

THE BEGINNING OF SAUL'S DECLINE

WAR WITH THE PHILISTINES

Introduction:

1. Chapters 1 – 8 took place during the time of the Judges and focused on the life of Samuel.
2. Chapters 9 – 12 deal with the transition of the nation into a kingdom.
3. Chapters 13 – 15 present the decline and rejection of Saul as King of Israel.

I. Jonathan's Initial Victory

(13:1-4)

- A. Sometime during or just after Saul's second year as King of Israel, the war for Israel's freedom began.
 1. This was a war to conquer the land of Canaan given to them by God.
 2. It would continue well into the reign of David.
 3. There is some question about the exact meaning of verse one and the timeframe of the events recorded in this chapter.
 4. We know that Saul reigned over Israel for 40 years (Acts 13:21).
- B. He chose 3,000 men as a standing army for Israel – 1,000 of whom served under his son Jonathan.
 1. Notice that Jonathan is not introduced as the son of Saul.
 2. He simply appears as a leader of great courage and faith.
 3. Later, we are shocked to learn that he is Saul's son and that his father wants to kill him!
 4. This is done to illustrate the great change that has taken place in Saul by contrasting him with his faithful son.
- C. Jonathan attacked the garrison of the Philistines at Geba.
 1. Geba was a low hill situated between Michmash to the north and Gibeah to the south.
 2. The Philistines were gathering in a place that would divide Israel's army.
 3. Thus, Jonathan attacked.
- D. When the word began to spread, both the Philistines and the Israelites knew this was the beginning of a great conflict.
- E. Thus, Saul sent word throughout the land for the people to gather at Gilgal.
- F. Jonathan demonstrated great leadership and faithfulness to God and to the nation of Israel – something we would like to see in Saul.

II. Saul's Fearful Disobedience

(13:5-14)

- A. As Israel was gathering to Gilgal, the Philistines were mustering a tremendous force near Michmash.
- B. When the Israelites saw their opposition, they began to run away and hide.
 1. Their fearfulness was no different than that of their ancestors (Num. 13 – 14).
 2. It was a lack of faith and trust in God – and, it was paralyzing.
- C. Saul remained in Gilgal awaiting the arrival of Samuel.
 1. Samuel had given instructions for this meeting in Gilgal.
 2. He was coming as priest to offer sacrifices to God before the battle.
- D. Saul became impatient and, thinking that Samuel would not come, he offered the sacrifices himself. *Saul also acted out of fear and discouragement.*
- E. As soon as he had finished, Samuel arrived and Saul went out to meet him.

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- F. Samuel's question came straight to the point: "What have you done?"
 - 1. Saul blamed his actions upon the people, upon Samuel, and upon the Philistines – everyone but himself.
 - 2. He had acted out of fear, doubt, discouragement, and a lack of faith.
 - 3. He took upon himself a role and function that was not rightly his.
 - 4. He had treated the sacrifices as a mere ritual necessary to gain God's approval and victory in battle.
 - 5. He lied about "forcing himself" to offer the sacrifices as if he did not want to do it but had no other choice.
- G. Samuel replied that Saul's actions were foolish and that he would not be established as a dynasty in Israel.
- H. His rule over the kingdom would not continue for God wanted a man after His own heart to lead His people.

- III. Israel's Modest Condition (13:15-23)
- A. After Saul's arrogant sin, we learn that Samuel left and traveled to Gibeah.
 - B. We also learn that Saul was left with only 600 men.
 - C. This begins a description of the dire condition that Israel was in as this conflict approached.
 - 1. Apparently, Saul and his 600 men followed Samuel to Gibeah.
 - 2. The Philistines began to send out raiding parties to the east and west of Saul's small fighting force.
 - a. Note that Saul remains inactive.
 - b. He will not take action until he is forced into it by others.
 - 3. Furthermore, we learn that there were no swords or spears among the Israelites – save for those held by Saul and Jonathan.
 - D. The chapter ends with the Philistines almost gloating in their pride over the puny Israelite force – daring them to come out and fight.
- IV. Jonathan's Faithful Triumph (14:1-23)
- A. Saul has failed miserably as a leader of the nation.
 - 1. He demonstrated his weakness by tarrying under a tree in Gibeah.
 - 2. He made no effort to engage the enemy.
 - 3. Furthermore, he seems to have rejected Samuel for the company of the descendants of Eli.
 - B. Yet, to the surprise of the Philistines, there was a man of faith – a hero – among the people of God – Jonathan, son of Saul.
 - C. It is significant that when Jonathan took action, he did not tell his father.
 - D. Jonathan and his armor-bearer acted on faith and trusted that the Lord would work for them if they would do their part and engage the enemy.
 - E. They did not act rashly, but devised a sign that they might know what God's will was in this matter.
 - F. These two men killed about 20 of the Philistines and began a battle that would lead to Israel's victory.
 - G. The Lord worked for them and sent a trembling in the earth and among the enemy.
 - H. When Saul began to realize what was happening, he once again revealed his true character.
 - 1. He called for Ahiah the priest to bring the Ark of the Covenant.
 - 2. This indicates that he wanted to enquire of God's will in this matter.
 - 3. However, as the noise of battle increased, Saul decided not to wait for an answer from the Lord but joined the fighting.
 - I. The size of Israel's army grew as those who had joined the Philistines and those who had been hiding began to help their countrymen.
 - J. Thus, God delivered Israel from their enemy.
 - K. Yet, it was due in part to the faith of Jonathan.
 - 1. Who refused to sit idle
 - 2. Who did not trust in numbers (Deut. 32:30; Judges 7:7; Zech. 4:6; Matt. 19:26; Romans 8:31)
 - 3. Who only sought to serve and glorify God

- V. Saul's Impulsive Transgressions (14:24-46)
- A. Though a great victory against the Philistines had begun, the Israelite soldiers were distressed.
- B. Sometime after Jonathan and his armor-bearer had left the camp, Saul had made a vow to God that he and the army would fast until evening.
1. This illustrates Saul's view of God and religion in superstitious terms.
 2. When he first saw the battle and the flight of the Philistines, he wanted to know who was missing from the camp (vs. 17).
 3. Then, he called for the priest and the Ark of the Covenant [to inquire of God or, possibly, to take it into battle] (vs. 18).
 4. After talking to the priest, Saul stopped him from inquiring of God and hastily ran into battle (vs. 19-20).
 5. He then accepted the deserters back into his fighting force (vs. 21-22)
 6. Obviously, Saul was trusting in himself rather than in God.
- C. His vow was an attempt to get God on his side by appearing spiritual.
- D. However, it was a rash vow made out of self-will.
1. Why would a captain command his soldiers not to eat as they engaged in strenuous fighting?
 2. Note that the people were "distressed" (vs. 24), "faint" (vs. 28), and "very faint" (vs. 31).
 3. It may have been an attempt by Saul to save face and take some credit for the victory for himself (cf. 13:3-4).
- E. So, when the soldiers came into a wood where there was honey, no one ate of it – save for Jonathan, who had not heard his father's vow.
- F. Jonathan eyes were enlightened when he ate of the honey, indicating that he was strengthened as his hunger was satisfied.
- G. When he was told of Saul's vow, Jonathan spoke the truth – "My father hath troubled the land."
- H. Verse 31 is of key importance in this story.
1. It tells us how far Israel had pursued the Philistines – from Michmash to Aijalon, about 15 miles.
 2. It tells us that they were very faint because they had done all this without eating.
 3. And it gives us an important timeframe – "that day" indicates that they pursued until the sun set.
- I. At the beginning of a new day (*sunset for the Jews*), Saul's vow ended and the people "flew upon the spoil."
1. They were so hungry that they killed the animals upon the ground and then began to eat them.
 2. This means that they did not allow the blood to drain from the bodies before eating them.
 3. This violated the Law of Moses (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; 7:26-27; 17:10-14; 19:26; Deut. 12:16, 23-24).
- J. Upon hearing of this, Saul commanded a stone to be brought on which the animals could be bled before being eaten.
- K. Saul also began to build an altar to the Lord.
- L. He decided that it would be best to pursue the Philistines in the night.
1. The soldiers agreed to follow what orders their king gave.
 2. But, the priest suggested that they should inquire of God.
 - a. Ahiah may have been trying to do what was right.

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- b. Or, he may have been getting back at Saul (cf. vs. 19).
 - c. Either way, by the time they were finished it was too late to chase the Philistines any further.
 - M. When they asked of God's will, He did not give an answer.
 - N. Thus, they knew that there was sin among the people.
 - O. Notice that Saul seems sure from the outset that Jonathan is to blame.
 - 1. Twice, Jonathan has won decisive victories for Israel while Saul has remained in the background.
 - 2. On both occasions, Saul seems to have tried to take credit for himself.
 - 3. We know from the story of David that Saul is prone to jealousy (18:8).
 - 4. Could it be that he wanted to remove his son from the spotlight?
 - P. As they cast lots, God revealed that Jonathan had violated Saul's vow.
 - 1. It should be noted that God takes all vows seriously, even those made in rashness (Ecclesiastes 5:4-5).
 - 2. However, God made this transgression known to reprimand Saul and to honor Jonathan.
 - Q. The rashness of Saul's vow was known to the people and with great wisdom they refused to allow him to kill Jonathan.
 - 1. They reasoned that God had used Jonathan to give them victory.
 - 2. If God and Jonathan were working together, then the fault must not be with Jonathan, but with Saul and his vow.
 - 3. Thus, they rescued Jonathan from death.
 - R. Saul ceased pursuing the Philistines and they returned home.
 - S. However, they would be a problem and threat to Israel all the days of Saul's reign (vs. 52).
- VI. Summary of Saul's Service as King (14:47-52)

Ecclesiastes 5:4-5

4 When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed.

5 Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay.