

Saul: His Deflection from the Course

I Samuel 13-15

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This morning we continue our study of the Hebrew monarchy. Last week we talked about the demand of the Israelites for a king, a demand prompted not only by their desire to be like the other nations, but also by their concern over the decadence of Samuel's sons and their fear that one of them would succeed Samuel as judge. But as we saw, what was underlying their demand was a desire to replace the Lord as the head of the nation, to do away with the theocracy and to replace it with a man-centered monarchy. They wanted some visible, tangible expression of leadership in their midst. So Saul was the man appointed first king of Israel.

But Saul was not the man after God's own heart; he was the man after the people's heart. And his history soon revealed the heart of the man. He really did not want God's way. Chapters 13 through 15 of I Samuel gives us a look at the series of incidents in the process of decline in Saul's life. As you remember, through a combination of unusual circumstances God brought Samuel and Saul together at Ramah, Samuel's hometown, and Samuel anointed Saul king over Israel. After his anointing Samuel called the nation together at Mizpah, where Saul was appointed king over all Israel. The anointing at Ramah had been a somewhat private, secret affair solely between Samuel and Saul, but at Mizpah he was proclaimed king. After a brief military campaign against the Ammonites, the nation gathered at Gilgal where Saul was enthusiastically acclaimed as king by all of Israel. Chapter 13 begins with Saul's career at that point:

Saul was forty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-two years over Israel. Now Saul chose for himself 3,000 men of Israel, of which 2,000 were with Saul in Michmash and in the hill country of Bethel, while 1,000 were with Jonathan at Gibeah of Benjamin. But he sent away the rest of the people, each to his tent. And Jonathan smote the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba [or Gibeah - Saul's hometown] and the Philistines heard of it. Then Saul blew the trumpet throughout the land, saying, "Let the Hebrews hear." And all Israel heard the news that Saul had smitten the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become odious to the Philistines. The people were then summoned to Saul at Gilgal. Now the Philistines assembled to fight with Israel, 30,000 chariots and 6,000 horsemen, and people like the sand which is on the seashore in abundance; and they came up and camped in Michmash, east of Beth-oven. When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait (for the people were hard pressed), then the people hid themselves in capes, in thickets, in cliffs, in cellars, and in pits. Also some of the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the land of Gad and Gilead. But as for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.

This was a sad state of affairs in Israel. They had long been oppressed by the Philistines, whom they had first encountered during the time of Samson, as recounted in the book of Judges. The Philistines were not like the other peoples who lived in Canaan. They were not Canaanites, not descendants of Ham, as were the other nations around. They were a people from the Aegean Sea related to the Greeks, and had migrated from that area about 200 years earlier. They had fought as mercenaries in the Trojan War, and perhaps this is the reason they had left. They had traveled to Crete, lived there a while, and then migrated to the land of Canaan where they set up a series of city-states similar to those of the Greeks.

Excavations in this area indicate that the Philistines were a sophisticated, very warlike people much like the Greeks. Saul's fortress in Gibeah has also been excavated and discovered to be a small mud fortress about 160 feet square. So you can see something of what the nation of Israel was up against. There were 3,000 Israelites, while the Philistines had 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horsemen, and more infantry than they could count an historic example of overkill. You can see what the Philistines were trying to do. They wanted to annihilate the Israelites, these pesky people who had been a thorn in their side for a long time. Jonathan triggered the

Philistine campaign by attacking the garrison at Gibeah.

Samuel had told Saul, in I Samuel 10, that in times like this, when he was faced with a military campaign, he was to go to Gilgal and to wait there for seven days. He was to wait because God was to be the commander-in-chief of Israel, not Saul. God would tell him what to do. As the story unfolds,

Now he waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him. [The number of his troops dwindled from 3,000 to 600.] So Saul said, "Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings." And he offered the burnt offering. And it came about as soon as he finished offering the burnt offering that behold, Samuel came, and Saul went out to meet him and to greet him. But Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, therefore I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the Lord.' So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering," And Samuel said to Saul, "You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure, the Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you."

This seems like severe discipline for such a seemingly minor infraction. The people were scattering, and Samuel hadn't arrived within the prescribed seven days. So you can see what was going through Saul's mind he had to DO SOMETHING - he had to ACT. It is true, he *did* have to act. But he acted precipitously. This shows something of the attitude of Saul's heart. He really was impatient with God. He really felt God couldn't handle the job alone - he had to "help."

How many of us can identify with Saul? Even when we have been told to wait, to rest, to trust God for His timing, nevertheless we get anxious, uptight, and we feel that we *must* do something. The hardest thing in the world is to wait - to wait for a marriage partner, to wait for a job, to wait for a ministry, to wait for our children to change. So we feel that in order to get the job done we have to act ahead of God. We can't wait any longer. And what violence it produces!

Abraham stands out in my mind as the man most illustrative of this tendency to act out of impatience, to act precipitously. Abraham was promised a son. That was the desire of his heart. Ten years went by and no son appeared, and so Abraham took matters into his own hands. He had a child by Sarah's handmaid. The child was Ishmael. And Ishmael became a thorn in Abraham's side, and he has been a thorn in the side of the Israelites ever since, because he was the father of all the Arab nations. Abraham was just trying to help God out. He was doing a "good" thing, but it wasn't according to God's timetable. God's timetable was twenty-three years. Abraham had to wait that long before God would provide the son of his choice.

It is hard to wait. And Saul couldn't wait. He had to ACT. He had to DO something. This characterizes the frantic activity which so many Christians manifest - running around doing good things, trying to get the work of God done, but acting on their own, not acting out of faith and rest, not willing to wait upon God. The result in Saul's life was that his dynasty was taken away from him. He himself was not rejected as king, but God said, "Your dynasty will not endure, your sons will not be kings."

And that is what happens to us. You see, like begets like. If we are characterized by this kind of frenetic Christianity - running around trying to get the job done for God - then we produce the same kind of Christians around us - anxiety prone, anxiety-ridden Christians. They are not kings. Our dynasty does not continue. Our sons do not become kings. They become just as anxious as we.

Saul wouldn't wait for God's time. He felt that he had to do something on his own to further God's program. That is the first incident in his life as king. After Saul was rebuked by Samuel he went back to Gibeah. This so often happens to the man whose life is characterized by activity alone. When you take his activity away he doesn't know what to do with himself - he gives up.

In chapter 14 we have the second incident:

Now the day came that Jonathan, the son of Saul, said to the young man who was carrying his armor, "Come and let us cross over to the Philistines' garrison that is on yonder side." But he did not tell his father.

Skipping to verse 6:

Then Jonathan said to the young man who was carrying his armor, "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."

We begin to suspect that Jonathan is the man of faith in this family. The odds now were at least 60 to 1. The Philistines had some 36,000 or more, and the Israelites had only 600. But that was of no consequence to Jonathan. And when some of the Philistines shouted from their fortress (verse 2), "Come up to us and we will tell you something," Jonathan responded. He and his armor bearer scaled the side of the mountain. Verses 13 through 15;

Then Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, with his armor bearer behind him; and they fell before Jonathan, and his armor bearer put some to death after him. And that first slaughter which Jonathan and his armor bearer made was about twenty men within about half a furrow in an acre of land. And there was trembling in the camp, in the field, and among all the people. Even the garrison and the raiders trembled, and the earth quaked so that it became a great trembling.

The Philistines turned against one another, and the Hebrew mercenaries who were fighting on the side of the Philistines turned against their lords and began to fight them. And the nation of Israel came out of its holes and dens and caves and began to attack the Philistines, and the Philistines were put to flight. There could have been a great victory in Israel that day. God could once for all have dealt with this enemy.

But Saul enters the picture again. In verse 18 Saul captures Ahijah the priest and inquires of him as to the direction they should go. The priest begins to reveal God's mind, but Saul looks about him and sees the Philistines fleeing, and so he stops the priest. "Withdraw your hand," he says, "I don't want to hear any more from you." He takes his troops and enters the battle, and as they enter the battle he hinders them with a vow which is given to us in verse 24:

Now the men of Israel were hard pressed on that day, for Saul had put the people under oath, saying, "Cursed be the man who eats food before evening, and until I have avenged myself on my enemies." So none of the people tasted food.

He made them swear that they would not eat that day. And because they took this oath the battle became difficult for them, they became weak and weary. Verse 27:

But Jonathan had not heard when his father put the people under oath; therefore, he put out the end of his staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes brightened [i.e., he was strengthened] Then one of the people answered and said, "Your father strictly put the people under oath, saying, 'Cursed be the man who eats food today.' " And the people were weary. Then Jonathan said, "My father has troubled the land. See now, how my eyes have brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. How much more, if only the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now the slaughter among the Philistines has not been great.

And we go on to read how they fell upon the flocks the Philistines carried with them to feed the troops, and slaughtered the sheep, and they were so hungry that they ate the sheep with the blood still in the animal and thus transgressed the law of Moses.

Do you see what Saul was doing? He felt that victory could be achieved by some sort of discipline, some sort of law. For Saul was a legalist. A legalist is one who imposes upon himself, or upon others, regulations which God has never given, laws which were never prescribed for believers. Saul felt that if he could somehow discipline himself and discipline the people, then victory would be theirs.

But the flesh is never disciplined by ascetic practices - by not tasting or touching certain things, by denying yourself by setting up laws and making vows that you will rise at five o'clock every morning and read the Bible for one hour, or that you will memorize a certain number of verses, or that you will witness to so many people...as good as those things may be. The flesh is never conquered in that way. You cannot legislate the flesh into good behavior it simply will not respond.

And the results in the life of a nation are the same results which obtain in our own lives. The account says that the Israelites were oppressed - they had lost their feeling of freedom. They were limited and inhibited, they felt frustrated and oppressed because they were under this law. Secondly, they became weary, they just got tired of trying. And that is what happens with us. We get weary, fainthearted, discouraged. And thirdly and most importantly, it led them onto greater sin. That too is what happens to us. When we try to pass laws to deal with some aspect of the flesh we discover that the flesh merely crops out with greater intensity some place else - resentment, bitterness, an unforgiving spirit, lust, greed, pride.

In Colossians 2 Paul says that decrees characterized by "touch not, taste not, handle not" make a good show in self-made religion, but they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. You can pass laws, you can vow vows, you can make oaths - they are of absolutely no value against fleshly indulgence. The flesh will run rampant. And that is what happened in Israel. Saul learned through this bitter and difficult experience that you cannot legislate victory. The result was an incomplete victory. The Israelites were not able to subdue the Philistines.

There is a third incident in chapter 15 - the campaign against Amalek:

Then Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord has set me to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. 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. 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.' "

Who is Amalek that he should receive this kind of judgment from God? God says, "Annihilate Amalek!" The Hebrew literally says "kill him", "put him to death" - Amalek and all that pertains to him. It seems strange that God should dispense this sort of judgment. The Amalekites were actually very close relatives of the nation of Israel. They were descendants of Esau. Amalek was Esau's grandson. Esau was the brother of Jacob, who was the father of the twelve sons who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Amalekites settled in the Sinai Peninsula, and were the first nation Israel encountered when they left Egypt. As they came out of the land of bondage into freedom, Amalek struck them from behind. They attacked the rear of the column where the women and children were, and they inflicted great damage upon Israel. In Exodus 17, verses 14 through 16, as Moses records the incident, the Lord said to him,

"Write this in a book as a memorial [Write it down where everyone can see it.], and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses [in commemoration of this revelation] built an altar, and named it The Lord is My Banner; and he said, "The Lord has sworn; the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation."

Later on, in Deuteronomy 25, when Amalek comes into the picture again, the Lord says to Israel, "Remember Amalek. When you come into the land, exterminate the Amalekites." We Texans say, "Remember the Alamo!" The Israelites said, "Remember Amalek!" Now, Amalek in the Old Testament is symbolic of the flesh, as are Esau and all his kin - close relatives of the people of God, yes, but not part of God's life. And God will have war with the flesh from generation to generation. God will not make peace with the flesh, because it is an

enemy of the life of God.

Paul says in Galatians 6, "The flesh wars against the Spirit." The flesh, i.e., the soul-life, the self-life, is in constant conflict against the life of God within us. The flesh is the tendency to go our own way and to live our own life, to live out of our own resources and to act apart from God. God's life is one of faith and dependence, of drawing upon his life. God's life and the flesh are in constant conflict. So God says to his people, "Never make peace with Amalek. Don't pander to them, don't tolerate them, don't live with them. Destroy them to a man,"

And throughout their history the Amalekites lived under the judgment of God. God had prophesied that the Amalekites would be defeated. They were a defeated foe before Israel ever encountered them. God had already dealt with Amalek.

And God has already dealt with Amalek in your life. When Christ died on the cross, we died with him. We were identified with him, and our self-life was pinned to that cross with Jesus Christ. Its power over us was broken. Oh, it is still with us, and it is still powerful, yes, but its ultimate power over us has been taken away, and we now have the power of Jesus Christ available to us to live in victory over the flesh.

And this was true of Israel. The Amalekites were a defeated foe. The Israelites were to live in the light of that promised victory. But they had to live out that victory. They had to defeat Amalek, and they had to do it completely. They had to exterminate the Amalekites to a man. They were not to tolerate any of them in their midst.

We have an account of the campaign against the Amalekites in I Samuel 15, beginning with verse 4:

Then Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, 200,000 foot soldiers and 10,000 men of Judah. And Saul came to the city of Amalek, and set an ambush in the valley. And Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the sons of Israel when they came up from Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. So Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. And he captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but every thing despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.

God said to exterminate them to a man, and they did - almost. Saul spared Agag, the king of the Amalekites - certainly not from any humanitarian consideration but because of his own private thoughts about the treatment any king deserved. And the people destroyed all the worthless things, but they kept the best. God says that the Huh has to be dealt with ruthlessly, and we will agree - up to a point

because some aspects of the flesh are bothersome - habits which dominate us, and attitudes and actions which cut us off from other people. These are distressing, and we are willing to sit in judgment upon them.

But there are "good" things about the flesh. There is the religious side of the flesh the tendency to do things for God. There are private, secret aspects of the flesh which are very satisfying to us - our tendency to bear grudges, to be unforgiving, to "tell off" people who have defrauded us and deprived us of our rights. These little secret areas of the flesh we tolerate. We allow them to remain in our life instead of judging them as God intended Israel to judge the Amalekites.

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My command's." And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night. And Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul . . .

Verse 13:

And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the Lord! I have carried out the command of the Lord. " But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" And Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites for the people spared the best of the sheep, and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed."

"We kept the best to sacrifice." That is, "Here are some aspects of the self-life which could be used for God - our ambition, our energy, our intelligence, our personality - all of these things we can preserve and give over to God for his use - to 'give of our best for the Master.'

Then Samuel said to Saul, "Wait, and let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night." And he said to him, "Speak" And Samuel said, "is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? [These are Saul's own words. Saul had tried to reject the kingship because he felt he was not worthy. Samuel takes Saul's words and repeats them.] And the Lord anointed you king over Israel and the Lord sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated,' Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord?"

Verses 24 through 26:

Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I may worship the Lord. " But Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you, for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel"

Note that God did not reject Saul as an individual; he rejected him only as king. When Saul failed to deal with the Amalekites according to the word of God he thereupon lost his ability to reign as king. He still was the recipient of God's love and care but he could no longer be king. And this is what happens to us. When we fail to deal with the flesh, as God has told us we must deal with it, then we lose our capacity to reign. We can no longer be kings.

God has said we are to be ruthless with the old life, We are not to support it, not to tolerate it, not to allow it to reign in our life. Its power over us has been broken, and we are to deal with it in sight of the cross. The Lord Jesus Christ, in his death, has put it to death. Every area of the self-life has been rendered impotent. No longer does it have ultimate authority over us. We can reject it. And we can turn to Jesus Christ and lay hold of his strength in order to reign as kings.

The Scriptures say, "Remember Amalek!" There are some aspects of Amalek that we like to entertain, because we feel that it is profitable, that it is to our best interest to do so. But we need to remember that Amalek is an enemy of the life of God, and that the ultimate intent of the flesh is to destroy us. It is only as we deal with it as God has told us to deal with it that we can reign as God intended us to reign.

Some time ago I gave a message (Catalog number 3051) on the prophet Balaam, this wizard who came out of Mesopotamia. Though he did not really know the God of Israel, he had a great deal of truth which was revealed to him by God. He made a number of prophetic statements about Israel, one of which predicted the coming of Messiah. In Numbers 24, tucked away among some of his other remarkable prophecies, there is a statement about Agog. He is talking about the future annihilation of the Amalekites, and he says, "The king of Israel is greater than Agag." Now, this was written many, many years before this incident involving Saul.

"The king of Israel is greater than Agag." That is the word of God to you this morning. You are a king among God's people. God intends you to reign. He has never had any intention for the flesh to dominate you in this life - no habit, no sin, nothing. God has constituted you a king, and the king is greater than Agag, because in Christ the deathblow has been dealt to the flesh. Our responsibility is to act out, on a day-to-day basis, the truth of the death of the old life, to reckon daily, moment by moment, on that death, and to draw afresh each

moment on the life of Jesus Christ. If we do, we will reign as kings.

Father, we thank you for this encouraging assurance that the king is greater than Agag. When we are honest with ourselves we see our tendency to further the life of Agag within us, to excuse and condone those aspects of the flesh which are pleasurable to us. We thank you, Lord, that Agag has been defeated, We thank you that we can act on the basis of that promise and that we can receive from you the resurrection life which makes possible a life of reigning, in Christ's name,

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