

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lessons 20 & 21

THE RISE AND FALL OF KING SAUL

I Samuel 9 - 31

I. BACKGROUND

I and II Samuel cover the transition period between Israel being governed by judges into a monarchy where Israel is governed by kings. I Samuel records the rise of Saul, the first king of Israel. From the record of the life of Saul in I Samuel, a number of lessons are learned. There are also several significant passages which echo throughout the rest of the Bible. Both the life of Saul and these passages are core parts of biblical literacy which we will explore in this lesson.

II. THE STORY

We pick up the flow of the story in I Samuel chapter 9. The people have been requesting a king from Samuel. The people feel that a king will help lead them in battle against the Philistines and others. Samuel ultimately anoints Saul as the first king of Israel.

We read in I Samuel 9:2 that Saul was outwardly impressive and he was a head taller than most anyone else. Ultimately, this story shows that outward appearance is an unreliable measure of a king's true stature. It is the heart, both in humility and obedience, that causes a king to stand out before God and his people.

Saul is first located by Samuel while Saul is out searching for his family donkeys that have strayed. When Saul is approached by Samuel, Saul has a heart of humility. He sees himself and describes himself humbly as being of the least of the tribes of Israel (a Benjamite). Samuel then anoints Saul as King and gives Saul a progression of orders on how to proceed to walk into his kingship.

Saul leaves from this anointing and the Spirit of God descends upon him. When the Spirit of God comes upon Saul, it turns Saul into a different person (I Sam. 10:6). This is another place where the Old Testament shows that God's Spirit was selectively given to unique individuals in Old Testament times. This is a significant change from New Testament times when God's Spirit is poured out on all of his

children. In other words, among the followers of God in the Old Testament, only a select few received an anointing of God's Spirit. Joel prophesized, and Peter explained it came true on Pentecost, that in the latter days (after Christ), all of God's children would receive an outpouring of his Spirit. Hence, we can reference Christians as Spirit filled, whereas the Spirit only selectively dwelled within a chosen few prior to the time of Christ.

Once Saul is publicly proclaimed king, Saul practically goes into hiding. Saul goes home. Saul is joined by men whose hearts were touched by God, and chose to follow their king. There were some trouble makers who despised Saul and did not see him as an appropriate king. We must remember that the people of Israel all had their own view of what was best for the country. There is no doubt that a lot of people did not support Saul as a king. It was up to Saul to earn his kingship from the people, in spite of the proclamation by Samuel that Saul was to be king.

The town of Jebash offered Saul the opportunity to prove his metal. The Ammonites seized the town. The town folk offered to surrender to the Ammonites and pay tribute. The Ammonites agreed to accept the surrender but at a price beyond tribute. The Ammonites wanted the right eye gouged out of every Israelite in the town. At this point, the Israelites rethought their surrender and sought help outside of their town. When messengers reported the Ammonite terms to Saul, the Spirit of God burned upon him with power. Saul was righteously angry (I Sam. 11:6) and Saul decided to go to battle. He persuasively carved a pair of oxen up and sent the pieces around and proclaimed similar results would happen if Israelites failed to join him in the army. This act brought together a big army which Saul used to whip the Ammonites. After this massacre of the Ammonites, the people in a united fashion reaffirmed Saul as king, even offering to kill those who might despise him his authority. Saul said, "No, let's don't kill anyone," and Saul went on to be king.

This success of Saul gave Samuel an opportunity to give a farewell speech offering to fade into the woodwork as Israel followed their king. In this speech, Samuel made a point of telling people that everything would work well as long as both the people and the king followed Jehovah. (I Sam. 12:14). Samuel reminded the people that requesting a king in itself was evil, but that God would honor the people and the king as long as the king and the people followed God. Saul was 30 years old when he became king and reigned for 42 years (I Sam. 13:1).

I Samuel next records problems for Saul at Gilgal. Saul is getting ready for a battle and waits 7 days for Samuel to arrive and offer appropriate sacrifices. When Samuel is not there on the 7th day, Saul decides to offer his own sacrifice without Samuel. This disobedience before God causes Samuel to declare that God will take the kingdom of Israel from Saul. Rather than give it to Saul, God will give it to a man after God's "own heart."

As the Israelites continue to get ready to fight this battle, things look grim because Israel has very few weapons. The Philistines would not allow blacksmiths in Israel. Jonathan, the son of Saul, takes his armor-bearer and goes out to see if God might deliver the enemies into his hands. God in fact does, and the enemy is routed. In the process of this victory, Jonathan eats some honey he stumbles upon. Unfortunately, unknown to Jonathan, Saul had made a foolish commandment that anyone who ate that day would be killed. Subsequent to that day, the men get a bunch of livestock and butcher the livestock in a non-kosher fashion and begin eating the livestock while blood is still present in the meat. Saul stops this eating of non-cooked meat, but in the process is alerted that Jonathan had already eaten honey in violation of Saul's fasting commandment. Saul proclaims that his son is to be killed, but men rescue Jonathan from Saul's irrational vow.

Sometime later, Samuel comes to Saul and instructs Saul to totally destroy the Amalekites (I Sam. 15). The destruction will be absolute and total not only of every Amalekite, but of every possession of the Amalekites. Saul very clearly violates this commandment by leaving the king of the Amalekites (Agag) and the best of the livestock alive (I Sam. 15:3; I Sam. 15:8-9). Saul then sets up a monument in Saul's own honor when Samuel comes to cross-examine Saul about his actions. Saul lies about his disobedience, explaining that he did everything Samuel had commanded. When Samuel catches the lie (the livestock were making too much noise) Saul recovers and makes excuses for his prior lie. Unmoved, Samuel again brings the news that Saul will be losing the kingdom. At this point, Saul offers a new holy excuse (which is also a wholly new excuse) for his disobedience (I Sam. 15:20-21). Samuel then explains to Saul that obedience is better than sacrifice before God (I Sam. 15:22). Saul is told that rebellion is like a sin of divination and arrogance is like idolatry (I Sam. 15). Still refusing to accept responsibility and repent, Saul then blames the people for Saul's disobedience (I Sam. 15:25). Samuel takes matters into his own hands and finishes the commands of the Lord and kills Agag the king.

From there, Samuel goes and finds David to anoint as King (I Sam. 16). The selection process contrasts God's vision against the vision of man - even holy men like Samuel. God explains to Samuel in picking David that, "God does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (I Sam. 16:7). As David is anointed, the Spirit of God comes upon David in power. Again, we see the selective handing out of the Spirit. God has taken the Spirit from Saul and Saul operates under the influence of evil spirits (I Sam. 16:16) while David is walking in the power of God's Spirit.

I Samuel then contains the well-known story of David and Goliath. The enemy is huge. The enemy comes out each day challenging the Israelites to a battle *mano-a-mano*. David is sent by David's father to check on his brothers who are enlisted in the Israeli army. When David hears the challenge by Goliath, David's response is not the fearful response of all the other Israelites. Rather David asked, "Who is the uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (I Sam. 17:26). David has memories of how God had delivered David from lions and bears. These memories gave David confidence that God would deliver him here as well. It is interesting to note that the peoples' response to the challenge was an earthly fear whereas David's response was an indignation that one would insult God.

Saul suggests that David put on Saul's armor and go out there and give the fight his best shot. David tries on the armor, but takes it off. David explains that he will not fight in Saul's armor "because I am not used to them." (I Sam. 17:39). David picks up his smooth stones and goes out to meet Goliath. As David approaches, the trash talk begins. Goliath first starts trashing David with his taunts (I Sam. 17:43-44). David responds and not only is about to whip Goliath, but out trash talks him as well (See David's talk in I Samuel 17:45-47). David commences the fight and slays Goliath on site. The Philistines disperse and the victory for the Israelite army is divinely wonderful.

Over the next years, we see Jonathan, the son of Saul, and David develop an incredibly close relationship. Saul, meanwhile grows very jealous of David, trying to kill him on repeated occasions (I Sam. 18). When Saul is unable to kill David directly, Saul decides to use his daughter, Michal, to try and have David killed by the Philistines. Michal is in love with David and Saul urges David to marry his daughter, Michal. David says, "I'm too poor. I can't afford her dowry." Saul says, "If you can't afford her dowry, then give me 100 foreskins of

the Philistines.” David goes out and gets 200 foreskins and double pays. This act, of course, just increases Saul’s jealousy as the people see David as the victorious fighter against the Philistines.

Saul makes additional repeated attempts to kill David (I Sam. 19), but Jonathan comes to David’s rescue (I Sam. 20). David heads out on the run. In the process, he stops and is given priestly bread to eat along with Goliath’s sword. This is done by the Priests of Nob.

Unfortunately, Doag the Edomite is there. Doag the Edomite goes and rats out the priests of Nob to King Saul. When Saul hears that the priests assisted David, Saul goes and kills the priests and their families in cold blood. Meanwhile, David continues to defeat Philistines, sparing Saul’s life, and staying on the run.

I Samuel then records the death of Samuel as it continues to recount David fleeing from Saul. We repeatedly see David sparing Saul’s life because it is up to God to take the head of God’s anointed. David will not raise his hand against anyone God has anointed. David goes so far as to live among the Philistines for a while to keep himself safe from King Saul.

A big battle between Israel and the Philistines then begins to brew. I Samuel 28 records Saul seeking specific guidance for his battle from God. God is quiet to Saul and gives him no guidance at all. Saul then goes to a witch at Endor. (Importantly, this is the same Saul who has already been told that rebellion is a sin of divination. Saul, never satisfied with mere rebellion, decides to add the sin of divination to his list.) The witch at Endor calls Samuel back from the grave. Samuel has nothing but bad news for Saul. The bad news is fulfilled when a big battle between the Israelites and the Philistines ensues. During that battle, Saul’s children die and Saul is mortally wounded. Saul then takes his own life, bringing an end to I Samuel.