Saul, in the days of the wilderness wandering, Israel had been savagely attacked from the rear by the Amalekites, a deed the Lord had promised to avenge someday (Ex. 17:8-16; Dt. 25:17ff.) and now that time has come: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt'" (1 Sam. 15:2). Some 400 years had passed since that event, but God is faithful to His Word. He will keep His promises and His threats, and though the wheels of God's justice grind slowly, they grind exceedingly fine.

In giving the command, Samuel is simply being God's spokesman, giving God's orders to Saul. Though told to destroy the Amalekites completely, Saul was to spare the Kenites since they had shown kindness to Israel (Ex. 18:9-10; Jud. 1:16). This command to exterminate a whole people and all their belongings is very difficult for some to understand. Note these considerations:

1. They were basically defensive, not offensive;
2. They are retrospective rather than programmatic -- they are not meant to encourage and justify future wars, but to recognize the immense danger that Canaanite religion posed to the Israelite;
3. That God's real enemy is not some specific nation or people, ancient or modern, but the forces of the evil one wherever they are to be found, and
4. There is a quota of iniquity that once surpassed brings God's judgment on a nation (cf. Gen. 15:16).

B. Saul's Arrogant Disobedience 15:4-15

Saul proceeded to do God's bidding, but not entirely. Verse 9 tells us that he spared Agag, the king, and kept the finest of the animals. In so doing, Saul defied not Samuel but God. Whether Saul was greedy for plunder is not quite clear, but he definitely is not acting out of any humanitarian interest. He was not so much careless as arrogant, desiring to display public trophies of his leadership. That this was Saul's intent is seen from verse 12 which speaks of Saul's erecting a monument to his own honor.

C. Saul's Deceitful Explanation 15:13-15, 20

He tried to cover up when challenged by Samuel, claiming that the animals were brought as a sacrifice to the Lord. His statement was a bald-faced lie. Contrast this with the care he had shown

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during the Philistine campaign in Chapter 14 to obey God's commands to the last letter and you quickly see that had now quite evaporated.

"To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (15:22). It was not that sacrifice was undesirable, but that without an obedient heart, it was unacceptable. It is the age-long contrast between religion in its outward trappings and true spiritual reality. This is the consistent view of the Old and New Testaments (see Micah 6:8; Mt.23:23). Likewise, love of Jesus is expressed not in religious exercises primarily, but in obedience to Him (John:14:15 -- "If ye love me, keep my commandments"; John 14:21 --"He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me..."). There is no higher good than obedience.

Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft in that both turn away from God to the Enemy for selfish purposes, use another standard of knowledge than the Word of God, and both are hideous in God's sight. Samuel goes on to say that in addition to disobedience, Saul was also guilty of rebellion, arrogance, and rejecting God's Word.

D. Saul's Great Weakness

Saul's response in 15:24-25 is not a statement of repentance but only of remorse. We still see Saul as a man after man's heart. He always wanted to look good in the eyes of the people. His emotions and action swung a pendulum of intense desire to please God and an obsession with himself as he appeared before the people. He was a changed man, but could never conquer his self will. The result for Saul was the Lord's rejection of him as king (15:26), symbolized by the poignant scene of Saul's tearing of Samuel's robe (15:27-28). This repudiation of Saul and selection of a replacement did not mean that God had misled Samuel or even changed His mind (15:29). The statements in this chapter of God's repentance are anthropomorphic statements (figures of speech based on human analogies). Rather, God gave Saul ample opportunities to repent, and, like a master chessman, allowed him full freedom of movement but responded to his every move and at times changed His strategies. God had from the beginning chosen another one who would be "after His own heart" (cf. 13:14; 16:1).

E. Samuel's Great Strengths

Saul would still be recognized by the people as their king for about fifteen more years, so Samuel granted his request that at least he be allowed to save face before the people (15:30-31). Samuel shows the two sides of godly character: absolute obedience to God and tender compassion to men. He carried out what Saul should have done by executing Agag, reminding the Amalekite king that God's judgment had fallen upon him because of his own cruelty and sin (15:32-33).

The closing scene is touching tragedy. The finality of it all was not missed by Samuel, for from that day Samuel never visited the king again (15:35). The estrangement between Samuel and Saul represented that which now existed in permanent form between the Lord Himself and the disobedient king. Though the divine condescension had permitted Saul to reign in response to the demand of the people, that very concession now grieved the heart of God. And both Samuel and Jehovah felt the loss deeply (15:35).

CONCLUSION

Obedience may be expressed in various forms of worship and religious observances, but obedience is always superior to any external form:

1. Obedience is universal; form is merely partial.
2. Obedience is moral; form is merely ceremonial.
3. Obedience is essential; form is merely circumstantial.
4. Obedience is reality; form is merely symbol.
5. Obedience is an end; form is merely a means.
6. Obedience is eternal; form is merely temporary.

"To obey is better than sacrifice, ..." or prayer, or reading the Bible, or burning candles, or giving to charity, or taking communion, or attending church, or being pleasant, or

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 7

READ LESSON 6:

1. List Saul's three failures.
2. What were the excuses he gave when confronted by Samuel at Gilgal?

READ CHAPTER 16:

4. What do you learn about David from Saul's servant's description of him and the writer's description?
5. Why did Samuel think Eliab would make a good king?
6. What do you think is meant in 16:14?

READ CHAPTER 17:

7. Where and how had David learned of God's power before the Goliath incident?
8. What does the Goliath narrative reveal about David's character?
9. Describe Goliath.
10. Why did David refuse Saul's armor?
11. How many stones did David pick up from the dry riverbed?
12. What was the cause of Goliath's death?
13. Why do you think Saul asked about David's father?

READ CHAPTER 18:

14. Summarize the story of David's marriage to Michal.