

Saul - A Tale of Self-Deception

King Saul was technically Israel's first king. He came to power after a bloody and tumultuous period in Israel's history, when the people were governed by various tribal chieftains, called "Judges." An account of this period can be found in the book of Judges, which tracks the progressive moral corruption of the Israelites and their leaders after the death of Joshua. With no centralized government and two hundred years of poor leadership, this was a period of political and social upheaval. The Israelite people were looking for a savior who could end the strife that had marred their nation's landscape for generations. They needed a king, but what kind?

This kind of leadership crisis is familiar from past and current history. Israel wanted a good leader, one who was not corrupt and had integrity. However, there were other cultural influences at play, and the Israelites' intentions were not completely pure as they asked for a king. We're told that

"all the elders of Israel gathered together and they came to Samuel at Ramah." They said to him, "You are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now, install for us a king to govern us like all the other nations."

This should bother us, because Israel had a king already, named Yahweh (remember Exodus 15). He was trying to teach the Israelites how to become different from the other nations in order to become a blessing to those same nations. But the cultural pressures to have a leader like the Canaanites proved more powerful. Their hearts were not aligned to Yahweh, so He honored their request.

Samuel's Warning

The Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in relation to all that they say to you. For it is not you they have rejected, but Me they have rejected from reigning over them... Now then, obey their voice. Only you will testify against them and proclaim to them the judgment concerning the king who will reign over them."

Next, Samuel delivers a famous warning to the Israelite people (1 Samuel 8:11-22), giving the Israelites what they desired.

Saul was not a great king, nor was he even a good man. He was deeply flawed. The entire first half of Samuel is dedicated to a character study about his failures. When reading through Samuel, you might have a tendency to become critical or judgemental of Saul at times; you'll probably feel sorry for him at times too. But slow down and be honest with yourself. If you're open-minded, you'll realize you likely have more in common with Saul than you'd care to admit. The whole point of exploring Saul's failures is to warn us so we don't repeat his mistakes.

First Samuel offers up a number of vignettes, some seemingly small, some big, that examine Saul's missteps (see 1 Samuel 13-15). You might wonder if God being overly hard on Saul is just an intentional creation of sympathy by the narrator. Well, yes. He wants us to feel sorry for him, so that we begin to see ourselves in him and learn our lesson through him.

In essence, Saul's root character flaw is self-exaltation and self-deception. He thinks he knows better than everyone else, including God. The biggest tragedy is that he's not even aware of it. The story shows he is completely blind to his arrogance and always believes he's in the right.

Saul can't get it together

As Saul's story progresses, the mistakes get bigger and the stakes get higher. Somehow, he is never able to own what wrong he has done when it's pointed out to him. For example, in 1 Samuel 13, he was told to wait for Samuel before offering sacrifices to God and initiating a battle with the Philistines. He didn't listen, however, and he bulldozed ahead impatiently. Even though Saul eventually wins the battle, he did it on his own terms instead of God's, a point that he seems to never grasp.

His self-ignorance is even greater in 1 Samuel 15, where God commands Saul to go and fight against the Amalekites (this nation tried to wipe out the Israelites long ago when they had just escaped Egypt, see Exodus 17:8-15). He was given clear instructions to thoroughly defeat the Amalekites. However, Saul stopped short and allowed the soldiers to plunder the spoil, even though he was explicitly told to not let this happen. When Samuel confronts him, Saul somewhat confesses, but with a spin: “The people spared the best of the sheep and oxen to make a sacrifice to Yahweh” (1 Samuel 15:15). He justifies his stubbornness as a form of obedience, but he can’t see that’s what he’s doing. Samuel then calls Saul to account: “*Why then did you not listen to the voice of the Lord? And why did you rush upon the spoil and do evil in the sight of the Lord?*”

Saul is still unable to see his mistake: “*I did listen to the voice of Yahweh, and went on the mission he sent me... but the people took the spoil.*”

Now he’s blame-shifting to get Samuel off his back. But Samuel has had enough: “Does Yahweh delight in burnt offerings as much as listening to his voice? To listen is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22). It’s only at this point that Saul can see his error, and so he owns his behavior with a confession: “*I have sinned. For I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and your words, because I feared the people, and listened to their voice.*”

It’s really hard to tell how genuine Saul’s repentance might be. He’s slippery and has a habit of saying whatever he needs to say in order to get out of trouble. In just a few moments, he reveals one of his motivations for the show of remorse: Then Saul said, “*I have sinned, but please honor me before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn back with me, that I may worship the Lord your God.*”

Look inside your heart

Saul’s failures hit close to home, if we’re willing to let this story shine a spotlight onto our own hearts and minds.

Saul valued the opinion of the people over God’s wisdom. He feared people when he should have feared God. Moreover, he continued to worry about one thing in light of correction—his own reputation and honor. Saul is perpetually downplaying his role in the bad decisions he makes. He keeps bringing in other people as if they are responsible for his mistakes.

The remainder of 1 Samuel recounts Saul’s further slide into moral and spiritual decay. His descent provides a strong contrast with David’s rise to a role of influence. At the end of the day, Saul placed his real trust in himself, his plan, and other’s opinions of him. When convicted of this sin, his response is less than admirable. He never actually changes, and he perpetuates these behaviors until the end as he continues down a self-centered and prideful path. Contrast this with David, who is characterized in these same chapters as radically obedient and trusting of Yahweh, which eventually leads to his rise as king and solidifies his lineage.

These two characters provide us an opportunity for self-reflection so that we might find the blind-spots where our pride may be getting the best of us. We justify our poor decisions and try to negotiate with God. We let our cultural river sweep us away. All of this forces the reader to ponder if we are more similar to Saul than different. In what ways do we elevate the opinions of other people above the wisdom and love of God? In what ways do we blameshift in order to avoid truly owning our failures?

Saul’s demise is a powerful lesson, but as with all tragic stories, it serves a redemptive purpose. It’s a warning for us, so we don’t repeat his mistakes. Our deepest character flaws don’t have to define us or be the end of the story, not when it comes to the God revealed in Jesus. Unlike Saul, Jesus was a king of Israel who never failed, but took upon himself the consequences of the failure of others. Unlike Saul, Jesus never flinched when faced with the dark side of humanity. Rather, he ran directly into it with his love and passion because he knew that God’s power could overcome our evil and create something new. What Saul needed, and what we really need, are new hearts and minds that don’t need to defend

themselves or justify failure and selfishness. What we need is what David later prays for after his greatest blunder: *“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a spirit of integrity in me.”*