

The Weight of the Crown

A Rejected King

1 Samuel 14-15

Mark Vroegop

The word of the LORD came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night. And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal." And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD." And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction." Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night." And he said to him, "Speak." And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?" And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king." Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the LORD." And Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel." As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you" (1 Sam. 15:10-28).

Tragic events require careful reflection.

I remember the hallway in my Christian school featuring TVs with a live broadcast of the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion on January 28, 1986. I can still see the image in my mind, along with the picture of the seven astronauts, including Christa McAuliffe who was a schoolteacher.

In the weeks that followed, I also remember seeing a huge warehouse with a collection of the pieces of the rockets and space shuttle. After the explosion, President Reagan created the Rogers Commission to investigate the cause of the explosion. They completed their work on June 9, finding that the cause of the explosion was a faulty O-ring. But the problems were deeper than that:

The commission criticized NASA's organizational culture and decision-making processes that had contributed to the accident. Test data since 1977 demonstrated a potentially catastrophic flaw in the SRBs' O-rings, but neither NASA nor SRB manufacturer had addressed this known defect. NASA managers also disregarded engineers' warnings about the dangers of launching in cold temperatures and did not report these technical concerns to their superiors.¹

The Space Shuttle Challenger explosion required a commission to figure out what went wrong. Tragic events require careful reflection.

You could think of 1 Samuel 14-15 in a similar way. These chapters show us the tragic leadership implosion of Israel's first king. These chapters are in our Bibles to show us what happens when God is rejected and disobeyed. The writer of 1 Samuel is crafting a bigger message about the relationship between God and his people. He's demonstrating how God works in the world.

We started our journey through 1 Samuel in January, and I highlighted this verse as central to the message of this book:

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength (1 Sam. 2:4).

The people of Israel wanted a king. And in a few short years, their first king is a complete disaster. Saul's leadership implodes, and we see this clearly in these two chapters through three scenes.

- Scene 1: Jonathan's Faith-filled Courage (14:1-23)
- Scene 2: Saul's Idolatrous Insecurity (14:24-52)
- Scene 3: Samuel's Prophetic Judgment (15:1-34)

Tragic events require careful reflection. Let's see what we can learn.

Scene 1: Jonathan's Faith-filled Courage (14:1-23)

Chapter 14 begins with an account of Jonathan's faith-filled courage in attacking the Philistine garrison. It's interesting that Jonathan enters the story here and the contrast between him and his father. Jonathan first appears in chapter 13 as a competent soldier.

Chapter 14 highlights the same thing with Jonathan, but this time there's an undeniable implication toward his father, Saul. In 14:1, we learn that Jonathan intends to attack the Philistine garrison, but "he did not tell his father." The narrator seems to want the reader to draw a conclusion about Saul's leadership. Verses 2-3 tell us that Saul is waiting with six hundred men, including Ahijah who is

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Shuttle_Challenger_disaster

described as “Ichabod’s brother, the son of Phineas, son of Eli.” In 1 Samuel 2, the priesthood connected to Eli was under judgment. Samuel was now the spokesman for God. Yet, Saul has aligned himself with this history, and it’s probably because his relationship with Samuel had deteriorated after his unlawful sacrifice. We have a rejected king and a rejected priest working together.

Jonathan devises a covert plan to attack the Philistines by climbing a steep cliff. Beyond the physical risk and military strategy, verse 6 is essential to the message of this narrative:

Jonathan said to the young man who carried his armor, “Come, let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised. It may be that the LORD will work for us, for nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6).

Keep this bold statement in mind when we come to chapter 17 because it sounds like what David says about Goliath.

Jonathan and his armor-bearer attacked and killed about twenty soldiers, and it creates panic in the camp. There’s even an earthquake, which appears to be a sign of divine intervention. Jonathan’s bold, faith-filled action resulted in a cascading military opportunity.

The watchmen at Saul’s camp (v. 16) recognized the unfolding situation, and Saul gathers his troops for an impromptu battle. Astonishingly, Saul tells Ahijah to bring the ark of God near the battlefield (v. 18). We’ve already seen how badly this turned out before (see 1 Sam. 4:3). It seems that Saul is using the ark to inquire of God. Verse 19 features Saul talking with a priest, but when the Philistine chaos grows, Saul heads into battle. He tells the priest, “Withdraw your hand.”

While the Philistines are fighting against each other, the Israelites who deserted came back to Israel’s side. What’s more, those who were hiding in the hill country joined the battle (v. 22). The conclusion in verse 23 is noteworthy: “So the Lord saved Israel that day”

Jonathan’s faith-filled courage set in motion a wonderful victory, and we get some additional concerning actions from Saul. The contrast between Saul and Jonathan will continue to be more and more evident in the chapters that follow.

Scene 2: Saul’s Idolatrous Insecurity (14:24-52)

What’s wrong with Saul? That question is underneath this section in 1 Samuel. I think that idolatrous insecurity might be a good way to summarize his spiritual and leadership issues. We’re going to see how Saul is increasingly insecure in his leadership. This was evident in chapter 13 with his unlawful sacrifice because Samuel was delayed, and he was losing the support of the people (see 13:11). This pattern gets worse in chapters 14-15.

This section is a flashback. Saul attempts to motivate his troops with an over-spiritualized oath or vow. It appears that he’s trying to entreat the favor of the Lord while also trying to motivate his troops because they are “hard pressed”—a word that means to be experiencing difficulty or trouble. They are fighting a battle, and Saul calls them to eat no food.

To make matters worse, the troops find honey on the ground as they are making their way to battle. Jonathan did not hear the oath from Saul, and he took honey and ate it (v. 27). What follows in verses 28-29 is telling:

Then one of the people said, "Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, 'Cursed be the man who eats food this day.'" And the people were faint. Then Jonathan said, "My father has troubled the land. See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey" (1 Sam. 14:28-29).

Jonathan can see his father's demise. Things get worse with the soldiers. Saul's impetuous decision creates a scenario where the soldiers were killing animals and eating them raw (v. 33). Saul intervenes and builds an altar where the animals could be slaughtered and eaten properly.² And the narrator adds what seems like an intriguing comment: "it was the first altar that he built to the Lord" (v. 35).

Things continue to get worse. Saul intends to plunder the Philistines, but he takes the advice of a priest to inquire of God (v. 36). Saul prays. According to verse 37, the Lord did not answer. It's telling, isn't it? He assumes there must be sin in the camp. Saul makes a brash statement about even if it's Jonathan, he will die (v. 39). He pulls out the Urim and Thummin. These were dice or coins kept on the breast piece of the high priest according to Exodus 28:30, and they were used like the casting of lots.³ The Urim fell to Jonathan, and he acknowledged the tasting of honey in the forest. Some commentators see Jonathan's statement as sharp sarcasm: "I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff . . . Here I am; I will die" (v. 43).

When Saul threatens to kill Jonathan, the people rebel against their king. They ransomed Jonathan from their own king. The wheels are falling off! The king is imploding. John Woodhouse writes:

We are witnessing the deterioration of Saul. The man who did not obey God in chapter 13 and then expressed no confidence in God when faced with his enemies and then devised the crazy plan to save himself by starving his troops and then sounded so very concerned about the people's act of disobedience was now prepared to kill his courageous and godly son because of his (Saul's) silly oath!⁴

This chapter ends with a twist of irony. On the one hand, Saul's kingship resulted in pushing back against his enemies on every side (v. 47). He accomplished what the people wanted. But on the other hand, he was never able to fully defeat the Philistines which was a central part of his calling in 1 Samuel 9:16. In addition, Saul attached himself to any strong or valiant man.

The portrait here of the first king of Israel is dismal. Jonathan must conduct a covert military operation. Saul's cabinet is compromised. He makes a rash vow. God won't answer his prayer. He threatens to kill

² John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 252.

³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "[Urim and Thummim](#)," in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2117.

⁴ John Woodhouse, [*1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*](#), Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 254.

his own son because of his foolish vow. The people revolt against him. While he's successful militarily, he's deeply insecure and idolatrous.

Scene 3: Samuel's Prophetic Judgment (15:1-34)

The final scene involves Samuel's prophetic announcement of judgment over Saul. Notice how 15:1 begins: "Samuel said to Saul . . ." We haven't heard from Samuel since chapter 13, and he emerges now to give Saul a command from the Lord. Saul is to bring divine judgment upon the Amalekites:

Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey (1 Sam. 15:3).

The command from God was clear. However, Saul and the soldiers didn't follow through with obedience:

But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction (1 Sam. 15:9).

They made an assessment of what was worthy of destroying and what was worthy of keeping. The wording suggests that Saul was directly involved in this decision. Perhaps it was his idea.

The word of the Lord comes to Samuel a second time:

"I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night (1 Sam. 15:11).

The next morning, Samuel travels to meet with Saul. In verse 12 there's a passing reference to something that is noteworthy: "Saul came to Carmel . . . and set up a monument to himself." The writer wants us to understand what is happening here. We'll come back to this in a moment.

What follows is one of the most dramatic confrontations in the Bible. Saul greets Samuel with deception: ". . . I have performed the commandment of the Lord" (v. 13). When Samuel asks about the new sheep and oxen (v. 14), Saul blames the people and spiritualizes the situation:

Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction" (1 Sam. 15:15).

Samuel's confrontation is sobering:

And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are

consumed.’ Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?” (1 Sam. 15:17-19).

When Saul again blames the people and spiritualizes his disobedience, Samuel delivers a timeless rebuke:

And Samuel said, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king” (1 Sam. 15:22-23).

Saul is imploding. While he acknowledges his fear of man, Samuel walks away and Saul grabs his robe, tearing it. Samuel’s words are devastating:

And Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you” (1 Sam. 15:28).

Samuel reluctantly returns with Saul, and he confronts the smug Agag who says, “Surely the bitterness of death is past” (v. 32). After pronouncing judgment on Agag, Samuel “hacked Agag to pieces” (v. 33). It’s a brutal scene.

And our scene ends with this statement:

And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel (1 Sam. 15:35).

This is how the reign of the first king of Israel ends. Saul is still on the throne, but it’s over. “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength” (1 Sam. 2:4).

Applications

What lessons do we learn from this tragedy? How did we get here? Why is this in the Bible? Let me highlight three applications for you to consider.

1. Safety and security can dangerously eclipse righteousness.

There’s a clear message here in the fall of Saul. Remember that the people wanted a king because of their enemies. In the name of safety or security, it’s tempting to embrace ungodliness or unrighteousness. Fear is a powerful motivator. Fear is a powerful justifier of regrettable actions. This was what was behind the crucifixion of Jesus: “If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (John 11:48). Be afraid of your fear. Be skeptical of people who are trying to make you afraid.

2. Personal insecurity and spiritualization can dangerously eclipse righteousness.

On a more individual level, we see Saul's deep insecurity in this text. It's a powerful example of the challenge with insecurity—not knowing who you are and who your God is. Insecurity plugs the confidence cord into the wrong outlet. And it over-spiritualizes to compensate. It replaces true righteousness with a fake righteousness.

3. Jesus is the true King who satisfies us and eclipses our unrighteousness.

1 and 2 Samuel point to the ultimate King—the one we desperately need. A messiah who is described as a shepherd who satisfies (Ps. 23:1), a king who reigns (Ps. 2), a refuge from trouble (Ps. 18:2), and our hope for the future (Isa. 9). And it's Jesus who said:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

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