

JUDGED

1 Samuel 15:7-17, 22-23

When you hear the name Saul, who was the first king of Israel, do you have a positive or a negative impression about him? When you hear the name, Paul, the apostle who was also known as Saul of Tarsus, what kind of impression do you have about him?

Most of us think of King Saul in fairly negative terms. But did you know that when he was chosen for the position he had no desire to be the king and thought that he was unworthy of such responsibility. He knew very little about the commandments of God and how God worked in dealing with Israel. His humility was demonstrated in that he hid himself among the baggage when Samuel was going to introduce him as the one God had chosen to be the first king. He showed great restraint when many opposed his being chosen as king. He simply overlooked the disrespect they showed him. He showed Godly concern when the Ammonites threaten an entire city in Benjamin by calling upon all Israel to come to the rescue. He showed good organization skills in that he could assemble an army of 300,000 men. He showed a lot of wisdom in the way he conducted battles with the Philistines who were much better armed than the Israelite army. He told them he would surrender to them the next day, but attacked them from three sides during the night and totally defeated them. Saul recognized that the victory should be credited to the Lord and not to himself. He was admired by the people and had led Israel to many victories against their historical enemies. After he was chosen by God to be the first king, he was told that the “Spirit of the LORD will come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them, and shalt be turned into another man.” In 1 Samuel 10:9 we read that “God gave him another heart.”

Saul of Tarsus, was well versed in the law and commandments. He was brash and arrogant and saw himself as a leader of the effort in stopping what he considered to be a significant heretical threat against Judaism. He was willing to have those with whom he disagreed killed or put into jail. He did not show a lot of “people-leadership” skills in that he was somewhat of a lone-wolf in his efforts to eliminate those who were followers of Jesus of Nazareth. After he was chosen by God, he experienced blindness and then had his sight restored and was filled with the Holy Spirit.

So, what changed in that the way King Saul was judged went from positive to negative and the way we judge Saul of Tarsus has been transformed from negative to positive? It seems that the primary difference can be explained by the statement that “it is much more important to end well rather than begin well.” This does not mean that the end justifies the means, but it is an indication that the “end” provides evidence of the “means and what had happened along the way.”

Many people begin well and sometimes their successes can cause them to start being concerned more about their legacy than the benefit that their work is doing. King Saul’s mistake was that he began to be more concerned about his success than God’s glory. Some think that his initial humility was a result of lack of self confidence and that the successes that God had given him led to a growth of “self esteem” rather than more “confidence in God.” It wasn’t enough that Saul had God’s Spirit within him. He also needed to respond to the Spirit’s prompting with obedience.

On the other side of this coin, in the life Paul, we see a continuing growth in humility and a growing awe of the power of God working in the lives of those who were responding to the Gospel message.

There were two events recorded in the Scriptures that illustrate the growing arrogance of

King Saul and that he saw God as a means to an end that benefitted Saul rather than God's glory being the outcome of what he did. The first event involved his refusal to wait seven days for Samuel to arrive to offer sacrifices to the Lord before engaging in battle with the Philistines at Michmash but offered the sacrifices himself. Since Saul had not obeyed but acted out of prideful and presumptive arrogance, then judgment was pronounced upon his descendants regarding them succeeding him as king.

The second event that happened was many years later and involved his decision to follow his own ideas of what was correct rather than being obedient to what God had instructed him to do through Samuel the prophet of God.

Saul's Disobedience – 15:7-9

⁷ So Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. ⁸ He captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. ⁹ But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed. 1 Samuel 15:7-9 (NASB95)

After Saul's disobedience in 1 Samuel 13, he was given another chance to salvage the throne and make things better. The family dynasty was over but he (as the king) was still in power and his reign was still in effect.

The Amalekites were descendants of Esau. Because Jacob had bought Esau's birthright for a "bowl of beans" and had stolen the blessing from Esau, their hatred of the descendants of Jacob had grown over the centuries to the point that the Amalekites attacked the Children of Israel in the wilderness when they were very vulnerable as they traveled from Egypt to Canaan. They had attacked the rear of the group where the weak and infirm people were located. This was a contemptible thing to do and is comparable to the terrorists attacks we see taking place in our time. This was the time when Joshua was first called upon by Moses to lead the people into battle. After that battle, God had Moses write in a book that "I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

God had instructed Samuel prior to the battle that Saul fought with the Amalekites that everything that was associated with Amalek was to be totally destroyed. The Hebrew word for "utterly destroyed" has been translated elsewhere as "devoted to the Lord." The implication of this is that whatever is "devoted" is exclusively for His use and His purposes. Maclaren's commentary observed

"There are two kinds of devotion to God: that of willing, and that of unwilling, men; the one brings life, the other, death. The massacre of the foul nations of Canaan was thereby made a direct divine judgment and removed wholly from the region of ferocious warfare."

This was to be the fulfillment and consummation of the divine judgment of what God had pronounce 400 years earlier on the Amalekites for attacking Israel at Rephidim. Some commentators have noted that this was not an act of Israel attempting to inflict cruelty on their enemy but was an execution of God's judgment.

The fact that Saul and the people spared the best and destroyed only the worthless created a question of the motives of what was done to the Amalekites. It would certainly appear that their motives were for personal gain and praise from the rest of the people of Israel. They want to parade the captured king Agag and the livestock through the country side as testimonies of their great victory. Saul and those he was leading were focusing on themselves rather than on bringing glory to God. God became (for them) a means to an end, rather than an end in Himself.

Samuel's Confrontation – 15:10-15

¹⁰ Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, ¹¹ “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.” And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night. ¹² Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, “Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal.” ¹³ Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed are you of the LORD! I have carried out the command of the LORD.” ¹⁴ But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?” ¹⁵ Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed.” 1 Samuel 15:10-15 (NASB95)

The first to know (besides those who were disobedient) that they had disobeyed was God. Did Saul and his army not think that God knew what had happened and did they not think that He cared? If we could keep such awareness in our own personal lives that “God knows” and “God cares,” then would it be logical to think that such awareness would impact what we do? Can we make the argument that we DO know these things and we go ahead and do what we want to do anyway? This is proof that we love ourselves more than we love God and we give more weight to what we want to do than what would be pleasing to God.

This was the second significant incident of impetuous self-assertion in which Saul had engaged. The first incident prompted God to cut off the dynasty of Saul’s family from the line of kings. This confirmation of the fatal character flaw of Saul’s character caused God to regret his choice of Saul to be the first king of Israel. This “regret” was the same words recorded in Scripture regarding God’s reaction toward humanity to what was happening in the pre flood world. The idea behind this word is that God was prompted to make a change in direction and implement another possible option that would better suit His overall will being carried out. This does not mean that He changed His mind about his purposes and plans.

God shared His discovery and change of direction with Samuel who was not pleased with what Saul had done and “cried out to God all night.” What did Samuel want God to do? We are not told, but we can assume that Samuel was totally disappointed in the outcome of this first attempt to establish a kingdom for Israel. He may have been praying for God to forgive the bad choices that had been made by Saul and his army. He may have been imploring God to guide the nation to accept a better choice for the replacement king.

God had not told Samuel everything Saul had done. The next day Samuel discovered that Saul had set up a monument to himself at Carmel. How many times do we hear talk about people in high political offices wanting to do things that would “insure a legacy” for themselves? It is sad when a person thinks that he or she needs to do something to manipulate how they will be viewed in history. Admittedly, history does not always get it right, especially in the short term but usually the truth eventually comes out.

Could it be that deep down inside Saul realized that his accomplishments and his basic character would not amount to much in a historical perspective? In his insecurity, he tried to do for himself what God and Samuel were unwilling to do for him: to etch or write his name in stone and history. Ironically, his actions accomplished what he was trying to achieve; however, it was a negative rather than a positive account that was etched in history.

Saul’s priorities were all wrong. Saul wanted the limelight for himself in spite of the fact that he had done practically nothing to enable the successful outcome of the fight with the Amalekites. The rout of the Amalekites was essentially guaranteed since the battle was being engaged at the commandment of God through Samuel. Since things went so well, Saul thought that he would take credit for having accomplished a great victory. Many times we think that the harder the job is to accomplish, the more we need God and we then give Him credit. When things go well and the job is easy it seldom occurs to us that God had already solved the problem and simply let us be a part of what He had already done. God deserves the credit in both cases.

When Samuel realized what Saul had done to enshrine himself in history, he was past the point of anger and exasperation; he was at the point of disbelief. The man who was “small in his own eyes” in the beginning was now too big for his own good. Saul had become unrecognizable. Instead of becoming better, he turned worse.

Saul could have given lessons to modern day politicians. They ignore the law and they lie. Then when they are caught in their transgressions and lies, they immediately make up a story that is nothing more than a feeble attempt to put themselves in a better light. When Samuel finally caught up with Saul at Gilgal, Saul said “I have carried out the command of the Lord.” That was a partial truth. It was not the whole truth. We recall that in our court system, the oath that witnesses take is that they will tell “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

When the evidence of “bleating sheep and lowing cattle” revealed the lie, another lie had to be fabricated to justify the disobedience. That lie was that Saul and his men “saved the best cattle so they could make an appropriate sacrifice to God.” Apparently, the sacrifice was not as important as building a monument to himself at Carmel. As we have seen in national and even in local politics, covering up lies can become a full-time job.

In the realm of Saul giving lessons to today’s politicians, we might think that perhaps they have already studied his techniques. Check out the very first words that Saul spoke to Samuel: “The Lord bless you.” How often have we heard our leaders stand before the people and declare that they were enacting laws that are completely in conflict with the revealed word of God and then end their remarks with “May God bless the United States of America?” Such a proclamation is an affront to God and borders on blasphemy when we pass laws that approve behaviors that God has declared to be abominations and then ask God to bless us in our overt rebellion against Him.

God’s Rejection – 15:22-23

²² Samuel said, “Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *And* to heed than the fat of rams. ²³ “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from *being* king.” 1 Samuel 15:22-23 (NASB95)

For those who look for practical applications and doing what really makes a difference rather focusing on ritual and religious practices, these verses should help clarify how important action is to faith. So much of the “religion” of Israel was focused on formal sacrifices and ritualistic practices that could be carried out by people whether they were sincere or not in their devotion to God.

Samuel presented Saul with two extreme comparisons to help him understand the situation he was in. The best or highest activity of formalized worship was the “burnt offerings and sacrifices.” The worst thing that one could image regarding formalized worship would be to participate in consulting a pagan god or engaging in worship of an idol. If we focus on the best of the worship practices, then we need to realize that “simply obeying the voice of God” is better than that. If we take the worst practices that would be totally abhorrent to a typical worshiper, then we need to realize that rebellion and failure to show respect to God and His word are even worse.

It is a common error to think that God will overlook and forgive sins if we will just be careful to attend church and give an offering or engage in some worship activity or ministry of the church. All the religious activity in the world will not offset a rebellious spirit and a disregard for what we clearly know to be the will of God.

The judgment pronounced on Saul was that his rejection of the word (command) of God

had resulted in God rejecting him from being the king. While Saul continued on in the eyes of the people in the position of king, God instructed Samuel to anoint another person as king of Israel. This choice and anointing were not immediately publicized and well known, but the process was underway to prepare God's choice for Israel's king to be ready to lead upon the death of Saul.

When Samuel left Saul after this encounter, they never saw each other again. Since Saul was no longer king as far as God and Samuel were concerned, there was no need for the prophet of God to interact with him. One of the sad things about this series of events was that Saul had rationalized that what he did was OK and that partial obedience was as good as total obedience. He did not see a problem in taking on the duties of the high priest in carrying out a religious ceremony. He failed to see that a person's capacity to function in a role of a person in authority is directly related to his willingness to submit to authority.

Think about that last statement in terms of those who would aspire to be in positions of leadership in our nation, in our churches, in the community, in the family, or even in our own personal life. If a person chooses to ignore even the simplest rules regarding the use of a communication tool and then lie about it, or to ignore the Constitution and then lie about it, or to ignore simple etiquette and fairness standards and then lie about it; then, those who would do so are not qualified to govern a nation or even their own personal lives.