

## King Saul: Firsts & Failures

### Early Years in the Land

After 40 years in the wilderness, the Israelites entered the "promised land" under the leadership of Joshua. The book of Judges records the first centuries after Joshua's death. During those years, the Israelites did evil, served and worshiped other gods, and abandoned the LORD. Thus God "handed them over" to their enemies. But God graciously raised up "judges" to deliver them from their enemies. However, they returned to their evil ways after the judges died.

### Israel's First King

The last of the judges was a man named Samuel (*1 Samuel 7:6, 15-17*). He was not only a judge; he was a priest and a prophet (*3:20*). When Samuel grew old, the elders of Israel said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have" (*8:5, NIV*). This displeased Samuel, so he prayed to the LORD.

📖 "And the LORD told him: 'Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king'" (*8:7, NIV*).<sup>1</sup>

God warned the people what it would be like to have a king (*8:11-18*), but the people refused to listen (*8:19-20*). So God granted their request, and Saul<sup>2</sup> was anointed as Israel's first king (*8:22; 10:1*). Saul was "as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else" (*9:2*).<sup>3</sup>



### Saul's Failures

In Samuel's farewell speech, he warned Saul and the people of Israel. Read 1 Samuel 12:14-15.

Samuel had instructed Saul, "Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. 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" (*10:8, NIV*). What did Saul do? Read 1 Samuel 13:5-14.

1. Saul disobeyed God's command (*13:13*). What influenced his disobedience? How did he attempt to justify (give good reasons for) his disobedience? What was his failure?
2. What were the consequences of Saul's disobedience? (*13:14*)

<sup>1</sup> God had planned that Israel have kings (*Genesis 17:6; 49:10, Deuteronomy 17:14-20*) so wanting a king was not necessarily wrong. However, their motivations for wanting a king were bad.

<sup>2</sup> Saul, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin (*1 Samuel 9:1*). He became king at age 30 and reigned 42 years (*13:1*).

<sup>3</sup> Saul started well. The 'Spirit of God came upon him in power' (*10:6, 9-10*). Saul's first battle was a success (*11:1-15*), and he had many other military successes (*14:47-48*).

On another occasion, Samuel told Saul, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites ... Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them'" (1 Samuel 15:2-3).<sup>4</sup> However, Saul was unwilling to do what God commanded. He "spared [the Amalekite king] and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs" (15:9).

The LORD was not pleased with Saul's actions. The LORD informed Samuel, and Samuel became angry (15:10-11). What happened next? Read 1 Samuel 15:12-23.

3. Samuel said Saul had disobeyed God (15:19). But what did *Saul* think about himself and his actions? (15:12-15, 20-21).<sup>5</sup> How did he attempt to give excuses for his disobedience?
4. What was Saul's failure? (15:22-23)<sup>6</sup>
5. What were the consequences of Saul's disobedience? (15:23b)
6. How does Saul's story apply to us today?<sup>7</sup> What lessons can we learn?



### Saul's Relation to the Kings of Kings

- † Saul was an example of disobedience leading to failure. Jesus was the supreme example of obedience leading to victory and salvation (Philippians 2:5-11). "[Christ] said, 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, O God'" (Hebrews 10:5-7, NIV; from Davidic Psalm 40:6-8).

### Reflection & Application

- The story of Saul teaches the importance of obedience to God, but it *does not* teach that our obedience can earn God's approval and salvation. You are saved "by grace ... through faith [in Christ] – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Have you trusted in Jesus Christ, and received God's gift?
- Though saved by grace, obedience is still important! In what ways do you disobey God? In what ways are you giving excuses for your disobedience? Do you claim to love God? "...this is love for God: to keep his commands" (1 John 5:3). Ask God to reveal areas of disobedience in your life; ask for his forgiveness; and commit to obey God by his grace and power.

<sup>4</sup> 'This kind of warfare, called *herem*, was practiced only against peoples who had come under the Lord's severest judgment' (Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* [Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1996], 169). God's instructions to 'totally destroy' are troubling to many people. See Jay's 'War in the Old Testament' for more perspective on this subject.

<sup>5</sup> Saul did not confess his sin until after Samuel said, 'Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king' (15:23-25).

<sup>6</sup> 'arrogance is like the evil of idolatry' – When self-will displaces God's word, it is like idolatry, 'for another god, self, has usurped his place' (Joyce Baldwin, *1 & 2 Samuel* [Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988], 115).

<sup>7</sup> There is much more to Saul's story (see 1 Samuel 16-31) including his jealousy of David, his attempts to kill David, his desperate turning to a medium (28:3-25), and the eventual taking of his own life (31:1-5).