

PLUCKED FROM OBSCURITY AND ELEVATED TO ROYALTY: THE SAD SAGA OF SAUL

Presented by

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As most of you know who are hearing me preach today, for the past several months those of us who attend here at Mill Creek have been involved in an in-depth study of the Old Testament. A large part of that study centered on the Israelites' exodus from Egypt after more than two centuries of slavery. Without a doubt, one of the most soul-stirring, spine-tingling events in the entire Old Testament occurred when God miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea to permit the Israelites to escape the thundering hoard of pharaoh's pursuing army—and then used those same waters to destroy Egypt's entire army in a matter of minutes. The echo of Moses' memorable admonition to his fellow Israelites, as recorded in Exodus 14:13, still rings in our ears to this very hour: **“Stand still, and see the salvation that the Lord will accomplish for you today!”**

Hour by hour, day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, and decade by decade, God continually cared for those whom He called “My chosen people, My special treasure” (Deuteronomy 7:6). God repeatedly provided the Israelites with quail from the skies, water from rocks, and manna from heaven. Plus, as Moses himself reminded his fellow Israelites, during what turned into an unexpected forty-year-long wilderness sojourn, “your garments did not wear out on you, and your feet did not swell” (Deuteronomy 8:4). In short, God left no stone unturned in taking care of every single one of His people's needs.

That said, I now would like to ask you a question. Which one of the following two groups of phrases would you say best describes the Israelites during this particular time in their history?

APPRECIATIVE, GRATEFUL, THANKFUL, and CONTENT

— or —

BICKERING, COMPLAINING, CRITICIZING, GRIPING, GRUMBLING, and WHINING

I suspect that for most of you, that is hardly a difficult question to answer. From the moment the Israelites left Egypt, until the day they entered the Promised Land of Canaan, they bickered, complained, criticized, griped, grumbled, and whined. In fact, one of their most frequent refrains was either, “Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?!” or “Let us select a leader and return to Egypt!” (Number 14:3-4).

And once they had made Canaan their permanent home, things were not much better, were they? In spite of the fact that God blessed the Israelites with a leader of the quality of Joshua, and in spite of the fact that God provided them with a series of fourteen judges upon whom came “the Spirit of the Lord” (Judges 3:10), they steadfastly refused to be satisfied. Eventually, the seeds of their **discontent** became the seeds of their **destruction**. The Israelites screamed at God's faithful prophet Samuel, **“Give us a king!”** (1 Sam-

uel 8:6). Samuel was wise enough to know what would happen if the Israelites had to live under a king like the nations around them. In fact, the old prophet tried desperately to warn God's people when he said,

“This will be the behavior of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen, and some will run before his chariots.... He will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers. He will take the best of your fields, your vineyards, and your olive groves, and will give them to his servants. He will take a tenth of your grain and your vintage, and will give it to his officers and servants. He will take your male servants, your female servants, your finest young men, and your donkeys, and put them to doing his work.... And you will cry out in that day because of the king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not hear you” (1 Samuel 8:10-18)

The Israelites, however, would not be silenced. Nor would they allow their demand for a king to go unrequited. Their constant cry was, “We will have a king over us so that we may be like all the other nations!” (1 Samuel 8:19). Thus, God gave them exactly what they wanted—a human king. And from that point on, everything went downhill for Israel—ultimately leading to a future time when Israel would be taken away into Assyrian captivity, and when Judah would be carried away into Babylonian captivity.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The focal point of my sermon today is not how the story of Israel's kings **ended**, but rather how it **began**. God told Samuel, “Heed the people's voice, and make them a king” (1 Samuel 8:22). Not long afterward, Samuel found himself face to face with a tall, strapping, good-looking young man named Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. Samuel asked Saul, “On whom is the desire of all Israel? Is it not on **you**?” Shortly thereafter, Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel, telling him, “The Lord has anointed **you** as commander over His inheritance” (1 Samuel 10:1). In a single moment in time, Saul had been **plucked from complete obscurity** as “a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and a family that is the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin” (1 Samuel 9:21) and **elevated to the status of royalty**. But more than that, “the Spirit of God” was upon Saul (1 Samuel 11:6). Israel now had a king. And that king now had a golden opportunity to not only make his people and his God proud of him, but also to set an example of godly service and success for every king who would follow after him.

So how, exactly, did Saul handle that “golden opportunity”? Would it help you answer that question if I told you that **just five short chapters** after the Bible says that “the Spirit of the Lord **came upon Saul**,” the Bible tells us in 1 Samuel 16:14 that “the Spirit of the Lord **departed from Saul**”? To say that Saul squandered his chance to be the type of king of which Israel and God could be proud would be to make a severe understatement. From practically the very beginning of his reign, Saul made a habit of disobeying God.

Samuel had told Saul, “Go down before me to Gilgal; and surely I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and make sacrifices of peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, till I come to you and show you what you should do” (1 Samuel 10:8). In the meantime, the Philistines began to gather for war. The end of the seven-day waiting period was almost upon Saul, but Samuel had not yet arrived. Saul grew impatient, and as 1 Samuel 13:9 informs us, “offered the burnt offering.” Here is what happened next.

“As soon as Saul had finished presenting the burnt offering, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him. And Samuel said, **“What have you done?!”** And 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**” (1 Samuel 13:10-12).

Samuel turned to Saul and said,

“You have done foolishly! You have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you. 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 13:13-14).

Then, as if that was not bad enough, just two chapters later we see Saul disobeying God **again**. God had plainly told Saul regarding the Amalekites, “Utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. Kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Samuel 15:3). Instead of obeying God, Saul spared Agag, the Amalekites’ king, as well as some of the Amalekites’ animals. God then said to Samuel, “I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments” (1 Samuel 15:11). Samuel, in turn, said to Saul, “You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel.... The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you” (1 Samuel 15:26-29).

The remainder of Saul’s reign as Israel’s king was filled with loneliness, despair, bitterness, anger, and jealousy. On no less than seven different occasions Saul set out to kill David, the next king of Israel. Plus, on one occasion he even tried to kill his own son Jonathan just for being David’s friend. Then, as if those sinful actions were not bad enough, Saul went a step farther in disobeying God. In Leviticus 19:39 God had said as part of the Law of Moses, “Give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits; do not seek after them to be defiled by them.” Just one chapter later, in Leviticus 20:6, God added, “If a person turns to mediums and familiar spirits to prostitute himself with them, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from his people.” But, as 1 Samuel 28 tells us, Saul ignored those divine commands, and went to the witch of Endor to ask her to try to communicate with the spirit of Samuel, who had died sometime earlier. That final act of regal disobedience brought God’s wrath upon Saul’s house in a way that the king could not have imagined. The next day, Saul and three of his six sons were slain in battle with the Philistines, thereby paving the way for God to finally and completely fulfill Samuel’s prophecy by giving the kingship of Israel to Saul’s “neighbor, who was better than him”—David of the house of Jesse.

Saul died as he had reigned—in rebellion to the will of God. When Samuel had introduced Israel to her new king, he had said to the people, “There is no one like him among all the people” (1 Samuel 10:24). But that is not all Samuel had to say. He also told Saul and the Israelites,

“If you fear the Lord and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the Lord your God. **However, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you, as it was against your fathers**” (1 Samuel 12:14-15).

Saul had begun his reign by pledging, “Today the Lord has accomplished salvation in Israel” (1 Samuel 11:13). But Saul did not keep his pledge. **God, however, *did!*** In Jeremiah 18:7-9 God made it clear that it is He and He alone Who has the power to “build and plant a kingdom” or to “pluck up and pull down a kingdom.” Saul disobeyed God—and saw God “pluck up and pull down” his kingship. And thus ended the sad saga of Saul—the man who had been plucked by God from obscurity, and elevated by God to royalty.

Romans 15:4 tells us that “whatever things were written before were written for our learning.” With that thought in mind, I would like to ask you a question: What do you think God intends for us to learn from the story of King Saul?