



Saul: A Humble Man Gone Proud

Lesson 2

“God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble”

Teacher’s Note: This lesson covers a lot of ground! While some kings get half a chapter or even just a few verses, Saul (and David and Solomon) have large portions of books dedicated to them. This creates a challenge in covering the material quickly and efficiently so that we are able to spend more time in lesser known portions of the history of the kings and get an overall view of these books. Don’t feel like you have to read every verse with your group. Go through and find the highlights.

Introduction

In Israel and Judah there were a number of kings who had a promising start but spiraled out of control and ended up a spectacular failure. No king’s rise and failure, however, is spelled out with as much detail as the first king – Saul. Almost the entire book of 1 Samuel, starting with chapter 9 and going through the end of the book, shows us the establishment and disintegration of the rule of Saul. At first, Saul seems to do extremely well. But pride and fear of man push Saul to rebel against God, and while that rebellion might seem harmless at first, by the end there’s no denying that this is a man at war with his Creator.

Pride and humility will be an important theme for all the lives of the kings, but it is here spelled out by God unmistakably clearly:

And Samuel said, When thou wast little in thine own sight, wast thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel, and the LORD anointed thee king over Israel?... Wherefore then didst thou not obey the voice of the LORD, (1 Samuel 15:17, 19).

This theme is important for all of us to consider, because although we may not be ruling over a nation, we too must decide whether we will remain small in our own sight or whether we will allow ourselves to think that we don't always have to obey the voice of God. In this lesson, we will fly over the key points of Saul's life to see how this process took place, and what we are expected to learn from it.

The Bible teaches that pride can ruin a person. How do you think that happens? How could pride ruin you?

Before we begin on Saul's life, though, it will be important to answer another question that we encounter in the first few chapters of Samuel: should Israel have wanted a king?

King Me?

Did God want Israel to have a king? What in Scripture would argue against Israel having a king? What might hint that a king was actually God's idea?

This may seem to be a fairly straightforward issue (1 Samuel 8:4-9). Israel asks for a king, and God says that in doing so they were rejecting his kingship over them. But how then do we explain that...

- God had planned on a king since the time of Moses. In Deuteronomy 17:14-20 there are several instructions given

to the king that Israel will one day have, which hints that God is expecting for them to one day have a king.

- The book of Judges, which comes right before the books of Samuel (with only Ruth intervening) ends with some pretty sordid stories. The point of these stories is summed up in a phrase we find at the beginning of this final section of the book and at the end of the book itself (Judges 17:6; 21:25): “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” Apparently, the author of Judges thought a king was a really good idea.
- We also must consider the fact that the idea of a king becomes a very important piece in the picture of the coming Messiah. God will eventually use the Israelite kings to set up a dynasty that will lead to Jesus himself. God promises an David (a king) that he will set up a descendant which will rule over the entire world (2 Samuel 7), a promise that is expanded on and clarified in the prophetic literature. All of this seems pretty important to be a “Plan B” in God’s mind.

So did God want Israel to have a king, and how can these passages be reconciled?

All of the above considerations make it very clear that God knew about the coming kings and was ultimately in favor of the idea. The problem was not the desire for a king, but the **reasons** for that desire. Israel gives 3 reasons for wanting a king: they wanted a military and political ruler (1 Samuel 8:5, 20); they were concerned about the poor leadership of Samuel’s sons (1 Samuel 8:4-5); and they wanted to be like the nations around them (1 Samuel 8:5, 20). While the first two reasons weren’t necessarily wrong, the third one was a major problem.

Ultimately, God saw the heart of the people and knew that their desire for a king was very different from the desire of the author of Judges. Rather than wanting a king who would keep them following God, their desire for a king came from a rebellious desire for independence.

How can realizing this be helpful for us in our own spiritual lives? What are some other ways we might do the right action but have the wrong heart behind it?

So God gives Israel their king. The life of Saul is a fascinating study, one that starts very strongly and ends in miserable failure.

Saul's Life: A Three Act Play

Act I: The Rise of Saul

Saul starts out with a lot of promise. God selects him and just about everything we see gives us high hopes for his future.

A. Saul initially exhibited much humility.

The major theme of Saul's life, and much of the kings, is the battle between pride and humility. This is understandable: since the king was the highest position in the land it would be easy to become conceited and self-reliant. God wanted kings who would stay humble and trust him. At first, Saul seems like he will be a good king because it looks like he will be a humble king. Saul's humility can be seen in 3 different ways:

1. He did not seek the king position (1 Sam 9:15-10:16)].

Being a king was the furthest thing from Saul's mind when he started. We are told a humorous story

instead of how poor Saul was just looking for some lost donkeys. On the way, he decides to go looking for Samuel to see if Samuel can show him where the donkeys are, and is instead anointed king. Saul's view at this time is appropriately humble (9:19-21) and then returns home and doesn't even tell anyone what happened (10:15-16)!

2. He was hiding when he was appointed (10:17-24).

Ironically, when it was time to pick the king Saul was nowhere to be found. The people actually have to ask God where the new king is, and God tells them that Saul is hiding among the supplies (10:22)!

3. He forgave those who opposed him (11:12-15).

After Saul's coronation, certain people had mocked him, thinking he was the last guy they would want to save them. After Saul wins an impressive military victory, some people want to execute those who initially questioned his leadership. Saul humbly and wisely refuses to allow this to happen.

Why do you think Saul lost this initial humility? What changed in Saul's life? How might we face similar temptations?

B. Saul was initially given the Spirit (10:10; 11:6).

The Holy Spirit came upon Saul in the beginning and caused him to prophesy. The way the Spirit worked in the Old Testament was a little different than the way he works in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the

Spirit would come upon leaders for the purpose of empowering them of the task God gave them (called by theologians “theocratic anointing”). The Spirit comes upon Saul before he is anointed king, and then it comes upon him when he must go and take care of an enemy of Israel.

C. Saul was initially successful (11:1-11).

God blessed Saul in his leadership. Saul rallied the nation of Israel to help their brothers in Jabesh-gilead take on the Ammonite army (11:6-11).

Why is success ultimately a poor indicator of someone’s spiritual state? Why is it so easy to look to success for this purpose?

Saul started really well. Unfortunately, he fell pretty hard. His humble, Spirit-filled, successful beginning all changed when he rebelliously took on roles that God had not given him. We turn next to Saul’s rebellion.

Act II: The Rebellion of Saul

Sadly, we have two major failures of Saul back to back in chapters 13 and 15 of 1 Samuel. These stories explain why it is that God refused to establish a permanent dynasty with Saul, and set up the need for another king: David.

A. Saul assumes more than he was allowed (13:8-15).

Saul waits for Samuel to come and give a sacrifice so that he can have the blessing of God before beginning battle. Samuel tells him to wait seven days, and Saul waits and

then decides that he will give the sacrifice. As he is finishing, Samuel shows up.

What does Saul do when Samuel shows up? How does this contrast with Adam and Eve's response when they rebelled and God showed up? Why do you think this is?

How does Saul describe his rebellious behavior? How might we similarly rephrase rebellion so it sounds less wicked?

B. Saul refuses to accept responsibility (14:29-30, 36-46).

Chapter 14 is designed to give us a contrast between Saul and Jonathan. Saul is cowardly, and Jonathan acts courageously. Jonathan waits for the Lord's approval before going into battle; Saul impatiently tells the priest to stop asking God because it's taking too long. Finally, Jonathan is ready to be put to death because he is willing to accept responsibility for an ignorant sin, whereas Saul won't admit that he was foolish and defend the life of his own son. Saul's lack of divine council led to a foolish vow, which almost led to the death of Jonathan.

C. Saul disobeys God's command (15:12-31).

We once again see a guilty Saul cheerfully, brazenly greeting Samuel as if nothing is wrong. Samuel immediately calls him out on his sin, and an exchange proceeds where Saul tries unsuccessfully to defend his rebellious actions.

*What excuses does Saul make for why he disobeyed?
What is God's response? How might we make similar
excuses today?*

*What was Saul's greatest concern in this passage?
What does this tell us about his character?*

*Why do you think Saul's actions mattered to God as much as
they did? Why was David forgiven for adultery and murder, but
Saul was not given a dynasty because of these sins?*

Saul begged and begged. . . that he not be embarrassed in front of other people. David would later beg and beg that God forgive him and restore fellowship with him, no matter the cost. David was publicly humiliated but was forgiven by God. Saul was not embarrassed by Samuel in front of the people, but his life fell apart. It is to this final, sad phase of Saul's life that we turn.

Act III: The Fall of Saul

Saul's judgment consisted of an emotional and psychological breakdown, spiritual compromise of the most hypocritical proportions, and ultimately Saul's untimely death.

A. Saul lost the Spirit and was instead tormented (16:14).

Remembering the different ways the Spirit worked in the Old Testament, Saul here loses his special anointing of the Spirit to accomplish his task. Saul having the Spirit come on him didn't make him saved, and losing the Spirit didn't mean he lost his salvation. Pagan prophets spoke in the Spirit (Balaam in Numbers 24:3), so simply having

the Spirit come on you didn't mean you were regenerate.¹

The Holy Spirit leaves and in his place is a tormenting spirit. We don't know what exactly this meant, but it appeared to be a mental breakdown of some kind that was appeasable by the playing of David's harp (1 Samuel 16:15-23).

B. Saul stoops to a point lower than he thought possible (28:3, 8-10).

This sad story near the end of his life shows how desperate a man can become when he's rejected God. The hypocrisy is painful. The woman doesn't want to help Saul, because she is afraid that Saul would kill her if he knew what they were up to. What Saul had once strongly condemned he turned to because of his own pride and stubbornness.

Sin makes hypocrites of all of us. When we seek to cover our wrongdoing, or resist God's will, or hold on to and hide things he has forbidden, we will often find ourselves going to lengths and making concessions we never thought possible. Faith and obedience are the basis of a life of integrity. Once we rebel against God, it's only a matter of time before the rest of the building crumbles without its foundation.

¹ The question of Saul's salvation is one that theologians have argued and debated for a long time. Whether Saul was a carnal and selfish believer or a flat out unbeliever is never definitively addressed for us by the New Testament (unlike, for example, Lot).

What are other ways that people capitulate to wrong because of their rebellion to wrong? How else does sin degrade us?

C. Saul is killed in battle with his sons (31).

Saul's downward spiral ended up with his death, and with him the death of his sons. Saul's long battle against the Philistines, with many ups and downs, was ultimately a doomed venture if the Lord wasn't behind it. It would be for David to become king of Israel and ultimately end the Philistine menace.

James warns us that sin, when it is finished, brings about death (James 1:15). Our sin will always cost us. Saul's pride and rebellion may have started out innocently, but it led to an abandonment of what he clearly knew was right and wrong and destroyed him, his sons, and the lives of the soldiers he led into a battle he could never win without God. Sin will always result in our ruin and destruction. Pride can cut us off from God's blessing and favor, and when that happens, there's no telling how far down we may spiral.

Based on Saul's life, what are some of the ways sin costs us? What are other ways sin may cost us?

Saul had such a promising start, but his pride and indifference to God's commands led to his ruin. His place was taken by a different king, a king after God's own heart. Next week, we will take a look at his life and see what the Spirit has to teach us from his example.