

A FAILED HERO

**SERIES: A LIFE OF PASSION:
THE STORY OF DAVID.**



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1 Samuel 15:1-35
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I have a bit of a confession to make. I'm a big fan of the movie *Footloose* (Melnick et al., 1984). I'm not talking about the one that came out a few years ago, in 2011. I'm talking about the original movie with Kevin Bacon that came out in 1984. If you're not familiar with the story, it's about a city boy who moves to a rural area where dancing isn't allowed. He has a hard time fitting in socially, but eventually succeeds in convincing the town to host a school dance.

I remember watching this movie when I was just starting middle school. The main characters' experience of not quite fitting in resonated with me quite a bit. But he was cool. Really cool. And eventually people realized it. One of the songs featured in that movie was "Holding Out for a Hero"¹ by Bonnie Tyler. The lyrics read like this:

I need a hero

I'm holding out for a hero 'til the end of the night

He's gotta be strong

And he's gotta be fast

And he's gotta be fresh from the fight

I need a hero

I'm holding out for a hero 'til the morning light

He's gotta be sure

And it's gotta be soon

And he's gotta be larger than life (line 8-18)

It's possible that as a middle school boy, I watched this movie alone in my house, singing these words at the top of my lungs and trying to dance as well as Kevin Bacon. And desperately wanting a hero to come save me from my own hard time fitting in. Or better yet, to be that hero that Kevin Bacon became. There are times when we feel like we need a hero. We want someone to come save us from whatever it is going on in our lives. We want someone strong and fast and sure and larger than life. We want someone to come and rescue us.

Last week we kicked off our ten month journey through the life of David called "A Life of Passion". We are going to spend a lot of time with this man's story. And his story is the story of a hero. It begins with a people who desperately long for a hero. Ultimately the question we are left with is whether or not David was that hero. We will be asking that question all throughout this series. But before we get to David, there is another man's story that precedes him. A few weeks ago when Corrie preached on 1 Samuel 8, we saw the nation of Israel asking for a king. They wanted a hero and God gave them one. But this first hero didn't work out. Saul wasn't the king that Israel hoped for. Saul was a failed hero.

When authors write a story and they want to help their readers get to know the character of a person, they use a very simple device. If the main character is strong, they start out by introducing you to a weakling. If the main character is smart, you'll first meet someone who isn't that bright. This opposite character is called a foil. His or her main job is to show, by contrast, the personality of the main character.

This is the role that King Saul plays. He is a foil to David. Saul is everything that David wasn't. At least in the biblical story, and perhaps even in history, the purpose of Saul's story is to highlight what was so remarkable about David. Today we're going to see that the particular way that Saul failed as a hero is meant to show us one of the most important aspects of David's character.

To do that, this morning we'll try to summarize the beginning of Saul's reign. We'll start in 1 Samuel 9 and end in 1 Samuel 15 before we meet David next week in chapter 16. First, we'll see how Saul was chosen to be king. Why was he picked? Then we'll see how he failed as king. Twice. Most importantly, we'll look at the way Saul responded to his failure. And finally, we'll look at the consequences.

What we'll see all throughout these verses is that Saul had everything going for him. He was competent, winsome, strategic, charismatic, intelligent, and hard-working. But none of that helped him. He was missing something inside. He knew he was missing it, but he

didn't know what to do about it. His solution was to cover it up. To hide it. Because of that, everything fell apart for him.

Watching Saul fail as a hero will help us because we are tempted in exactly the same ways that he was, especially living under the kind of pressure that exists around us. His path is a pit that is always right in front of our path. But maybe we can learn from his mistakes.

Chosen Imposter

We love to be chosen for something. Being selected makes us feel special. Saul's story begins with him being chosen for the most significant role ever created in the history of Israel. Read how Saul is introduced in **1 Samuel 9:1-2**:

There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish, the son of Abiel, son of Zeror, son of Becorath, son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. ² And he had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.

The way in which a character is first introduced is very significant for the shape of the narrative. What do we notice about Saul? He's given a fairly long genealogy. This means he is from a good family. His father, Kish, was "a man of wealth"—old money, established family. He's handsome and young. Two more wins. He's also tall—taller than anyone else. In ancient Israel that didn't just mean he would win at basketball. It gave him an advantage in battle. It meant he might emerge from war alive.

Saul even has the right name. The word for "Saul" is related to the word for "asked." It's often used in the context of begging for something from Yahweh. So the name "Saul" is thought to have the connotation of "the one who has been begged for." (HALOT, Hal9275) Saul's very name suggests that he might be the hero we've been holding out for.

Saul had it all: good family, money, good looks, military strength, and the right name. As soon as we meet Saul, we like him. He's exactly the kind of man that we want to be our king.

God seems to think so, too. There are three different stories in 1 Samuel 9-10 that show how God has chosen him. First, he is privately anointed by Samuel. Then the Spirit falls on him as God blesses

him and he prophesies. Finally, in a public ceremony he is chosen by lot. Everything points to Saul being the king that Israel has longed for.

Saul is the man.

Or is he? Sprinkled throughout these stories of Saul being chosen are some strange indications that something is amiss.

We first meet Saul when he is sent on a mission by his father. Some donkeys have gone missing from the family farm. Saul and his servant are sent to look for them.

Have you ever met a donkey? They aren't brilliant strategists. They are strong and tough and docile. They are work animals: beasts of burden. And they have a loud bray which can be heard for up to two miles. So, a pack of lost donkeys shouldn't be hard to find.

This whole scene where we first meet Saul is like a slapstick comedy. It's like reaching down to pick up a quarter and slipping on a banana peel. Saul can't find the donkeys. He searches everywhere. Finally, he's ready to give up because he thinks his father might be more worried about him than the donkeys.

Saul's servant is the one who suggests going to the nearby city and asking the prophet, who happens to be Samuel. Saul doesn't want to do that because they don't have anything to give the prophet. So his servant has to spot Saul the cash to pay off the prophet because he can't find a pack of lost donkeys. Would you want this man to be your king?

When Saul and his servant reach Samuel, the prophet tells them that the donkeys have been found. Then he says that he has an important role for Saul. Saul's response is interesting in **1 Samuel 9:21**:

Saul answered, "Am I not a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my clan the humblest of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then have you spoken to me in this way?"

We're not quite sure what Saul means. In actuality, his tribe of Benjamin was one of the most powerful tribes. And we've already established that his clan is respected and wealthy. Was Saul being modest? Or was it something else? Some nagging insecurity deep within?

We don't hear any more dialogue from Saul during the entire course of the story in which Samuel invites Saul to a feast, Saul is anointed as king over all of Israel, and Saul receives the Spirit the God. The next time we

hear Saul speak is after he gets home and he answers his father's question as to why this task took so long. Saul just says they ran into the prophet and were delayed.

It seems Saul is overwhelmed by all that has happened. In the story, he is speechless. He seems unsure—doubting and uncertain. Not what you'd expect from a tall, handsome rich man from a good family who has just been made king.

It gets worse. When Samuel hosts a public ceremony to choose Saul by lot, something strange happens. Saul's tribe is chosen, then his family, and finally Saul himself is chosen. But no one can find him. **1 Samuel 10:21b-23:**

But when they sought him, he could not be found.²² So they inquired again of the Lord, “Is there a man still to come?” and the Lord said, “Behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage.”²³ Then they ran and took him from there. And when he stood among the people, he was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward.

Saul's behaviour is bizarre. The whole nation is gathered together to crown a king. Saul knows that he is the man. He is a tall, handsome rich man from a good family. So why is he hiding under the suitcases? What is he doing?

God himself had to tell the people that the king I've chosen for you is hiding under the baggage. So the people go there, find him, and then realize that he's taller than anyone else. They fall in love and celebrate that God has chosen him for their king.

The picture that we see of Saul in these opening chapters is of a man who has everything on the outside. But inside, he is desperately unsure of himself. He doesn't have the initiative to find some lost donkeys. He can't think up a gift for a prophet. He doesn't feel worthy to be treated well. And once he's been chosen as king, his instinct is to hide from the responsibility in hopes that everything will go away.

Saul looks good on the outside. But inside, he's full of insecurity and anxiety. Does this sound familiar?

There is a phenomenon that is on the rise in many parts of our culture. It's been called the “Impostor Syndrome.” There was a recent article in Forbes titled, “Afraid of Being ‘Found Out’? How to Overcome Impostor Syndrome.”²² The article quotes a managing partner at a major accounting firm who says to herself, “What are you

doing here? You're going to be found out.” Kate Winslet, an Academy Award winning actress is quoted as saying, “I'd wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot, and think, I can't do this; I'm a fraud.”²³

I think this is what Saul felt. He felt like he was going to be found out. He knew he looked like he was competent, but he didn't feel competent. He felt like a fraud. Saul isn't the only one that feels this way. I've heard this feeling being described by students at Stanford, corporate executives, successful leaders, and rising young stars. Do you ever feel like that? Do you feel like an imposter?

I sometimes do. I've had some of those exact thoughts. What if everyone finds out what's really true of me? It's not as if there is some secret life that no one knows about. I'm pretty open about what's going on—the things I struggle with. But I can still feel like I don't belong in this pulpit. I don't deserve to be a pastor or a husband or a father. And someday someone is going to realize that.

What do we do with these fears? How do we handle them?

As Saul's story continues, we are going to see how he deals with them. I'm convinced this is what brings Saul down. Not that he feels like an imposter, but what he does with that feeling. Let's continue in his story and see how it plays out.

Ruled by What Makes Sense

Saul makes some mistakes as king. You can't blame him for that. We all make mistakes. But two of them are followed by a declaration that he is no longer fit to be king. Samuel tells Saul that God is going to choose someone to replace him. We've looked at how Saul was chosen. Now let's see how exactly he fails as king.

The first failure occurs in 1 Samuel 13:7b-9. Saul had been king for two years. He assembled an army and won an early battle against the Philistines. But then they rallied their troops for a vengeance attack. Israel was way outnumbered and they were scared. This is how it happened.

Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.

⁸ He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him. ⁹ So Saul said, “Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings.” And he offered the burnt offering.

Samuel had apparently told Saul to wait up to a week for him to come offer a sacrifice before beginning the battle. But the week was almost up and Samuel wasn't there. The people were terrified and starting to run away in fear, so Saul made a decisive leadership decision: He'd offer the sacrifice himself.

Saul probably reasoned to himself that he had received the Spirit of God. People talked about him being among the prophets, so what was the big issue? He could kill a bull just as well as Samuel could. So he did.

From an objective perspective, this doesn't seem that big of an issue. Saul got impatient and offered a sacrifice. Maybe he should have waited, but we can understand why he did this. He did what had to be done. Why does this become such a big issue?

Before we answer that, let's look at the other incident in which Saul makes a mistake. This story is in 1 Samuel 15. God had charged Saul with leading Israel in carrying out vengeance on the Amalekites. Generations earlier, the Amalekites had mistreated God's people and now it was time for justice to be done. Here is God's command in **1 Samuel 15:3**:

Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.

God is clear. He is executing justice on the Amalekites. Saul is charged with destroying everything. I think he was probably particularly excited about killing the donkeys, given his previous interaction with them.

I realize that this command from God raises obvious moral questions. It is an example of the biblical command of *herem*, sometimes translated as “the ban.” We don't have time to go into it right now, but there are good ways of understanding what God was doing here. It is related to an understanding of God's justice, the severity of idolatry, and the unique time period of Israel coming into the promised land. (If you're interested in following up, I've uploaded some notes on the web page for this sermon that includes other resources: pbc.org/messages/a-failed-hero.)

For our purposes this morning, we just need to see what God commanded, not fully understand the complexities behind that command. Everything was supposed to be destroyed.

Here's what happened in **1 Samuel 15:8-9**:

And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. ⁹ But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

Saul did attack the Amalekites. He did kill all the people: men, women, and children. That part of the command he fulfilled. But he kept the king, Agag, alive. And he kept “the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good.” Notice that the donkeys didn't make it either.

Saul didn't quite obey God. The intent of the ban was to devote everything destroyed to God. He devoted all the people, but kept the best of their property. The text says he kept “all that was good.” Somehow he seems to value the possessions over the people.

What do we make of these decisions of Saul? He got impatient and offered the sacrifice before Samuel could get there. He destroyed a city, but kept the valuables that God wanted devoted to him. If we can summarize Saul, I think the best word would be “pragmatic.” He does what seems to make the best sense at the time. That's not necessarily a bad thing. It's only a bad thing when being pragmatic violates the clear command of God.

What about you? Do all of your decisions make sense? Are you willing to trust God that something you can't understand might actually be what's best for you and the people you love in the long run? Are you ruled by what makes sense?

You see, sometimes the commands of God don't make sense on the outside. They only make sense if there is something deeper—something more true than what you can see around you.

So if you suffer from the Imposter Syndrome, like Saul does, then it is very hard not to become a pragmatist. When you feel like a fraud, the temptation is to keep up the illusion that you've got everything together. Your decisions have to make sense on the outside. That's all you can count on. You're not sure what lies underneath, so you have to make sure the outside looks great. You became a slave to common sense.

This behaviour becomes really clear when we see how Saul responds to being challenged by his failures. In fact, I think that up until now Saul might have been okay. I'm not sure he's really failed yet. It's the next two scenes we'll look at that show his biggest mistake.

Unfortunately, I think Saul's response will feel really familiar. It's the same way that we are tempted to respond when our mistakes are pointed out to us.

Defend At All Costs

After each of these incidents, Samuel confronts Saul with the fact that he made a mistake. When people are confronted, their true character often emerges. Now we see the real Saul. Right after Saul offers the sacrifice in 1 Samuel 13, Samuel appears.

1 Samuel 13:11-12:

Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, ¹² I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the Lord.' So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering."

Listen to Saul. "I saw that the people were scattering." "You did not come." "The Philistines had mustered." All the focus is on everyone else around him. So what does he do? I love his description. "I forced myself." Saul blames everyone else.

The other story is really similar. Samuel confronts Saul again. This is one of the funniest scenes in the Bible. After the battle with the Amalekites, Samuel checks in on Saul. Here's that conversation in **1 Samuel 15:13-15:**

And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord."¹⁴ And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?"¹⁵ Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction."

Again, Saul is classic. "I have performed the commandment of the Lord." So Samuel asks, "What is this bleating of sheep in my ears?"

This week, I saw a great YouTube video of a 3 year old with Nutella all over her face. Her mom asks her, "Did you get into the Nutella?" Over and over again the little girl is adamant that she didn't touch the Nutella, all the while her face is covered in it. Finally when her mom asks what she was doing, she insists, "I was just washing the dishes."

This is Saul. Insist on a blatant lie while the evidence is right next to him. Until that doesn't work. Then he goes back to his other strategy: "The people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God" (emphasis mine). Once again, everyone is at fault except for himself. Saul is brilliant at deflecting blame and explaining why it's not his fault. If you're looking for a mentor on being defensive, Saul would be a great choice.

But most of us don't need a mentor. We've been getting defensive for generations. Remember what happened when Adam and Eve first ate the forbidden fruit? God asked Adam what he had done. He answers in Genesis 3:12, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (emphasis mine). Everyone else is to blame. This is the human condition of sin. When confronted, defend myself at all costs.

The truth is, and I keep learning this the hard way, that becoming defensive when you're confronted is poisonous to relationships. Defensiveness kills intimacy and trust and honesty. It puts up a wall and keeps others away. That's what Saul does here. Do you do that? Do you blame others and get defensive? Do you get defensive?

I know, it's not your fault that you get defensive. You get it from your parents. That's exactly my point.

What Saul doesn't realize is that when Samuel confronts him, he has an opportunity. This is a holy moment. This is the turning point for him. Up until now, we haven't heard about any kind of a consequence in either of these stories. The consequence doesn't come until after Saul has responded. He only loses the kingship after he makes it clear that he is not willing to go into the deep places of his heart.

Saul doesn't get it. It doesn't matter that he doesn't feel adequate. It doesn't matter that he feels like a fraud. Samuel gives him a chance to come before God, but Saul pushes Samuel away. He pushes God away. Eventually, Saul apologizes, but only because he has tried everything else. By that point, his apology is empty. At every turn, Saul chooses the path of holding God at arm's length.

What do you do when you're found out? How do you respond when someone sees something you'd rather them not see? Do you defend yourself at all costs like Saul? How does it usually work out?

Be Open to God

It didn't out well for Saul. In each of these cases, God gives him an extreme consequence. After the early sacrifice, Samuel said this in **1 Samuel 13:13-14**:

And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the Lord your God, with which he commanded you. For then the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. ¹⁴ But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you."

After the battle with the Amalekites, Samuel states in **1 Samuel 15:23**:

For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king."

Saul has been rejected as king. But in reality, Samuel is only proclaiming what has already happened. God didn't reject Saul. Saul turned away from God. God is the real king of Israel. Saul was just a stand-in: a steward. So if Saul rejects God, then he has rejected the kingdom.

At the end of the day, being king of Israel is all about how you relate to God. It's not about your economic policy or your military strategy. It's not about how competent you are. This is what Saul failed to see. He felt like a fraud, so he tried to compensate for it instead of simply confessing it. Instead of turning to God and asking for help and forgiveness, he defended himself. He closed himself off. He tried to hide from God.

Saul shows us what not to do. When we get to David, we will notice how different he is before God. He actually makes far worse mistakes than Saul. But in some mysterious way, he is open before God. David has an openness to God amidst all his faults. What about you? Are you open before God?

The truth is that we're all frauds. Every single one of us is an imposter. None of us even deserves the breath in our lungs. We are all of us, addicted to our needs and desires and comforts. As Paul says in Romans 3:10, "None is righteous, no, not one."

Many of us look good on the outside. Some have education, some have careers, some have personality, some have money. But deep within we know that something in our hearts is broken. We have doubts. Insecurities. Mistakes from our past. Anxiety. Fear. We worry that others will find out what is really true of us.

And we are bombarded by messages around us that even though we might look good, we can never measure up. We don't look as good as others, we aren't as smart or successful or popular. Every day we hear the world whisper, "You're not good enough. You never will be."

That is our opportunity. That is our chance to come with open arms to God in all our faults. Because when the world whispers "you're not good enough", the gospel thunders in return "you don't have to be." Yes, you're a fraud. Yes, you don't deserve the life you live. But God forgives sinners and heals the broken hearted. Our God redeems us.

Have you ever eaten a mango? A few of my kids love mangoes, but I'm terrible at cutting them. I just don't understand where the core is and how to get to it. It's all very confusing to me. But I've seen people cut mangoes in this brilliant way where you just slice it up into cubes on the peel and the flip the peel inside out. So now all the good stuff is on the outside. And you can just eat it off perfectly.

This is how we can live before God because of the Gospel. We are able to flip our insides out. We don't have to hide and cover up and compensate and defend. We're free. I think this is partly what Jesus meant when he said in John 8:32, "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

Living like that inside out mango means that the real you is laid bare before God. It's scary, but it's freedom. Saul wasn't willing to go there. That cost him everything.

What about you? Can you be open before God? There is only love and forgiveness and freedom and life waiting for you if you can.

Conclusion

We all want a hero.

We want someone who comes from a good family. Someone who has money. Someone who is handsome, tall, charming, confident, and capable. We want someone like Saul.

But Jesus comes born to a poor outcast teen. He is defeated and rejected. His body is mangled and abused. He hangs on a cross, humiliated.

Saul is everything we want from a hero. Jesus is everything we need.

If you feel like an imposter, being found out is not the worst thing that could happen to you. It might just be the best. That's your opportunity.

Admit your brokenness. Open yourself up to God. Be rescued by a hero broken and bruised for your sake. Come to God with all your failings. Ask forgiveness from your friends and family. Be honest with your brokenness and accept the grace of God's healing.

You may be a fraud. But Jesus is the real thing. Open up to him and find life.

(Endnotes)

¹Steinman, Jim and Pitchford, Dean.(1984). Holding Out for a Hero [Bonnie Tyler]. Footloose [Album]. CBS.

²Warrell, Margie. "Afraid of Being Found Out? How to Overcome Impostor Syndrome". Forbes.com. 3 April 2014.

³Ibid