

## Samuel to King David 1 Samuel Ch.13 – Saul the Unspiritual

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The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

### Introduction

We can all think of someone who has wasted the natural abilities that they were given. A gifted sportsman whose lifestyle undermined his abundance of talent. A young woman with a brilliant mind who never applied herself to develop and use her abilities. A promising artistic talent who got involved in drugs and slid into destitution and despair. We have all known, or read about, somebody with a similarly, tragic life story, and Saul, the central character of today's chapter, is a classic example.

Saul had an abundance of natural abilities. According to 1 Samuel 10:23 Saul was,

“Taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward.”

Both Samuel and the people of Israel thought he would make an inspiring leader. This was just the person to, “Judge us and go out before us and fight our battles,” as the people had said in 1 Sam 8:20. It would appear that Saul did have considerable skill as a military leader and planner. He created Israel's first ‘standing army’, as we shall see in a few minutes, and his first battle against the Ammonites, recorded in chapter 11, was a great success. Added to this, when Saul was first anointed as King, he was a diffident and humble man (see chapter 10:21,22) and also a compassionate one (see chapter 11:13). More importantly, God did not simply leave Saul to his own devices but, via Samuel, God promised Saul, “The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you, and you will prophesy...and be turned into another man” (10:6).

So, Saul had many natural strengths, and the promise of further strengthening from God for the special job of being the leader of the LORD's people. He had a solid beginning and seemed to promise great things but, as the title of this talk suggests, he was an unspiritual man, and this was the fatal flaw that would lead to his downfall.

It might help us in considering this chapter, and the history of Saul, if we briefly review the difference between the way that the Holy Spirit indwells genuine Christians today, and the way that the Spirit came on people in the Old Testament. The New Testament states quite explicitly that all believers in Christ are indwelt by the Holy Spirit from their conversion – see for example Romans 8:9,

“Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.”

Those believers, mentioned in the early chapters of Acts, on whom the Spirit came sometime after their initial belief in Christ, are exceptional cases, relating to the way the church was initially formed of Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles and have no parallels today. I don't have the time to go into any details now, but Christians cannot lose their salvation, and therefore the Spirit will never

be taken away from them. In the Old Testament, the Spirit came upon, rather than dwelt within, individuals, and this was for a finite amount of time. Sometimes the Spirit would even come upon clearly unbelieving men to speak, or work, through them. All of this means that the fact that the Holy Spirit came upon Saul does not guarantee he was a genuine believer, and the fact that the Spirit “departed from Saul”, according to 1 Samuel 16:14, does not mean that this can happen to Christian’s today!

That was a rather lengthy introduction(!), so we had better start our consideration of chapter 13. Let’s begin with an outline of the chapter, which I would break down as follows:

### **Breakdown of the chapter**

Vv. 1-4	The Background.
Vv. 5-7	The Challenge.
Vv. 8-10	Saul’s Terrible Decision.
Vv. 11-14	God’s Verdict, Delivered by Samuel.
Vv. 15-18	The Unhappy Position.
Vv. 19-22	A Compounding Problem.
V. 23	The Philistines Have All the Advantages.

### **The Background – vv. 1-4**

I will read the first four verses of the chapter.

“Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel, Saul chose for himself three thousand men of Israel. Two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and in the mountains of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin. The rest of the people he sent away, every man to his tent. And Jonathan attacked the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. Then Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, ‘Let the Hebrews hear!’ Now all Israel heard it said that Saul had attacked a garrison of the Philistines, and that Israel had also become an abomination to the Philistines. And the people were called together to Saul at Gilgal” (1 Samuel 13:1-4).

The first verse gives a rather confusing time frame. Checking a variety of translations will show you that Bible scholars have worked hard to try and make some sense of the Hebrew here, but have mostly reached the conclusion that something has got lost, or confused, as this verse was copied and recopied down the centuries, and there is now no way to be sure what these time periods really mean.

Verse two records for us the creation of Israel’s first standing army, that is, a permanent army of full-time soldiers. Until this point, most men had received military training, but were only called together in times of impending battle: they were dismissed home soon after a battle was concluded. This verse tells us that most of the assembled men were sent home, quite possibly after the battle with the Ammonites recorded in chapter 11, but that Saul retained 3,000 men on a permanent basis and divided them under the command of himself and Jonathan. The locations given for the two companies of soldiers are less than ten miles apart and are both to the North, North-East of Jerusalem – in fact pretty much all the action in this chapter takes place within a ten-mile radius. Gibeah of Benjamin may be the same place as Geba, but it is to be distinguished from Gibeah of Saul.

Jonathan, and the 1,000 men with him, then attacked a group of the Philistines who had occupied a location nearby. The Philistines were much stronger militarily than the Israelites at this time and occupied a series of places in Southern Israel. Saul sought to regather the fighting men for battle by having the trumpet sounded across the land. This was the normal way to gather the people to fight. He was, no doubt, looking for something similar to the 300,000 or so men who responded to the call to arms in chapter 11.

The people said that, "Saul had attacked... the Philistines", simply because Saul was the king, and therefore ultimately responsible for all his men's actions. They were presumably afraid that the powerful Philistines had been needlessly annoyed, but some *did* come to Saul at Gilgal, although in much smaller numbers than Saul would have wanted.

### **The Challenge – vv. 5-7**

"Then the Philistines gathered together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude. And they came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that they were in danger (for the people were distressed), then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. As for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling" (Samuel 13:5-7).

Verse five gives us another difficult number. Thirty thousand chariots, seems improbable and may be another transcription error, but the principal point is that the Philistines had a much bigger, and better equipped, army than Saul did! This disparity frightened many of the Israelites and they chose to hide rather than gathering to fight such an overwhelming force. Some of them fled east to hide beyond the Jordan with the two and a half tribes that lived there. They thought that the natural barrier of the Jordan river would keep them safe. Those left with Saul suffered from extremely low morale.

This is the extremely difficult challenge that Saul finds himself facing as the leader of God's people. How will he react? Where will he turn for support and strengthening? We can certainly sympathise with Saul, and possibly think of some parallel situations in our lives where we have faced overwhelming circumstances and wondered what to do for the best. May God grant us to make wiser choices than Saul did!

### **Saul's Terrible Decision – vv. 8-10**

"Then [Saul] waited seven days, according to the time set by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. So Saul said, 'Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me.' And he offered the burnt offering. Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him" (1 Samuel 13:8-10).

The Bible doesn't record for us the making of the arrangement for Saul to wait seven days for Samuel. Chapter 10:8 mentions a seven day wait, but that was for another occasion which had occurred before the events in chapter 13. When and why the seven days had been agreed may be unknown, but it is clear that both Saul and Samuel knew this was what should happen. But Saul became increasingly nervous as his army started to drift away and, just before the seven days were up (see later verses), Saul acted on his own authority. It is not absolutely clear if Saul physically made the offering himself, or rather commanded the priest to do so on his behalf. Either

way, he acted in a way that he knew to be wrong. Just as the offering finished (on day seven), Samuel arrived(!), and Saul went to meet him.

Rather than jumping straight in and analysing Saul's error, I will read the next section before making further comment.

### **God's Verdict, Delivered by Samuel – vv. 11-14**

“And Samuel said, ‘What have you done?’ Saul said, ‘When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered together at Michmash, then I said, “The Philistines will now come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not made supplication to the LORD.” Therefore I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering.’ And Samuel said to Saul, ‘You have done 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 continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you’” (1 Samuel 13:11-14).

Samuel (the spiritual!) was renowned for listening attentively to God and speaking boldly on His behalf. He was obviously aghast at Saul's actions, asking, “What have you done?” Like so many of us when caught out in our failings, Saul hurried to make his excuses. The people were scattering. Samuel was late. The Philistines were threatening. God urgently needed to be petitioned. “I had no choice”, Saul implied. But he did have a choice, and he couldn't blame everybody else for the choice he had made. I freely accept that Saul was in a dreadful predicament from any human perspective, but that is the point – Saul only looked at things from a strictly human perspective. A spiritual man, like Samuel, would have seen the same situation, appreciated the apparent hopelessness of it, and then promptly taken the matter to God and asked for His guidance! Saul may have argued that in making the burnt offering he was approaching God about the matter, but the truth is that he was really trying to find a natural solution to keeping his army together and rallying the people after himself.

Samuel's summary was both brief and stark, “You have done foolishly.” He characterised Saul's actions as disobedience to the revealed and acknowledged will of God and insisted they would have serious, adverse consequences. If Saul had been obedient, Samuel said, then God would have established Saul's family as the perpetual kings of Israel. But Saul had not been obedient, and so God would bring an end to Saul's kingdom and seek out another king, one “after [God's] own heart”, and establish him as commander of God's people instead. We know from later chapters that the new commander God is referring to is David.

David's life was certainly not without failure and disobedience to God. We are not to think that Saul's one rash act caused God to act so decisively against him. In chapter 15, we will see further disobedience from Saul, and hear a reaffirmation of God's rejection of him as king. Saul was rejected because he *consistently* chose to act in independence from God, often from purely selfish motives. You might say that he continually repeated the sin of Adam and Eve in choosing self-will over God's will.

## **The Unhappy Position – vv. 15-18**

“Then Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people present with him, about six hundred men. Saul, Jonathan his son, and the people present with them remained in Gibeah of Benjamin. But the Philistines encamped in Michmash. Then raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies. One company turned onto the road to Ophrah, to the land of Shual, another company turned to the road to Beth Horon, and another company turned to the road of the border that overlooks the Valley of Zeboim toward the wilderness” (1 Samuel 13:15-18).

Samuel left the scene and Saul, having just received the crushing news of God’s rejection of him as Israel’s king, was left to purely natural resources. Saul counted up his remaining armed forces, and from the 3,000-man standing army, plus whatever volunteers responded to the summoning of the trumpets, there were only 600 men left with Saul and Jonathan! The Philistines were nearby in Michmash, which Saul had occupied at the start of the chapter.

The Philistines didn’t proceed immediately to a pitched battle, instead they sent out three raiding parties in different directions: presumably to pillage and loot as well as to further terrify the Israelites. What a dreadful position to be in! Saul had effectively decided that it wasn’t wise to simply trust in God, and that he was better off trying to organise matters himself using his own abilities and resources, and it had all spiralled downwards into a complete shambles! Before shaking our heads too vigorously at Saul and his foolishness, we might usefully pause to ask ourselves just how often we act in exactly the same way!

If these things were bad enough, there is another major difficulty!

## **A Compounding Problem – vv. 19-22**

“Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, ‘Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears.’ But all the Israelites would go down to the Philistines to sharpen each man’s ploughshare, his mattock, his axe, and his sickle; and the charge for a sharpening was a pim for the ploughshares, the mattocks, the forks, and the axes, and to set the points of the goads. So it came about, on the day of the battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people who were with Saul and Jonathan. But they were found with Saul and Jonathan his son” (1 Samuel 13:19-22).

As if fighting a much bigger army with better morale was not sufficiently difficult, the Israelites were hopelessly under equipped with weapons. To maintain their stranglehold, the Philistines had managed to monopolise all the metalworking in the region. Not only did the Israelites not have conventional weapons such as swords and spears, but even the agricultural tools that could make improvised weapons, could only be maintained by making requests to the Philistines and paying them for the privilege.

It would be unfair to blame Saul for this situation, which must have been developing for years before he was crowned, but it was one more difficulty that Saul had no spiritual resources to help him meet.

The chapter ends without any lifting of the general gloom.

## The Philistines Have All the Advantages – v. 23

“And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the pass of Michmash”  
(1 Samuel 13:23).

The main Philistine army takes up a strong, elevated position and Saul does not appear able to muster any effective response.

So what are we to make of the puzzling, and rather sad, character of Saul; and what lessons can we learn from this situation that might help us live more effectively as servants of God today?

### **1. Without the Spirit of God, we only have natural resources, and they are never enough by themselves.**

The world is full of people cleverer, more skilful, stronger, and fitter than me: yet even *they* seem to struggle with life's challenges. Even before I factor in the spiritual enemies I have to face as a believer in Jesus, my own resources are never going to be enough for the situations I will face. Unless I keep going back to God time after time, to ask for more wisdom, courage, grace, and a dozen other things which I lack, I will never live well for God in this world.

### **2. Recognising I have been foolish is only a preliminary step to improving. It is not enough unless acted on.**

In this chapter, Samuel points out Saul's foolishness to him. In later exchanges with David, Saul will admit himself that he, Saul, has acted foolishly, and will appear to show contrition - but he never takes any steps to change. It takes the work of the Spirit in a human heart to make real, lasting change. In fact, Saul's character and his actions only get worse as he gets older. How much more is my character like that of the Lord Jesus this year than last?

### **3. Saul seems to have been a very self-centred person.**

Even towards his own children, Jonathan and Michal, he could be unthinking and cruel. He didn't fight the nation's battles as the Israelites had hoped. Victories usually came from David or Jonathan, and Saul is often seen to be afraid and self-pitying. I say these things, not to assassinate the character of a man long dead, but to remind us that long suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are part of the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22,23). This means that we need the work of the Holy Spirit to produce those qualities in us. They don't develop spontaneously, even in Christians, unless we walk in the Spirit and are led by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16,18).

Finally, let's consider the tricky question of whether Saul was a real believer, and if we will, therefore, one day see him in heaven! To address that we will need to turn again to the New Testament, where Paul describes three distinct kinds of human beings:

1. Natural – that is, what every human being is apart from salvation and new life in Christ.
2. Spiritual – that is, what every believer in Christ Jesus is because of their new birth and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It also infers that the believer is living a life in-step with the Spirit (see Galatians 5: 25).
3. Carnal – A believer in Christ, but one who is living according to their old nature rather than guided by the Spirit.

This is not language that the Old Testament employs, but we do find ourselves wondering which of these categories Saul might fit into. As the title of this talk implies, we would not place him in category two, the spiritual! The question is whether he was carnal, that is, truly a believer but not

living like one; or simply a natural man, that is, never a real believer at all. The most honest answer is that this is not one of those questions which we can be dogmatic about! There is no plain statement in the Bible that tells us whether Saul was a true believer. We can look for the fruit in his life, as we would for a professing believer today; and that would tend to suggest Saul was not real. But we would have thought that about Abraham's nephew Lot without the plain statements in 2 Peter 2:7,8 about Lot being righteous!

Only God, who is able to look into people's hearts, and not just at their actions, can be definitive about questions like this. What we need to do, is to ensure that our own hearts are right before God, and that we are keeping in step with the Spirit, and, by God's strength and grace, producing, "fruit to holiness" (Romans 6:22).

Heavenly Father, we know that your word tells us the stories of people's lives, both good and bad, so that we might learn from them. Keep us from having a critical spirit, that is quicker to spot errors in others than in ourselves, rather help us to always find the lessons that increase our knowledge of You, and our desire to be more like You. Amen.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on 1 Samuel 13– Saul the Unspiritual, talk number T1314.

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