

## **Rise and Fall of King Saul, V**

In this session we want to do a little more with Saul. I know you are getting tired of Saul. He is a tiresome person, but we are about done. We want to look at him from two different angles and then we will move on into the rest of 1 Samuel. Of course, Saul will remain a character in the rest of 1 Samuel, but he will not be the main character after chapter 15. I would like to look at why what we have been saying about Saul and the reasons for his rejection is something of a theological defense of God's rejecting Saul. We can see the gravity of his offenses.

We want to look first at the way in which this picture of Saul that is beginning to emerge is confirmed from the surrounding context. As we sweep through the story of his rise very quickly, looking particularly at the portrayal of Saul, we will discover certain dark tones. They become increasingly sinister in the life of Saul but present already in the depiction. Second, we want also to think about how what we are saying about Saul is confirmed through his psychological transformation. Saul's personality almost seems to change as we read the story. So first of all, let us look at the confirmation from the surrounding context.

Let us begin in 1 Samuel 9 very quickly. I am only going to highlight certain things, so we are not going to work too tediously through this. Notice, first of all, what is said when we first meet Saul in 1 Samuel 9:1-2: "There was a Benjamite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish son of Abiel, the son of Zeror, the son of Becorath, the son of Aphiah of Benjamin. He had a son named Saul, an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a head taller than any others."

What strikes you about this introduction to Saul? How does he impress you so far? Physical presence. He seems to have had a commanding carriage. He was a head taller than others. He was an impressive picture of manhood. What is missing? Nothing much is said about his character, his heart, or his fundamental commitments in life. He is just an impressive young man. The Hebrew said he was *bachar*, which means he was "choice" and *towb* or "good." Saul was not necessarily good in a moral sense or even in an intellectual sense, but good looking. The word is quite general. He was a good physical specimen. We are disturbed, however, once we know what Saul turns out to be like. As we reread the story, we sense the lack of the kind of statement that is made when David is introduced in 1 Samuel 16. It is not his first introduction, but in 1 Samuel 16:18 we have Saul's servants recommending David to him. They say things like, "I have seen the son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the harp, who is gifted. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man." They notice gifts both physically and skillfully. But then it says, "And the Lord is with him." Earlier God had said to Samuel, "Man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart." Though it did not perplex us when we first read Saul's introduction, once you know how he began to develop, it is vaguely unsettling to go back, read his introduction, and suddenly realize it is purely external. It is just talking about the outward appearance and nothing at all about the heart.

In another translation it says, "From his shoulders upward, he was taller than other people." It sounds like he had a big head, but I am not sure that is how we could construe the idiom, actually. The comment really has to do with the fact that Saul often expresses himself in relation to the people. That sets the tone for what we later find, as in 1 Samuel 15, for instance. Saul confesses to having obeyed the people: "I listened to the people rather than to God." Let us not jump too far ahead, though. I would take the second clause of his introduction as explanatory. It says, lest you get this wrong, we are talking about his impressive physical presence. He was without equal. He was choice and good looking, without equal; in fact, he was a head taller than anyone else. I would construe it that way.

Later in 1 Samuel 9 the episode recounts how he was sent by his father to go search for some lost donkeys. He certainly seemed to be concerned for his father's concerns, and as such he goes off looking for the livestock, trying to fulfill his assignment. They do not find them. It says in 1 Samuel 9:5, "When they reached the district of Zuph, Saul said to the servant who was with him, 'Come, let us go back, or my father will stop thinking about the donkeys and start worrying about us.'" He is the good son who is out beyond curfew and he thinks, "My parents are going to be worrying; we really should get home." He cares what his father thinks. So, we do not want to paint him in completely negative terms. He is probably a good, dutiful son. But the servant then says, "Look, in this town there is a man of God; he is highly respected [heavy, *kabad*], and everything he says comes true. Let us go there now. Perhaps he will tell us what way to take." The servant begins to take the lead because apparently Saul either does not know or it does not dawn on him to seek the man of God. I think that is a very subtle hint that something is perhaps amiss in Saul. Whereas the servant is aware of a man of God and values what the man of God might have to say, Saul seems to be oblivious to it. Again, he is not a bad guy; he does not resist it. But he does have a problem. He says in 1 Samuel 9:7, "If we go, what can we give the man? The food in our sacks is gone. We have no gift to take to the man of God. What do we have?"

That may betray a deficient understanding of the way prophets in Israel function. Prophets in Israel were often offered gifts, but in the biblical accounts that we have of them, there was only one instance where a prophet actually accepted a gift. Elisha accepted a gift to distribute it to the people. By and large, Israel's prophets did not prophesize for profit. Now, it was typical in surrounding nations that you would bring payment with you; you could buy the oracle. But that was not typical in Israel. So, it may betray a deficient understanding, although the servant goes along with it. "'Look,' he said, 'I have a quarter of a shekel of silver. I will give it to the man of God so that he will tell us what way to take.'" Then in verse 9 it explains the terminology. "Formally in Israel, if a man went to inquire about God, he would say, 'Come, let us go to the seer,' because the prophet of today used to be call a seer." It is a very interesting footnote placed in the text to let us know that there was some time lag between the events and the recording of this event in written form. So, it needs to update the terminology.

"'Good,' Saul said to his servant, 'Come, let us go.' So they set out of the town where the man of God was. As they were going up the hill to the town, they met some girls coming out to draw water, and they asked them, 'Is the seer here?' 'He is,' they answered. 'He is ahead of you. Hurry now; he has just come to our town today, for the people have a sacrifice at the high place.'" Just to give you a sidelight, the Hebrew of 1 Samuel 9:12 is really confused to the extent that many commentators have sought to reconstruct the wording and make good grammatical sense. But with a better literary sense of how to read these texts, you begin to realize that what is being depicted there is the excitement, the agitation of these young maidens who come to the well. They meet this guy without equal; they were impressed to meet him. I think they were excited, and they were stumbling over themselves. I think the Hebrew narrator had the good sense to depict it that way. They did not complete their sentences; they ran into each other as they were trying to speak. It sounds more like, "He is here. You will get there. Get on up there. You will meet him just as he is coming into town." In 1 Samuel 9:13 they prepare him, saying, "As soon as you enter the town, you will find him before he goes up to the high place to eat. The people will not begin eating until he comes, because he must bless the sacrifice;"—maybe a preview of later problems—"afterward, those who are invited will eat. Go up now; you should find him about this time."

How do we know that Samuel is the prophet? Are there hints already that Samuel is the prophet? They are using that word "heavy" in the sense of "honored, highly respected" in this case. There a couple of hints that are a little more direct even than that. In 1 Samuel 5 Saul and his servant reached the district of Zuph. In the first verse of the book of 1 Sameul we heard about Zuph: "There was a certain man from

Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim.” Who was that man? Elkanah. Whose father was he? He was Samuel’s father. Samuel was born in the district of Zuph. He was a Zuphite; his hometown was Rama. So, in a subtle way—if you knew the geography—as you read here you would begin to think that this is Samuel. They did not give his name, but this is Samuel.

Is there another hint? What about 1 Samuel 3:19, which says, “The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up, and let none of his words fall to the ground.” We are reminded of that when we read in 1 Samuel 9:6, “He is highly respected, and everything he says comes true.” These are synonymous expressions. They are not identical but synonymous, saying the same thing. His word is authoritative, God is with him.

In several different ways we are alerted to the fact that this is Samuel. So why do you think the narrator did not just say, “Samuel was in this town”? We will eventually be told when we get to 1 Samuel 9:15. It says, “Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel.” We discover at that point that it is Samuel. We have been guessing that all along. What is a possible reason why the narrator withheld the name of Samuel to this point in the narrative? That is too hard a question for me to pose and expect you to answer. Let me contrast two different perspectives. One critical approach to these texts has been to say what we have here is the combination of two originally independent stories. One is about an anonymous seer in the district of Zuph and the other is about Samuel. These have been combined together in an artificial fashion so that we should not trust them as telling what really happened.

There is another way to read this. The way I would suggest reading it is that the narrator intentionally withholds the name of Samuel explicitly, but gives us sufficient hints. If we are attentive we begin to say, “Zuph; not one of his words falls to the ground; everything he says comes true. This must be Samuel.” We have already figured out it is Samuel, especially by the time 1 Samuel 9:15 comes around, and we are told that this is Samuel.

Some have asked if 1 Samuel 10:11 might be an indication that the seer and Samuel were different people. In this instance, Samuel tells Saul in 1 Samuel 10 that as part of the third sign Saul will encounter a group of prophets coming down from the high place. So, Samuel will not be involved in that aspect. It will be a different group of prophets. I do not think that that would have a bearing on whether the seer was Samuel or not.

Saul has been alerted to the presence of the seer. He has been told by the maidens in 1 Samuel 9:13 exactly where he will find him: “As you enter the town, you will find him before he goes up to the high place to eat.” Just as you enter the town you will find him; he is there. Verse 17 says, “Samuel caught sight of Saul. The LORD said to him, ‘This is the man I spoke to you about; he will govern my people.’” But what does Saul do in verse 18? “Saul approached Samuel in the gateway and asked, ‘Would you please tell me where the seer’s house is?’ Again, this is a very subtle thing, but what impression does it give us of Saul? He is big, but dumb.

God is working in Samuel’s heart, saying, “this is the man,” and Saul has the benefit of these excited young maidens who said, “You will find him just as you enter the city. He will be there; you will run into him; you will find him.” He runs right into him and says, “Excuse me, could you tell me where the...” It is not the servant but Saul who makes the mistake. The reader, who has rather quickly and easily figured out that this is Samuel as we reread the text, thinks, “Is Saul really with it? Is he really catching what is being said? Is he attentive or not?” Again, it is the kind of subtlety that would pass us

by on a first reading. But if you know the end of the story and how things develop and then go back and reread it you think, "Well, maybe there is something to that."

Now we move on to 1 Samuel 10, which was the anointing scene. Notice the reaction of the bystanders. The third sign is fulfilled; Saul is prophesying among them. What is it that those who had known Saul formerly ask? They say in 1 Samuel 10:11, "What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" People try to interpret this in different ways. Some say the prophets were viewed as madmen, and the people were wondering what happened to this normally sane person that he is mixing in with these madmen. Some characters in the Bible do refer to prophets as madmen, but that is more a reflection of their perspective. In the Bible, generally, true prophets were highly esteemed. For Saul to fall in with the prophets was a positive thing, but it surprised those who had known him formally. Again, that is a subtle hint that perhaps not all is well with Saul. If I can put it this boldly, "We have known him to be an unbeliever, a secular guy. What is he doing out there with those religious folk?" That is when the second bystander says, "Who is their father?" Remember, it is not a hereditary thing. You are not born a believer. Maybe Saul has come to believe. That could be what they are asking. Or, they could be saying, "Maybe we better check out this group. Who is their leader? Who is their father?" Maybe the group is suspect if Saul is among them. Either way, this is again another unsettling confirmation that all is not well, even in this early phase.

Then we come to the lot-casting episode, when Saul is ultimately found. We have talked about it already, so I will just hit on it briefly. The lot lands on him, and he cannot be found, so they inquire of God again. God says, "He is hiding behind the baggage." The standard interpretation, as I have mentioned before, is that this is evidence of Saul's laudable, praiseworthy humility: "on the verge of greatness." Knowing that he had been selected, he nevertheless was self-effacing and withdrew from that great honor. That is one reading, but I do not think it is a plausible reading in the light of all else that is happening in these texts. The better reading, I think, is that this is an example of Saul's faltering timidity and fear in the face of challenge. It is not so much that he denied himself the honor. He denied his calling that God had placed on him, assured him of, and charged him to fulfill. So, he is dragged out of hiding. The troublemakers' comment was not good because God had chosen Saul. Still, there was some truth to their dissatisfaction. They said, "How can this fellow save us?" The hiding giant, giant though he be, was cringing in fear behind the baggage; they were not impressed.

Let us go back to 1 Samuel 10:14-16 before you get to the lot-casting procedure. Saul gets into an interesting conversation with his uncle, who is very curious when he hears that Saul has encountered Samuel. The uncle says, "Tell me what Samuel said to you." Saul says, as I mentioned last time, the donkeys were found. Was that the main event?!? The narrator points out that Saul did not even mention the kingship. Again, that is typically traditionally interpreted as a sign of Saul's humility. How amazing. He had been chosen. He had been chosen to be king and he did not even tell his uncle. Maybe the king has a duty to fulfill which he has not done and the uncle might tend to kick him into action. Maybe he did not mention it because he was feeling like his hour had come and he had not grasped the opportunity. Again, I would see that as a sign of Saul's faltering, his hesitance to do the will of God.

Did Saul simply falter? Was it in a sense a sin of weakness that he did not get on with it? Or was it truly a sin of unbelief that he ignored what Samuel said? Saul thought instead he would do what is necessary in the situation. I would see it as failures stemming from unbelief, not weak belief. God is very gracious toward our weaknesses. He is patient with us in our weakness. Though we are faithless, He remains faithful. But unbelief is a different thing; it is an entirely different thing. I think that is the problem here: Saul will go through the motions so long as it is convenient, expedient, and serves the situation. But he

does not have any fundamental belief that everything rides on what God is doing in a situation. That seems to be the case from what we read.

In 1 Samuel 11 the messengers, who are sent from Jabesh Gilead by the elders who are threatened, come to Gibeah. I have argued that the text really would suggest that the messengers came directly to Gibeah. They say to Nahash, "Give us seven days so we can send messengers throughout Israel; if no one comes to rescue us, we will surrender to you." But we need to remember that they are talking to their enemy, the enemy that is threatening them and wants to pluck out the right eye of all their warriors. So they are saying, "Give us some time. Maybe we can raise a savior from the land of Israel." So confident is Nahash that he agrees to give them seven days to find some help. But then the text says that the messengers went to Gibeah, which I think means that they knew Saul was the choice. Saul is the one. He was the one who was selected by lot, cringing, though he was behind the baggage. Verse 4 says, "The messengers went to him." In the NIV it says, "When the messengers came to Gibeah," and that is a possible translation, but the "when" is not necessary. It is not mandatory that you translate the Hebrew that way. It is just "the messengers" came to Gibeah. What was the response of the inhabitants when they saw that people had come to Saul, to the city of Saul, for rescue? They wept. They knew him best. They thought there was little chance that Saul would be able to help them, and they wept. But God came upon Saul in power, and he burned with anger. He chopped up those oxen with which he had been plowing. Remember he had been set aside to be king, but he had gone back to farming. He chopped up the oxen and sent them out in Judges-like fashion. Last time I talked about Judges 19 and the way this is reminiscent of a time when there was no king in Israel. Saul was supposed to get to the throne by demonstrating. But he had failed to do what his hand found to do, so it is almost as if there is no king in Israel. The process was started, but through Saul's faltering it never got anywhere. He is still not on the throne. He has gone back to farming. He is even behaving like the Levite in Judges 19, dividing up the parts and sending them all to Israel. Immediately the people come out in mass and Saul does win a great victory. The kingship is renewed at the end of chapter 11.

The emphasis in 1 Samuel 12 is that there is a test still to be stood. Then we get into chapter 13, which we have talked about at length.

The reason I go back over that one more time is just to help you get the picture. Particularly in Samuel, but also in Kings and the story of Solomon, biblical narrators sometimes convey their messages through subtleties. They also provide enough significant guideposts that we are driven along the right road. You do not have to be a genius to get the point. You certainly do not have to read Hebrew to get the point. They are very gifted, as you would expect from an inspired writer. And close attention to detail in the text is rewarded. You understand more fully what was going on in these stories, histories, and the lives of the characters by paying close attention to the details. It also helps to read and reread the text; you almost always pick up something new.

I would conclude in terms of the surrounding context that our argument is that Saul's fundamental problem was a fundamental unbelief. This led to various kinds of disobedience. The general problem was he simply did not obey God because he did not really believe that obeying God was all that important. So, he disobeyed in various ways. The surface offenses were things like not waiting for Samuel, going ahead with the sacrifices, and failing to execute Agag as commanded.

Is he really all that different from other great men of faith who also hesitated when they were called? What about Gideon or Moses, for example, or others that were mentioned? In that respect, no. Hesitation is appropriate when you are called upon to do something great. God may say, "I want you to teach the women in your church Bible study, that gathering of 80 women. I want you to be the one to teach this

semester.” You are terrified and you say, “Me? Are you kidding? I am not the one for that.” If God then confirms to you that it is right that you feel inadequate, but you are His choice, then it becomes culpable for you to hang back. You should not say, “I will not do it. I am not capable of it.” God knows you are not capable. None of us is capable of any good thing. He will do it if he calls us. In Moses’ case, he hesitated and said, “I cannot talk.” But God asked, who made man’s mouth? Do you think I cannot give you the ability to speak if I call upon you to do it?” Moses continued to hesitate until God became angry with him. But God did not reject him. The difference between Saul and those great men of God is how they responded to what happened in their lives.

That brings me to the last point. How is what we are saying about Saul and his unbelief confirmed through the rest of the story of Saul? It is through the transformation that we see in Saul. Sometimes writers will talk about the difference between good faith and bad faith, both of which are to be distinguished from true faith or real faith. Good faith means that you are doing the best you can and you have a good will and you are trying to do right. Bad faith means you are malicious and meaning to misbehave and you do not want to do right.

Let us make faith one axis on a diagram. Let us make the other axis ignorance or lack of knowledge. We see in Saul a growth in knowledge and, I think, a decline from good faith to increasingly bad faith. In the early stages it may be that Saul just does not get it. Eyes that are not opened spiritually may not see the significance of that first charge that Samuel gave. Saul may, in 1 Samuel 13, be legitimately surprised that Samuel is so upset. We do not know how angry Samuel was because we do not know his intonation when he said, “What have you done? You have acted foolishly.” He may have been pleading with him, wondering what was wrong with Saul. Saul may have said, “Everybody else was fleeing; what is the deal? I was acting in good faith.” Samuel made it increasingly clear what was required of Saul, that he needed to listen and obey what God said. As he made it more and more clear, we see that Saul’s good faith began to wane as his knowledge increased. In fact, the direction in Saul’s experience is this way, an inverse relationship between good faith and knowledge. The more Saul understood what was involved, the less willing he was to go along with it.

As an adjunct to this, think about the major character trait we see in Saul when he is faced with those initial challenges. What is his reaction to those initial challenges? Before he experiences any military success, what is his chief characteristic? Fear, timidity, panic. He is paralyzed. He is hiding. We do not want to be too fanciful about it, but he is afraid. What is the root cause of his fear? Think about the challenges you face in life. What is the root cause of your fear in the face of those challenges? Or to put it more positively, what is it that enables you to face those challenges without overwhelming fear? It is faith. It is the knowledge that God is there, and as you face those challenges He is there for you. You do not face them alone. I do not know how non-Christians face a day in this life. You do not know when you get up in the morning whether your family whom you love will be there that night. There is so much you do not know. How do you face that if it is all just chance? Anything can happen any day. I admire the unbeliever’s ability to go through days and not just end it all because they are without hope. Life is terrifying if God is not in control. But because God is in control, we can face those challenges in our lives. There are a lot of minor challenges. You have to get up and preach your first sermon. You have to make a presentation at work. You have never done that before and you are terrified to get up in front of people. Or suppose you have to do a number of other things that are frightening. The reason that you are not paralyzed with fear is because you are going to trust God with it. It does not mean that you have no natural fear; you are still a little anxious, but the foundation is that God is there.

Saul’s paralyzing fear, I think, confirmed the fact that he was an unbeliever. God was not a reality for Saul. He was not a source of strength when Saul faced those challenges. Notice, however, what

happened to Saul when he began to experience his successes. What transformation in his personality took place? He became prideful. He became arrogant. He would flip flop back and forth. The threat was removed and the people began to say, "Saul has slain his 1,000, but David his 10,000." Saul was peeved; he was jealous because of his pride. What is the source of pride in our lives? Let us say you have just accomplished some great task that no one thought you could do. You did it and you were arrogant in your pride. What is the problem? You think that you did it. Again, God is not a reality for you. You do not give credit where credit is due. For a believer, the fear of the challenge is mitigated by a knowledge that God is there. God will bring me through it. God will help me in it. Likewise, the temptation to pride should be dashed by the recognition that you did not do it. God did it. He could have used someone else. He could have used anyone else. It was not anything in you that got that accomplished. If God is not a reality for you, you are going to be going from fear to pride and back. It is the same malady that is expressed in both phases of Saul's life. In the early phase we see more of the fear. In the later phase, we see more of the pride and the unwillingness to submit to the will of God. Saul insists that he is going to kill David and thus maintain his power.

That is all I am going to say on Saul. I hope you get something out of it. I am very grateful to God that I feel like I learned something valuable by working on Saul who was a puzzle and so perplexing to me. But by studying it, it confirmed to me that God's Word does make sense. Everyone was saying the story does not make sense, so it has to be a mixture of several conflicting sources. It does make sense, though, and God is also just. Until I really understood what was wrong with Saul, he bothered me. He made me think that when I do a little wrong God is going to say, that is it; this is the last straw, you are out; you are gone. But I realized Saul was never in. Saul was not one of God's people. God does not deal with His children that way. It was a comfort theologically to clarify that.

The question is as Saul becomes increasingly insane and is involved in this downward spiral, is this God judging Saul repeatedly or is it an exhibition of what Saul is really like? I think the path that we see Saul taking is the path of a man without God. In difficult circumstances, that is the natural path that we would all take if we were without God. We would all become increasingly bitter, withdrawn, and alienated. That is the nature of life if you are placed in a pressure cooker. There are some unbelievers who live their lives and are nice, decent, kind, and reasonably good. Sometimes it makes you wonder how that can be. Some unbelievers are so much nicer than believers. The problem is they are nice because they want to be nice. They are nice because they feel good being nice. It pleases them to be nice. But the Bible says, "We have all fallen short of the glory of God." We all fall short of glorifying God.