

“The Beginning of the End”

1 Sam. 13:1-23

- INTRO. - JOKE – A young boy lived in the country and his family had to use an outhouse (which he really hated). It was hot in the summer, cold in the winter, always stinky – so he decided to come up with a plan to get rid of it.

The outhouse was located near the creek, so the boy decided one day to just push it into the water and let it float away. After a big spring rain, the creek was running high, so he decided this was the time to carry out his plan.

Later that day he ran into his father, who told him he was going to have to take him to the woodshed for a spanking. When he asked his dad why, his father said, “Someone pushed over the outhouse and I think it was you. Was it?”

The boy immediately fessed up, and then he reminded his father about George Washington. He said, “Remember, when George Washington chopped down the cherry tree, he didn’t get disciplined because he told the truth.” His dad said, “That’s true – but George Washington’s father was *not* in the cherry tree when he chopped it down!”

- Our sin almost always impacts someone else – and sometimes it can even impact a large number of people. Here (in this chapter) we see where Saul’s sin had a devastating effect on the nation of Israel – and ultimately began the end of his reign.

- 1 Sam. 13 shatters the giddy optimism of chapters 11 and 12. Although there were so many positive expectations of Saul’s reign as king, the events of this chapter will document the beginning of a decline that will go for several more chapters.

- Of course, as we emphasized last time, it’s *not* how you start that counts, but how you finish. And Saul will *not* finish well.

- Now, I hope you don’t get frustrated with the fact that we will only get a *glimpse* of this before we end our summer sermon series. This may feel like an awkward place to wrap up for the summer (and this study in the OT) but we will (perhaps) come back and pick up on it next summer and continue to develop this history.

- Another problem with ending with this chapter is that it means we will be ending on a dark, somber note. Saul had started off so well, with his resounding victory over the Ammonites. There was so much excitement as he was crowned king and everything looked rosy.

- But when we get to this chapter there is a dark cloud on the horizon. The Philistines (who had been obliterated back in chapter 7) have apparently recovered, and are now ready to attack with an incredible force. *Not only* that, but everything in this chapter indicates that the Israelites are being completely dominated by the Philistines.

- But there is a much bigger issue in this chapter than the enormous size of the enemy's forces. It is the issue of the heart of the king. And we need to keep in mind the warning of Samuel at the end of chapter 12.

- He had said, "Only fear the LORD and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, both you and your king shall be swept away." (1 Sam. 12:24-25)

- Saul looked so kingly on the outside, but what about the inside? What kind of heart would he demonstrate? He may have been taller than all the people, but how tall was his character? God was looking for a man after His own heart – would Saul be that man?

- Unfortunately, the answer to that is "no." Unfortunately, Saul began to demonstrate a fault that is still very common in politics today. He is going to begin to show that he is driven (internally) by a principle of expedience and self-justified compromise.

- Now, I think we can divide this chapter into five parts. The primary section is the "dialogue" section of vv. 10-15a, but we need to set the stage first – so we begin with:

I. THE SETTING (vv. 1-4)

- Look with me at v. 1, "Saul was forty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-two years over Israel." Now, that's the NASB, but you might be saying,

"Wait a minute! My Bible doesn't read that way." This verse is famous for its textual difficulty. One commentator writes, "The text of this verse (omitted by the Septuagint) is held to be corrupt, and the numerals denoting Saul's age at his accession as well as the duration of his reign, are thought to be omitted or faulty."

- The literal Hebrew text reads, "Saul was one year old when he became king and ruled two years over Israel." How many of you think that is the way we should read this? (Let me see your hands...)

- No, there has to be some sort of copy error here, and our modern English translations have a number of different renderings. Several English translations even leave blanks in the text, acknowledging that this is somewhat of a mystery here.

- It's possible that it should read, "Saul was one and thirty years old..." We're *not* told anywhere else in Scripture what his age was at his ascension to the throne. But there *are* some other biblical clues we can follow.

- First of all, we are told in Acts 13:21 that he ruled "for forty years." That being divinely inspired (in the NT) should be our starting point. We also know that he had to have been older (at this point) because his son Jonathan is a grown man. We're told (in 2 Sam. 4:4) that his grandson Mephibosheth was 5 years old when Saul died.

- So what all this tells us is that there was a considerable time lapse in between when Saul became king and the

events of this chapter. In 9:2 we are told that Saul was a “young man” but here he *has* to be much older. And we need to understand that the author of 1 Samuel is interested in getting to the reign of David – so he skips over much of Saul’s reign and goes to the end of his rule, to his rejection by God and the rise of David.

- So what I am saying is that there is probably a lot of time in between the end of chapter 12 and the beginning of chapter 13 (that is *not* written about here). Nobody really knows what numbers to put in v. 1, but the bottom line is, that we *know* he reigned for 40 years (because we see that in the NT), and by this time his son Jonathan is grown up. He has (perhaps) been king for 15 years or more.

- You’ll have to study it on your own and see if you can figure it out, but I believe this is (now) getting toward the end of his reign. The Philistines, who were obliterated back in chapter 7, have now had time to fully recover their strength. They now dominate Israel.

- But go on to v. 2, “Now Saul chose for himself 3,000 men of Israel, of which 2,000 were with Saul in Michmash and in the hill country of Bethel, while 1,000 were with Jonathan at Gibeah of Benjamin. But he sent away the rest of the people, each to his tent.”

- All three of these locations were in the hill country just north of Jerusalem. Jonathan is mentioned here without any introduction. It is just assumed the reader will know who he is.

- He is (of course) the firstborn son of Saul. He is the heir apparent to the throne, although (as is made clear later) he will never take the throne – God will give it to David (the man after God’s own heart).

- Now Saul chose for himself 3,000 men of Israel, of which 2,000 were with Saul in Michmash and in the hill country of Bethel, while 1,000 were with Jonathan at Gibeah of Benjamin. But he sent away the rest of the people, each to his tent.

- Verse 3, “And Jonathan smote the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it.” (Stop right there for a moment.) Geba was about a mile away from Michmash, separated by a deep ravine.

- John MacArthur says, “The fact that the Philistines had a garrison there, near the heart of Israel, indicates the extent of their dominance over the Lord’s people.”

- This victory of Jonathan’s is probably his first military accomplishment, but it won’t be his last. And you might think that all the Jews would have been thrilled about this, but it makes the Philistines mad as hornets.

- So notice what happens next. Back in v. 3, “Then Saul blew the trumpet throughout the land, saying, ‘Let the Hebrews hear.’” Verse 4, “And all Israel heard the news that Saul had smitten the garrison of the Philistines...”

- Wait a minute! I thought Jonathan won this victory? Did Saul take credit for it? Apparently so. J. Vernon McGee says, “The real nature of Saul is beginning to show. His son Jonathan got the victory...but Saul blew the trumpet and took credit for it.”

- He says, “Saul [must have] believed in the motto: ‘He who tooteth *not* his own horn, said horn will go untooted.’” You can almost literally say that Saul blew his own horn here. Of course, everybody in the army knew that it was actually Jonathan who did this.

- But the result of this raid is found at the end of v. 4, “And all Israel heard the news that Saul had smitten the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become odious to the Philistines. The people were then summoned to Saul at Gilgal.”

- Saul now has to call all the people of Israel together. He calls them to gather at Gilgal, which is where he was officially crowned as king. Gilgal (you may remember) was between the city of Jericho and the Jordan River.

- The problem (though) is that the people do *not* stay “gathered” for very long – so the next thing we see is:

II. THE SCATTERING (vv. 5-7)

- Look at v. 5, “Now the Philistines assembled to fight with Israel, 30,000 chariots and 6,000 horsemen, and people like the sand which is on the seashore in

abundance; and they came up and camped in Michmash, east of Beth-aven.”

- Uh oh! “Houston we have another problem” – another textual problem, that is. This is probably a scribal error. They probably did *not* have 30,000 chariots, but 3,000. In Hebrew, the numbers 30,000 and 3,000 look very similar and it would be easy for a copyist to get the number wrong.

- The word for “horsemen” is sometimes translated “charioteers” – so they probably had 2 charioteers for each chariot. *Some* biblical manuscripts have it this way – and this makes more sense.

- However, this is still a formidable enemy. The chariots and cavalry alone could have subdued Israel’s armies, but notice that the Philistine troops are described as being as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

- So the main message of this passage is *not* lost in the scribal error. The Israelites are vastly outnumbered – and as we will see, they don’t have any good weapons to fight with.

- Saul is in a very difficult position here! How do you stand against a force “as numerous as the sand on the seashore”? You can’t! Only God can! We’re told in v. 22 that only Saul and Jonathan even had a sword. The rest of Israel’s army had only farm implements. So this was a real problem!

- But in addition to these “hardware” problems, there were also “software” problems. The hearts of the men of Israel were melting. They started running and hiding.

- Look at v. 6, “When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait (for the people were hard-pressed), then the people hid themselves in caves, in thickets, in cliffs, in cellars, and in pits.” Saul’s armies are bailing fast.

- Look at v. 7, “Also some of the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the land of Gad and Gilead.” Some of the people even took off across the Jordan River to the other side. At the end of the day, Saul will end up with only 600 men (according to v. 15) and even v. 7 says that the ones who remained with him were “trembling.”

- This is *not* a good situation – and Saul is in desperate need of the Lord’s help! What would he do and what would be the outcome? Unfortunately, this leads us to:

III. THE SACRILEGE (vv. 8-9)

- Go on to v. 8, “Now he waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him.”

- Now, most commentators assume this is referring to what Samuel said in 10:8, but that was years earlier and was fulfilled in 11:15. Apparently Samuel has said something similar to Saul in this time period (that we don’t have recorded for us).

- Either way, the command is clear – Saul is to wait 7 full days for Samuel to come to him and offer the sacrifice and call upon the LORD. Now, I (personally) believe that Saul waited 7 days, but *not 7 full* days.

- We know that Samuel shows up right after Saul makes the sacrifice – so this tells us that Samuel was *not* really late. He was right on time, but Saul was getting “antsy.” He waited *into* the 7th day, but he didn’t wait for that complete day.

- Go on to v. 9, “So Saul said, ‘Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings.’ And he offered the burnt offering.” Now, some commentators say that they don’t believe Saul usurped the role of the priest here – but the text of this verse sure looks (to me) like he did.

- Some say he may have appointed a priest to offer the sacrifice, but look at how this is worded. It says, “Saul said, ‘Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings.’” That sounds like the offerings were given to Saul.

- Then it says, “And **he** offered the burnt offering.” It doesn’t say he gave it to a priest. It says he offered it up himself. So *not only* was his sin that of failing to obey God by waiting on the Lord’s prophet, but *also* directly violating God’s Word, that states that only priests can offer up these sacrifices.

- This is a serious violation of God's commands! Saul did what people often do (still today) – he took matters into his own hands and did *not* wait on God. We often do the same thing when we see our problems mounting. We panic – and either come up with our own remedy – or we turn to other human resources instead of trusting it to the LORD.

- But what Saul does (in his panic) is a serious sacrilege. It is a great offense! We will later see where king Uzziah will do something similar and God will smite him with leprosy until the day of his death.

- Saul ignored the explicit instructions that only a priest from the tribe of Levi could offer a burnt offering to the Lord. And here is the principle (that still applies to us today): Anytime we disobey God's clear instructions (to do something we think is better), it is a detestable sin in the eyes of God.

- Listen, sometimes the hardest thing for us to do, is to do *nothing*. God says, "Wait on Me," but we don't like that. We think we need to do *something* – anything – but we don't do very well in waiting on Him.

- How many times are we just like Saul? How many young people have jumped out and married an unbeliever instead of waiting on God to bring some committed Christian into their lives?

- How many have jumped out and gotten themselves into trouble with debt rather than waiting on God to provide?

How many have gotten into trouble with some sort of bad partnership instead of waiting for God's timing and provision?

- How many churches have panicked when they see members leaving, and have launched into some foolish "campaign" (of some kind) instead of trusting in the Lord to grow the church? We're more like Saul than we might want to admit.

- John MacArthur says, "It is a very serious matter for anyone to set aside God's requirements, but it is especially serious for those in spiritual leadership." In the same way that Saul's sin impacted the entire nation, so (today) a spiritual leaders' sin can impact a church (or even a denomination). In the case of Saul, the sacrilege led to:

IV. THE SENTENCE (vv. 10-15a)

- Look at v. 10, "And it came about as soon as he finished offering the burnt offering, that behold, Samuel came..." Isn't God's timing uncanny? As soon as Saul had finished offering up the sacrifice, here came Samuel. He wasn't late. He was right on time!

- Listen, in commanding Saul to wait for 7 days, he was speaking with prophetic accuracy. Nothing Samuel said prophetically ever failed to come true exactly as God gave it to him. And this didn't either.

- He likely came at the end of that 7th day, but it was *not* the time Saul would have liked. Saul wanted him there earlier, but Samuel was right on God's timetable. He was *not* late in any way.

- Now, in v. 11 Saul tried to put the blame on Samuel. He said "...**you** (emphatic) did not come within the appointed days..." But Samuel makes it clear that Saul was specifically told by God to wait until Samuel came – and he had failed to do that.

- In fact, the "dialogue" portion of this text (which is vv. 11-14) provides the theological ramifications. Look at v. 11, "But Samuel said, 'What have you done?' And Saul said, 'Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, therefore I said, "Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the LORD." So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering.' And Samuel said to Saul, 'You have acted 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 endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.'"

- This is the sentence that is pronounced on Saul for his willful disobedience. The "man after His own heart" is

David, who will eventually take over the throne. Saul claims that he had to "force" himself to offer the burnt offering (as if he made himself do the right thing) but Samuel says he acted very "foolishly."

- And notice, it does *not* matter that he has (what he considers to be) rational grounds for taking this kind of action. Human reason is never a good justification for violating God's clear commands.

- Some people (today) might read those reasons and think, "those were legitimate reasons" or "I would have done the same thing myself," but these are excuses for failing to trust God.

- Saul uses human reasoning, but it is flawed. It leads him in the opposite direction from God's will. When it says, "Because I saw" (in v. 11) it indicates that Saul was walking by sight instead of by faith. He is being driven by his fear.

- Oh, and there must be something missing between v. 14 and v. 15. Shouldn't it say, "And the Philistines came and attacked them and wiped them out"? That's what Saul feared, but what he feared never took place. The Philistines did *not* attack. This was an ungrounded fear and it just shows his lack of faith.

- Dale Davis explains that it was highly unlikely that the Philistines would have attacked Israel's army at Gilgal because it was too close to the Jordan River. Because of

its isolated location, there was *not* much chance they would be attacked here.

- But that is beside the point. The main point is that the king did *not* trust God enough to obey His Word and to wait on the Lord's prophet. The size of the invading army is *not* the issue. The issue is the willful sin and disobedience of Israel's king.

- Saul seems to have a theology that says, "In emergency situations it is OK to disregard God's Word. If things aren't going well, and everything seems to be stacked against me, it's OK to take matters into my own hands."

- And the irony of it all, is that he claims that he is seeking God's *favor* in all this. Look at v. 12 again, "therefore I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the LORD.' So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering."

- Hey Saul – I have news for you – if you want God's favor, obey His Word. We will never attain God's favor if we disobey His divinely-revealed will. Partial obedience is *not* obedience. Picking and choosing what parts of God's Word we will obey is *not* walking in obedience to Him.

- And Saul is going to pay a big price for this. Samuel tells him that if he had obeyed the Lord his kingdom would have been established forever – but since he

disobeyed the Lord in this matter, his kingdom would be removed from him.

- In fact, the rest of Saul's reign would be one sad example after another of what it is like to try to discharge the *service* of God without the *presence* and *blessing* of God.

- And please understand – this sentence was not just because of one act of sacrilege – it was because that act of sacrilege was indicative of an unfaithful heart. Saul is *not* a man after God's own heart.

- As God will later make very clear to Saul – "to obey is better than sacrifice." It's *not* about the ritual. It's about a heart of obedience. Just offering up a sacrifice will *not* guarantee God's favor. That only comes from being obedient to God's Word. As one pastor put it, "The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart." And Saul's heart is being made known.

- One of the saddest verses in all the Word of God is v. 15, "Then Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin." That statement represents the departure of God's prophet and the removal of God's blessing from his life.

Samuel had clearly given God's warning at the end of chapter 12 – that if he obeyed God he would have God's blessing but if he disobeyed God his kingdom would be swept away. *Now* that will begin to take place.

- Dale Davis points out all the bad things that have happened to Saul in this chapter, but concludes that the worst thing of all is that he has now lost the most precious thing of all – the guidance of God’s Word through His prophet.

- He says, “To be stripped of the direction of God’s word is to be truly impoverished and open to destruction. It is one thing to be in terrible distress; it is another to be alone in that distress.”

- The greatest tragedy of this account is that Saul is now on his own. What a terrible place to be! He can number his troops, but he can no longer count on His God.

- This is just as relevant for spiritual leaders today as it was for King Saul back in that day. God still requires obedience to His Word. His blessing is wrapped up in that obedience.

- And this is really the main message of this chapter. We are ending our summer study on a rather negative note, but one we can learn from. We need to have a heart after God and a heart that is quick to obey the Word of God.

- But there is one more point in our outline. This chapter is written in a rather interesting way, because the details of the situation are given “after the fact” (so to speak). After the main point is made, then the author goes back and fills in the details of what was really going on. I’m calling this last point:

V. THE SOMBERNESS (vv. 15b-23)

- I’m calling it the “somberness” because it paints a rather bleak picture. That bleak picture starts in the last part of v. 15. Look at it with me, “And Saul numbered the people who were present with him, about six hundred men.”

- Wait a minute! In v. 2 he had 3,000. Now he only has 600. The rest of his men have fled. They are hiding in caves and thickets and pits in the ground. Some have gone across the Jordan River.

- In vv. 17-18 the author mentions three bands of raiders wreaking havoc in the land. Interestingly, the word for “raiders” (in v. 17) is a word that can also be translated “destroyers.” It is the very same word that is used for the “destroying angel” in Exodus 12:23.

- These “destroyers” went out from the Philistine camp at Michmash. One headed north, another went west, and a third traveled to the southeast. No one could stop them and they were dominating Israel at will.

- On top of all that, the author details the problem with a lack of iron weapons in Israel. In vv. 19-22 he talks about how the Philistines had a corner on the iron market, so even if the Israelites wanted to get their farm equipment sharpened, they had to go to the Philistines to sharpen them – at a price (of course).

- MacArthur writes, “The Philistines had superior iron and metal-working craftsmen until David’s time,

accounting for their military might.” The Israelite armies only had farm equipment to fight with. The only two in all of Israel who had swords were Saul and Jonathan (and theirs were likely of bronze instead of iron).

- Now, the final verse in this chapter sets up chapter 14, but (unfortunately) we’ll have to save that for next summer. The big question (though) is, “What do we need to take away from chapter 13?”

- The entire tone of this chapter is dark, but the lessons are many. First of all, God demands obedience – *not* expedience. It is so easy (even in our day and time) to rationalize disobedience to God and His Word. Our difficult circumstances can keep us from being faithful to God.

- But from God’s point of view, difficult circumstances are never a legitimate excuse for failing to obey Him. Not only that, but God demands full obedience. Partial obedience is *not* obedience. We cannot afford to pick and choose where we will obey Him and where we will do our own thing.

- Finally, we learn from this passage that there is great danger in taking matters into our own hands. Even when things get tough we need to learn to wait on God. Even when it looks like things are de-railing, we need to stay with what God has commanded us to do – and trust in Him that He will turn it around.

- In our day and time we don’t have to worry about God taking the kingdom away from us – but He might remove us from our place of leadership – or even worse, He might remove His hand of blessing from us.

- MAKE APPEAL

- PRAYER