

AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

1 Samuel 13:1-23

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, May 17, 2009

“Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king” (1 Sam. 12:24-25).

In Samuel 13 begins with a textual problem that has puzzled the commentators. The Masoretic Text, the most authoritative Hebrew text of the Old Testament, reads that “Saul was one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned for two years over Israel” (1 Sam. 13:1). There are three main approaches to dealing with this statement. The first, and most common, is to assume that something has been lost in the scribal transmission of the text.¹ It is on this assumption that some English versions correct the verse on the basis of other records. The New International Version reads, “Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty-two years.” This reading is based on the Septuagint, the 3rd century B.C. Greek text of the Old Testament, as well as on Paul’s statement in Acts 13:21 that God gave Saul to Israel for forty years. The problem with this reading is that Saul’s son, Jonathan, plays a prominent role as a general in Israel’s army, which is hard to imagine if Saul, his father, was only thirty years old. With this in mind, the New American Standard Bible changes verse 1 to say that Saul was forty years old when he started to reign.

A second approach assumes that this problem resulted not from a scribal error but from the original author. It may be, some argue, that the editor who put 1st and 2nd Samuel into their final forms may not

¹ For this view, see P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 8 (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 222. McCarter refers to this as an instance of “scribal suppression of an obviously corrupt text.”

have known how old Saul was or how long he reigned, and thus left the text blank until he could find records to supply the information.²

A third approach assumes that the text reads as it was meant to read, however awkward it may appear. For instance, the expression “son of a year”, which is normally translated as “one year old,” could mean “at a certain age.”³ More likely is the view of John Woodhouse, who suggests that the text means that it had been a year since Saul’s anointing when the events of chapter 13 took place. Likewise, while it is certain that Saul reigned for more than two years – the New Testament puts the number at forty – the text seems to be stating that Saul’s legitimacy as king lasted only during the period recorded in chapters 13-15, after which he was rejected by the Lord, a period that would then have lasted two years.⁴ This final solution is the best, since it makes workable sense of what the biblical text actually says: “When it had been a year, Saul began reigning over Israel, and he reigned for two years.”

SAUL’S PHILISTINE WAR

If that is the introduction to this chapter, it is a depressing one. Nonetheless, 1 Samuel 13 begins on an upbeat note, as Saul takes the offensive against the Philistine forces who maintained fortresses on Israelite territory:

Saul chose three thousand men of Israel. Two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin. The rest of the people he sent home, every man to his tent. Jonathan defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was at Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, ‘Let the Hebrews hear.’ And all Israel heard it said that Saul had defeated the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become a stench to the Philistines. And the people were called out to join Saul at Gilgal. (1 Sam. 13:2-4).

Here, Saul responds to the greatest of the problems facing him: the Philistine domination of the Israelites. To this end, he forms a

² An example of this view is found in Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 497.

³ For this view, see David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 330-333.

⁴ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 227-229.

standing army which he locates centrally, under his own command and that of his son, Jonathan. Michmash and Gibeah were central locations on the east side of the Jordan River, from which Saul could respond in virtually any direction. With this arrangement, the king sent the rest of the people – the citizen militia – back to their homes to await a call to mobilization. After these arrangement had been made, Jonathan struck out at the nearby Philistine garrison (Geba is either a variant of Gibeah or a location nearby to the northeast⁵), setting in motion the conflict that followed.

The key to understanding this chapter is to realize that intentionally or not, Saul has finally gotten around to obeying Samuel's instructions, given to him at the time of his anointing a year earlier. After providing Saul with three supernatural confirmations of his anointing, Samuel commanded him: "when these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you. Then go down before me to Gilgal. And behold, I am coming to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do" (1 Sam. 10:7-8).

"Do what your hand finds to do," was a way of directing Saul to attack the Philistines, a command that Saul did not keep at the time. But how much had happened in the meantime! Saul had been selected by lot to be Israel's king. Samuel, in his farewell address to the nation, had called on both people and king to be careful in obeying God's Word: "Only fear the Lord, and serve him faithfully with all your heart... But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king" (1 Sam. 12:24-25).

Perhaps it took a year of thinking about this to work up his courage, and perhaps it was Jonathan's initiative that forced his hand, but Saul finally committed himself to do as the prophet had directed. Gibeah was the location of the Philistine garrison Samuel had ordered Saul to capture, and Jonathan's victory there started Saul down the road appointed by the prophet. When the Philistines were aroused by this break in the truce, Saul responded by sounding a trumpet throughout the land calling for national mobilization, saying, "Let the Hebrews

⁵ For a discussion of the former possibility, see McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel*, 225. For the latter view, see John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd edition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 188-189.

hear.” “And all Israel heard it said that Saul had defeated the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become a stench to the Philistines. And the people were called out to join Saul at Gilgal” (1 Sam. 13:3-4).

Some commentators malign Saul for what they consider to be his rash militarism. Gordon Keddie compares Jonathan’s strike at Geba to Japan’s attack on the United States at Pearl Harbor, the result of which was the stirring up a massive enemy to full-scale war. Keddie writes, “In embarking upon a war of aggression, Saul had made his first major mistake and brought the judgement of God upon his people.”⁶

This, however, is an erroneous view. For one thing, Old Testament holy war did not accommodate the idea of a truce with pagan nations occupying Israel’s holy land. For another, Saul was finally getting around to obeying the commands of God’s Word. It is never wrong for believers to begin practicing what God has commanded – in this matter, it truly is better late than never – and Saul was following the words of the prophet given at the very time of his anointing to be Israel’s king. Likewise, while believers and churches should not take a politically militant attitude towards our society and its prevailing sins, we nonetheless should embrace the boldness of Saul and Jonathan by speaking out against idolatry, gross immorality, and falsehood. For the church to seek cultural victory by worldly means would involve a mistaken militarism. But by muting our witness of God’s Word – for instance, refusing to speak out about controversial topics like abortion or homosexuality – we betray the Lord through accommodation with his Philistine foes.

It is true, as we will see, that Saul’s action – or perhaps Jonathan’s brave assault – immediately brought Israel into desperate straits, just as obeying the Lord will sometimes lead us into short-term difficulties. But Saul was following the plan God had commanded through the prophet, so the ultimate result of this way that he launched at Geba would be the deliverance of Israel from its oppressive foes, at least for a time. When in doubt, we should always

⁶ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 122.

simply obey God's Word as it applies to our situation. This is what Saul did, and while it gained him the scorn of both ancient and modern observers, we cannot fail to view this as the high-water mark of Saul's entire life and reign.

SAUL'S FAILURE AND REBUKE

The Philistines responded to Saul and Jonathan's assault with immediate, savage, and overwhelming force: "The Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude. They came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth-aven" (1 Sam. 13:5). This was a vast array far beyond what Israel could handle. Even if we take the Hebrew word for "thousand" to mean "regiment" as is probably warranted (so that the Philistines advanced with thirty regiments of chariots), their host completely overwhelmed the Israelites. As a result, when Saul blew his trumpets calling for mobilization, the people fled from the war zone as fast as they could:

When the men of Israel saw that they were in trouble (for the people were hard pressed), the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns, and some Hebrews crossed the fords of the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. (1 Sam. 13:6-7).

Meanwhile, Saul had gone to Gilgal, precisely in accord with Samuel's directions, and began the seven-day wait until the prophet should arrive. This must have involved an extraordinary trial on Saul's already tentative faith. He had decided to obey the Lord, putting God's faithfulness to the test, and it seemed that a major catastrophe was resulting. Still, Saul's orders required him to wait for "seven days, the time appointed by Samuel" (1 Sam. 13:8), during which time "the people were scattering from him," and "Samuel did not come to Gilgal."

How are we to understand God's purposes at work through Saul? In his farewell address, Samuel had admonished Saul and the people to "fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart" (1 Sam. 12:24), remembering the great things God had done for them before. Saul was trying to do this very thing, but everything was going wrong

and now his destruction seemed near. Does this mean that God never intended for Saul to succeed, so the Lord gave him a test that would strain anyone to the breaking point? Such an idea poorly represents God's integrity, and fails to note the clear terms with which God had offered his blessing to Saul if he should obey (1 Sam. 12:14). The reality is that God does test his people with severe trials, giving grace to those who trust in his might. Moses learned to trust the Lord with his back to the Red Sea – which God parted to save his people and destroy the Egyptian army. Likewise, Saul would need to trust the Lord in trying times so as to see God's salvation.

Yet the test proved too much for Saul. We can sympathize with him: the enemy he had provoked was drawing near, his own forces were melting away, and he was stuck waiting for Samuel to come and offer the sacrifice so that he could be sure of God's favor. What would we do in such a situation? Would it not be tempting to face the practical realities without regard for the seemingly unreasonable requirements of obedience and faith? Few of us can look with contempt on King Saul as he decided to take matters into his own hands: "So Saul said, 'Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings.' And he offered the burnt offering" (1 Sam. 13:9).

How often God's people fail when a little more obedience would have won through to success! In Saul's case, he broke down and offered the sacrifice just as Samuel was finally approaching: "As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came. And Saul went out to meet him and greet him" (1 Sam. 13:10). The prophet immediately accosted Saul: "What have you done?" (1 Sam. 13:11). We are reminded of the voice of the Lord speaking to Adam and Eve after their sin in the Garden (Gen. 3:9-13). Like Adam with his fig leaves, Saul sought to cover his disobedience:

"When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the LORD.' So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering" (1 Sam. 13:11-12).

If we are surprised by the ferocity of the rebuke that followed, imagine how Saul must have felt. Samuel replied:

"You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the LORD your God, with which he commanded you. For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you" (1 Sam. 13:13-14).

According to Samuel, had Saul obeyed this simple test, then his kingdom would have been embraced by the Lord and established forever. We must take this statement as face value, however unlikely its fulfillment was. Since Saul failed to obey God's Word, his kingdom would not continue. This was the beginning of the Lord's rejection of Saul, after which Saul should consider his reign to be illegitimate. At a minimum, Samuel's rebuke means that Saul would not produce a perpetual dynasty, his kingdom not being established forever and not being allowed to continue.

Why would God reject Saul over this? Samuel answered in classic language, stating that the Lord was seeking a man "after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14). This statement can – and perhaps should be – taken two ways. On the one hand, it can mean that God desired a king whose heart was wholeheartedly committed to him in faith. Saul's disobedience revealed a problem regarding his heart. But the expression can also mean that God desires a king of his own choosing. Saul was the king "like the nations" (1 Sam. 8:5), chosen by the unbelieving people. God desired a king of his own choosing, who would be like the Lord through his faith and obedience.

THE LESSONS OF SAUL'S SIN

What, exactly, was Saul's sin? The obvious answer was that he made the sacrifice despite his lack of authority to do so. Only a properly-ordained priest could offer the burnt offering that would secure God's favor. But, given the dire national circumstances Saul was facing, is it possible that God would be more concerned with the proper ritual for the offering of his sacrifices than with Saul's need to get moving with organizing the war? The answer is Yes. The sacrificial offerings of the priesthood were more important than the king's pursuit of the war. The sacrifices were holy, and they dealt with holy things, such as God's wrath against our sin and his

atonement work in Christ for our forgiveness. Objectively, it was more important for God to be worshiped properly than for Israel to survive its war.

At the same time, Saul's obedience to God's command would have gained the help of the Almighty, who is more than able to defend his people against all enemies. Had not Samuel warned them, above all else, to fear the Lord (1 Sam. 12:24)? William Blaikie writes: "God was willing to defend and rule His people as of old, *if only they had due regard to Him and His covenant.*" This realization "should have made Saul doubly careful to act at this crisis in every particular in the most rigid compliance with God's will."⁷

There are several applications of Samuel's rebuke that apply to us. First, we notice that foolishness consists of violating the command of the Lord. The proverb states, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding" (Prov. 3:5). Saul violated this very precept in making the offering himself. Given the circumstances, it seemed best – even necessary – to violate the command of God. But it is never right to violate the command of God, who is sovereign over all circumstances and saves his people who trust in him. This applies to Christians today in matters such as secular ideas of child-raising, dating, marriage, the use of time and money. As our ideas conflict with the teaching of God's Word and especially with its clear commands, they are nothing but folly. As Samuel said to Saul, so it could be said of us when our "wisdom" leads us to violate God's Word: "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the LORD your God, with which he commanded you" (1 Sam. 13:13).

Second, we see that obedience to God is obedience to God's Word. The reason Saul was guilty of breaking God's command is that he violated the word that Samuel gave him. Today, we receive God's Word in the Holy Scriptures. Yet people today complain that to revere the Bible is to make it an idol. But the Bible is God's Word, and the way that we worship and obey God is by obeying the

⁷ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 210 (italics original).

teachings of the Bible. It was because Saul treated God's Word without reverence that he was rebuked by the Lord.

Third, Samuel reminds us that if we want to do God's work, we must do it in accordance with God's Word. Saul was not on some agenda of his own: he was serving Israel against her enemies. So what was the problem? The problem was that he did not serve God in accordance with God's Word, so that he is rebuked and rejected by the Lord. Christians and churches risk the same result today when they adapt the worship of the church and plans for church growth of to worldly models derived from the entertainment and business worlds, rather than faithfully applying the kinds of ministry taught and modeled in the Bible.

Fourth, we are likely tempted to think that Samuel, and therefore God, was excessive in his rebuke of Saul. But this example shows that what we consider to be small matters of negligence are often considered by God to be major indicators of a heart that is not turned to him. God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7), and it is in the small matters of our lives that our heart's true attitude is often revealed.

SAUL'S DESPERATE STRAITS

As Saul departs from Samuel, the scene is one of despair. Everything had gone wrong, even Saul's fleshly attempt to honor the Lord. His mission at Gilgal having resulted in failure and rebuke, Saul returned to the army. When he numbered those who remained to face the Philistine juggernaut, they amounted to little more than a single regiment, "about six hundred men" (1 Sam. 13:15). This little force remained on the field of their victory over the Philistine fortress at Geba, while the enemy army fanned out to seize total control of the populace: "raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies. One company turned toward Ophrah, to the land of Shual; another company turned toward Beth-horon; and another company turned toward the border that looks down on the valley of Zeboim toward the wilderness" (1 Sam. 13:17-18).

Meanwhile, having thus extended their occupation of the Israelite populace, the Philistines tightened their grip:

Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, 'Lest the Hebrews make themselves swords or spears.'

But every one of the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen his plowshare, his mattock, his axe, or his sickle, and the charge was two-thirds of a shekel for the plowshares and for the mattocks, and a third of a shekel for sharpening the axes and for setting the goads (1 Sam. 13:19-21).

We can imagine the miserable jeers directed at Saul for his pitiful attempt to obey God's command. Today, people would complain, "This is what happens when you become fanatical about the Bible!" Because of Saul's failed attempt at obedience, the nation was in worse straits and God's honor was even more disgraced. As the chapter ends, Saul is cornered in the garrison fortress he has taken, the nation is utterly subjugated once more, and the people are deprived even of the means of resistance, with "neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people" (1 Sam. 13:22).

Yet little did Saul imagine how near was the help of the Lord, and how soon it would be before God struck out against the oppressors to save his people. Saul may have failed the Lord, but Saul was still the king of Israel, however illegitimate, and Israel was still the people of the Lord. As the angel would say to a later generation of Israelites: "he who touches you touches the apple of his eye" (Zech. 2:8). And as the apostle Paul discovered in his own failed attempts and weakness, God says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

The statement for which this passage is justly famous is Samuel's teaching regarding God's desire for a man "after his own heart."

Samuel told Saul: "The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you" (1 Sam. 13:14).

This statement anticipates the calling of David as king, yet it is primarily a general statement of God's purpose. God is seeking "a man after his own heart." This is what God is looking for in this world: obedience to his will. This shows the quality of a true king and leader: one who receives God's approval through faithful submission and service.

This shows us the importance of the test that Saul received. God was giving him a chance to be such a person: under the stress that Saul experienced his reliance upon God would be tested and revealed. If Saul, with his followers scattering and the Philistines advancing in great strength, would hold fast to God's Word, this would show that his heart was wholly given to the Lord. As it happened, the test revealed the opposite about Saul, so that he was proved unfit to reign over God's people and kingdom.

Saul's test was not the first such trial given by the Lord, nor the last. The first is recorded at the beginning of the Bible, when Adam underwent a similar trial on our behalf of our entire race:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:15-17).

Like Saul, had Adam kept this covenant when under the duress of Satan's temptation, then surely what God said of Saul would have been true for Adam as well: "For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever" (1 Sam. 13:13). But Adam failed the test, plunging our race under the curse of sin, leaving God still searching for man after his own heart.

As we continue in 1 Samuel, we will see that King David answers God's quest, at least provisionally, and David is enthroned as the king after the Lord's heart. When it comes to David's trial with Goliath the giant (1 Sam. 17) or with King Saul in the cave at Adullam (1 Sam. 24:6), David obeys the Word of God under the greatest stress. Therefore God promised to establish David's house as the eternal kingdom, not through sinful David but through the son whom God would give: "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Sam. 7:12-13). That Son and eternal king would later come in fulfillment of God's prophecy to David's hometown of Bethlehem: "from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days" (Mic. 5:2).

The New Testament reveals this promised Son, the man truly and fully after God's own heart, as Jesus our Savior. Like King Saul, Jesus' ministry began with a sore trial: Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. How greatly it must have rejoiced the Father's heart when his Son honored him before the trials of Satan, passing every test through obedience to the Word of God: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone'" (Lk. 4:4); "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve'" (Lk. 4:8); "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Lk. 4:12).

Jesus' success as the man after God's own heart means that *we have a king who reigns secure from an eternal throne*. Hebrews 1:8-9 rejoices: "of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.'" Furthermore, through Jesus' righteousness *we have a mediator who reconciles the fallen children of Adam through his own perfect obedience*. Paul explains: "as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:18-19).

Jesus' obedience therefore establishes the pattern for his own work in our lives. *He leads us into his own likeness*, that we might be men and women after God's own heart in him, through obedience to God's Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus sends: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Heb. 8:10). God's work in the followers of his royal Son is to make us men and women after God's own heart. And as we trust God in this way, we will have nothing to fear from the Philistines of this world, knowing that like his Son, in whom God is well pleased, we are the apple of his eye and he will let nothing touch us apart from his own good will for our salvation.