

Saul – The Failed King

Acts chapter 13, and verse 21 records how the people “desired a king, and God gave unto them Saul the son of Cis, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, by the space of forty years”. Saul then, was a king given at the request of the people. He was the kind of a man that the people would have rule over them, being “from his shoulders and upward” higher than any of them (1 Sam. 9:2). They saw in him a man of war, who would be able to lead them into victory against their adversaries.

That this is so is evident from the Old Testament record. 1 Samuel chapter 8 recounts the desire of the people, saying:

“we will have a king over us, that *we also may be like all the nations*; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, *and fight our battles*” (1 Sam. 8:20).

Here then, were two stated reasons for the people seeking a human king. Firstly, it was that they wanted to be like other people – and in this we have a warning for ourselves. Wanting the acceptance and approval of our peers is endemic to all generations. We also can be motivated by the desire to be like everyone else, so that we don’t stand out too much, as being an oddity in today’s society. But the Scriptures are clear. Consider the following testimonies:

“*be not conformed* to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind ..” (Rom. 12:2).

“come out from among them, and *be ye separate*, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:17).

“Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, *an holy nation, a peculiar people*: that ye should show forth the virtues of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet. 2:9)

“whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world *is the enemy of God*” (Jas. 4:4)

It is inevitable that those who follow the way of Christ will stand out as being different from those around them. As Peter wrote of the response of men of the World to the behaviour of men of God: “they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you” (1 Pet. 4:4). The natural response to this treatment is to minimise the difference between them and us. This can be seen in a whole variety of ways, from the practice of some to refer to the ecclesia of Christ as a “church,” and to the individual members thereof as simply “Christians” – when neither term is reflective of the truth, and both carry a doctrinal baggage which true believers want nothing of. But by using terms recognised by the majority of men, the aim is to lessen the difference between them and us.

The people made a democratic decision to have Saul reign as a human king, replacing the role of Yahweh as their king (1 Sam. 8:7). The second reason for this, is that their king would “fight our battles”.

In fact, Samuel comments on this later on as recorded in 1 Samuel chapter 12:

“when ye saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us: when Yahweh your Elohim was your king” (1 Sam. 12:12).

It was because the people no longer had trust that Yahweh would be their King and Deliverer that they sought a human king. The Psalmist wrote that: “it is better to trust in Yahweh than to put confidence in man” (Psa 118:8), but the faithless people trusted in the flesh to save them instead.

Even though the people had dubious motives in seeking a king, nevertheless when he was granted to them, Yahweh gave him certain tasks to attend to. It was in the Father’s purpose to raise up a Captain of Salvation, to deliver his people from the hands of the enemy. So Samuel was told: “thou shalt anoint him to be *captain* over my people Israel that he may *save* my people out of the hand of the Philistines” (1 Sam. 9:16). In this work, Samuel’s role was reflective of that of Messiah, Yahweh’s Anointed. Jesus the Christ is described by the Spirit as being “the captain of their salvation”, the “their” referring to his brethren (Heb. 2:10). So it was, that Yahweh’s warfare against the Philistines is likened to Messiah’s contention against the flesh – a theme that we will investigate further shortly.

The time when Samuel came to present Saul before the people, is characterised as being a time when Saul was humble. Rather than to boldly stand in front of all the people, Saul hid himself among the stuff (1 Sam. 10:22). Commenting to Saul about this later, Samuel said “When thou wast little in thine own sight, was thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel, and Yahweh anointed thee king over Israel?” (1 Sam. 10:17). In this, Saul provides a model example of humility before his God, an example that seems to be alluded to by Messiah himself:

“when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, *Friend, go up higher*: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and *he that humbleth himself shall be exalted*” (Lu. 14:10-11).

Saul was such an example of one who humbled himself, and was subsequently elevated to being king over Yahweh’s people. Interestingly in connection with these words of the Master, we read in 1 Samuel 9 of Samuel and Saul: “Samuel took Saul and his servant, and brought them into the parlour, and *made them sit in the chiefest place among them that were bidden*, which were about thirty persons” (1 Sam. 9:22). Saul then provides an example of one who was exalted in humility.

But tragically, Saul also provides an example of unbelief, in his failing to obey the voice of Yahweh. Speaking of a particular matter that we shall not consider here, Samuel had occasion to rebuke Saul saying: “Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of Yahweh thy Elohim, which he commanded thee: for now would Yahweh have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue: Yahweh hath sought him a man after his own heart, and Yahweh hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which Yahweh commanded thee” (1 Sam. 13:13-14). Because Saul refused the commandments of Yahweh, so Yahweh rejected him. Though he started well as a man of faith and humility, he fell through weakness and human pride.

The failure of Saul stands out in Scripture very plainly in the matter of the Amalekites. 1 Samuel chapter 15 records how Yahweh appointed a specific matter for Saul to take care of:

“Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Sam. 15:2-3)

Here was the command: to declare war upon, and smite utterly the power of Amalek, leaving none remaining. But instead of doing this, we read that Saul was very selective in those things which he destroyed:

“But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, *and would not utterly destroy them*: but everything that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly” (1 Sam. 15:9).

Here we see Human Nature exemplified. It is easy to cut out of our lives those things which seem not to confer any benefit, or which we take no pleasure in. But those things that seem to us to be “good” are much harder to remove. “Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14) is the Father’s Command, and by the very definition of what those lusts are, this will inevitably mean removing from our lives some of those things that we find ourselves attracted to, and which we desire. Saul desired those things that Yahweh had appointed for destruction, in a manner not dissimilar to that of Achan (Josh. 7:21) who desired the riches of Jericho. But he even went so far as to impute a religious motive to his actions:

“... the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice unto Yahweh thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed” (1 Sam. 15:15).

It is possible to use a religious reason to justify disobedience. The commandment was to utterly destroy everything to do with Amalek, but Saul saved the best alive, with the claim (whether true or otherwise) that the intention was to use them in service to Yahweh. Again, we can find a parallel of our own experience: it is possible to convince ourselves that a sin is acceptable if we can use it as part of our service to our God. Like the one who reasoned that gambling is not wrong, so long as we give all our winnings to the Lord’s service. The point is that Yahweh has decreed certain things to be destroyed out of our lives, and we are wrong to keep them alive under the guise of using them to serve Him.

So it was, that Saul was rejected of Yahweh, who said to Samuel: “it repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for **he is turned back** from following my commandments ...” (1 Sam. 15:11). Saul turned back into perdition, and so lost the kingdom, and in the final analysis, his life. So the writer to the Hebrews spake:

“Now the just shall live by faith: but **if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him**. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (Heb. 10:38-39).

The lessons for us in this matter are obvious.

By contrast with Saul, King David was a man after Yahweh’s own heart. Saul’s purpose as we saw earlier was to defeat the Philistines. Yet, though his faithlessness and lack of obedience, the Philistines defeated him instead. But David was a man of faith and courage, being prepared to overthrow Goliath, the champion of the Philistines. Goliath was the great man of Philistia, being “six cubits and a span” tall, and Saul was head and shoulders above all the people of Israel. It fell to Saul then, to fight against the Philistines, in obedience to the mission Yahweh had given him. But he did not have faith:

“the Philistine said, I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together. When Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, **they were dismayed and greatly afraid**” (1 Sam. 17: 10-11).

Saul, then, was “greatly afraid” and dared not contend against the giant. David, however, was not, even though he were but a youngster, a “stripling” (1 Sam. 17:56). Whilst “the Philistine cursed David by his gods”, David responded: “Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of Yahweh of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel whom thou hast defied” (2 Sam. 17: 44-45). Goliath came with an arm of flesh, but David in the Name of Yahweh. David knew, and trusted in the fact that the warfare was Yahweh’s (cp. 1 Sam. 17:47) against the power of sin, and that He would confirm the victory.

In this context, it is appropriate for us to consider Psalm 8, which seems to draw upon the incident involving Goliath and David in its prophecy concerning our Master, Jesus the Christ:

“out of the *mouth of babes and sucklings* hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, *that thou mayest still the enemy* and the avenger” (Psa. 8:2).

The allusion here appears to be to David, a “stripling” who stilled the enemy Goliath.

“what is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the Son of man, that thou *visiteth him?*” (Psa. 8:4).

This seems to draw on Samuel visiting David, to anoint him to be king.

“thou hast put all things under his feet: *all sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field ...*” (Psa. 8:6-7).

Those things of Amalek that Saul refused to destroy: sheep, oxen etc, will all be subjected to Christ.

“O Yahweh our Adonai, how excellent is thy name *in all the earth*” (Psa. 8:9).

Cites 1 Sam. 17:46, where David describes the consequence of his victory: “that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel”.

The point of these connections appears to be this: David’s slaying of Goliath pointed forwards to the work of Christ in overcoming Sin. Goliath epitomised the flesh in all its rebelliousness and antipathy to Divine things. There were two stages in his death: firstly David through a stone, which sank into his forehead (1 Sam. 17:49) causing him to fall to the ground. This seems to point towards the smiting of Israel’s enemies in the future: “God shall wound the head of his enemies, and the hairy scalp of such an one that goeth on still in his trespasses” (Psa. 68:21).

The second stage in the slaying of Goliath also points forward to the work of Messiah: Goliath was slain by his own sword. His sword was the power of death that lay in his hand: with it he thought to slay David, Yahweh’s beloved. But instead David took that sword (1 Sam. 17:51), and slew him with it – using sin’s (Goliath) own weapon against itself. Even so we read of Messiah: “that *through death he might destroy him that had the power of death*, that is, the *diabolos*.” Just as Goliath was slain with his own weapon, even so the Sin’s power is destroyed through death, so that it can be said of the Master: “thou hast ascended on high, *thou hast led captivity captive ...*” (Psa. 68:18).

When we come to consider the examples of Saul and David, we find two contradictory personages. Saul started off very well, in humility and with a Divine Commission to destroy the Philistines. But through his lack of faith in Yahweh, and disobedience to his commands, the Philistines destroyed him. There is a lesson in that: if we don’t faithfully engage in the warfare of faith against Sin, Sin will destroy us at the last.

What a contrast between Saul and David! David was not afraid to war against the enemy, and so doing this he is typical of how Messiah would overcome that which held the power of death, even by utilising death itself. We must, therefore be like David, a man after God’s own heart, a man unafraid of the enemy. But we can also find exhortations in the life of Saul, being both a good example in the way he began, but also an example of unbelief at the end. In considering these men, we are brought to our Redeemer, Jesus the Christ. He is our Captain who shall lead us into victory against the greatest enemy of all, even sin itself. In memorialising his sacrificial death, we remember his great victory – which victory will be ours, if we hold fast to the faith without wavering, and certainly without turning back.

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