

Lessons from Saul – The Rebellious King

Aim:

To learn from the example of Saul about the danger of justifying sin, and how it can end up alienating us from God.

Reading: **1 Samuel 28:3-19** *Saul consulting a medium before the battle at Mt. Gilboa.*

Introduction:

Context of reading:

Most of us would be familiar with Saul. He was the first Hebrew king over the nation of Israel. I say “*Hebrew king*” because Israel already had a king – His name was “the Lord God Almighty” (**1 Samuel 8:7; 12:12b; Judges 8:23**). But there are times when God’s people are not satisfied with what the Lord has put in place, and so they want to change things in order to be more like the world around them (**1 Sam. 8:5**). So on this occasion, God relented and let them have their way – he let them have an earthly king (**1 Sam. 8:7-9**).

So Saul was made king over the house of Israel, and he reigned for about 40 years – in a time context, this was around 1000 years BC. By the time we get to the passage of scripture shown in our reading, Saul is about to face his final battle with the Philistine armies, a battle that will end in his death. The situation is this;

- Samuel, the prophet whom Saul had consulted earlier in his reign, has died at some time ago, and had been buried in Ramah – **1 Sam. 25:1; 28:3**.
- The Philistine army has gathered for war against Israel at Shunem, a place located about 25km south west of the Sea of Galilee. Saul and the army of Israel are camped nearby at Mount Gilboa - **1 Sam. 28:4**.

When Saul saw the Philistine army, his heart sank. He was facing a formidable foe. He knew he was in trouble. In **1 Sam 29:1-2** we read about all of the Philistine armies getting together and having a military review at Aphek. The lords of the Philistines numbered in their hundreds and thousands. (it’s a bit like some of the scenes from the Lord of the Rings movies.) Earlier on in **1 Samuel**, we read about the Philistine army having 30,000 chariots, and people (soldiers) as numerous as the sands on the seashore (**1 Sam. 13:5**). And from **1 Sam. 13:19-22** we can also assume that they had better weapons than Israel. No wonder Saul was afraid.

But Saul does not turn to God for help, he turns to a medium. Now consulting mediums was forbidden by God (**Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deuteronomy 18:9-14**), and in fact, Saul had previously driven such people from the land (**1 Sam. 28:3**).

So why is it, then, that Saul now turns to a medium for help in his hour of need ?

Why is it, then, that the king of God’s people turns to such a person when God says that those who turn to mediums will be “*cut off from His people*” (**Leviticus 20:6**)

The lesson this morning will look at the circumstances leading up to this event, and what lessons we can learn from it.

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LESSON

1) The early reign of Saul

When Saul became king, he had a lot of things going for him;

- He was tall and handsome (**1 Sam. 9:2**).
- He didn't have to fight for the throne – God gave it to him (**1 Sam. 9:15-17**).
- He had a certain amount of humility (**1 Sam. 9:21**).
 - he “bit his tongue” when some people scoffed at the idea of him being King (**1 Sam 10:27**).
- The Spirit of God came upon him and he was able to prophesy (**1 Sam. 10:6-11**)
- He had an early military success – he saved the city of Jabesh Gilead from the Ammonites (**1 Sam. 11:1-13**).
- He gave God the credit for his victory at Jabesh Gilead (**1 Sam. 11:13**)

But after a couple of years, things began to change (**1 Sam. 13:1**). In **1 Sam 13:5-7** we read that the Philistines had gathered together at Michmash (near Bethel) to attack Israel. This is where we read about the 30,000 chariots in the Philistine army. They also had 6,000 horseman, and soldiers that were numbered like “the sands of the seashore”.

When the men of Israel saw the danger, they were fearful, and so they ran away and hid. Saul was still in Gilgal (near Jericho) with some of his men, and those men with him were terrified. From verse **8** we read that Samuel had instructed Saul to wait for him there for seven days. But when Samuel looked like being late, the people started to panic and leave. So Saul took things into his own hand and offered up a sacrifice (**1 Sam. 13:9**). But just when he did that, Samuel turned up. From what Samuel says to Saul in verse **13**, it is obvious that Saul had done the wrong thing. And it is here that we start to see a trend from Saul – he starts giving excuses for his sins.

2) Saul's excuses for his sins

At Gilgal

When Samuel confronted Saul about his sin at Gilgal, Saul tried to justify his sin by offering the following excuses;

- “*you hadn't come when expected*”
- “*the people were starting to leave*”
- “*the Philistines are gathering at Michmash*”
- “*they will come and attack me at Gilgal*” (**1 Sam. 13:11-12**)

There is no indication in these verses of Saul repenting of what he had done, not even after Samuel gave him the bad news. As a consequence of his sin, he was going to lose the kingdom, and not just he was going to lose the kingdom his descendants would not be king either.

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Failure to destroy the Amalekites

In **1 Sam. 15:1-3**, God had instructed Saul to go and destroy the Amalekites. This nation had attacked the Hebrews after they had come out of the land of Egypt (**Exodus 17:8-14**). What Saul was required to do was to fulfill the prophecy that God had made in **Exodus 17:14** – God had said, “...*I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven*”.

But Saul failed to do what God had told him to do. He spared the king of Amalek, King Agag, and allowed the people to take the best of the flocks of sheep and oxen. When confronted by Samuel about his disobedience, he again offered excuses;

- “*the people spared the best of the flocks so that they could sacrifice them to God*” (**1 Sam.15:15**)
- “*I did most of what I was asked to do. I killed all the people*” (paraphrased)

But excuses don't justify sin, and “*good intentions*” are no substitute for obedience. So again God, through Samuel, tells Saul that He has rejected him from being king – **1 Sam. 15:23**

While Saul acknowledged that he had sinned (**1 Sam. 15:24-25, 30**), he does not seek God's forgiveness. In fact, he asked Samuel to pardon him. But at the end of the day, he is not accountable to Samuel, he is accountable to God (**2 Cor. 5:10**). He needs God's forgiveness.

While acknowledging sin is important, simply acknowledging sin doesn't bring forgiveness – repentance and prayer are also required (**Acts 8:18-22**).

NOTE: We may think that God was a bit harsh on Saul. But who are we to tell God what is “fair” or “not fair” (**Isaiah 55:8-9**).

The murder of the priests at Nob

Some years later, David was on the run from Saul. Saul had become very jealous of David's military success and popularity (**1 Sam. 18:5-9**), and it got to a point where David was forced to flee from Saul's presence in order to save his life (**1 Sam. 19, 20**).

David and those with him came to a place called Nob, a town north east of Jerusalem. They were hungry and had no food, so the priests gave them the showbread that they had just replaced in the tabernacle (**1 Sam. 21:1-6**). Saul finds out about this and sends for the priests (**1 Sam. 22:9-11**). After a brief interrogation, Saul had all of the priests killed, and then slaughtered all of the inhabitants of Nob – men, women, children, babies and animals (**1 Sam. 22:12-19**) – he had them all killed.

And how did he justify this ? Saul believed that the priests were conspiring against him (**1 Sam. 22:13, 17**), so he had them all killed.

3) The consequence of Saul's sins

Sin always has its consequences. For Saul, the kingdom was going to be taken away from him and his descendants. But something much more

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serious had happened to Saul. And it was this - God had stopped listening to him. No matter how Saul made his enquiries, God did not answer him – not by dreams, nor by the Urim¹, nor by the prophets (**1 Sam 28:6, 15**). Whenever Saul called on the Lord, the Lord didn't hear him. The problem wasn't God's ears, the problem was Saul's rebellious heart..

We see in both the Old and the New Testament that God is a patient God (**Jeremiah 3:12; 18:8; 1 Peter 3:9**) and shows mercy to those who repent. But God's patience also has its limits (**2 Kings 17:22-23a; Revelation 2:5**).

Unrepentant sin separates us from God (**Isaiah 59:1-3; Romans 6:23**). If we repent and seek God's forgiveness, we can be reconciled to God. But an unrepentant heart will only incur God's wrath (**Hebrews 3:7-11**). In **1 Peter 5:5b** we read,

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble”.

Saul wasn't the only king who sinned. King David committed some pretty terrible sins with regards to Bathsheba and Uriah (**2 Sam. 11:1-27**). He committed adultery with Bathsheba, got her pregnant, tried to cover it up, and when that didn't work, he arranged to have Uriah killed in battle. But the difference between Saul and David was that when David was confronted with his sin, he repented; he had a contrite heart, and he asked God to forgive him (**2 Sam.12:13; Psalm 51**). The difference between Saul and David was that David *“was a man after God's own heart”* (**1 Sam. 13:14; 16:7**). – deep down, David wanted to do the will of God, whereas

Saul just wanted to do what Saul wanted to do.

While all sin is wrong, sometimes the sinful act itself is not the real problem. Rather, it is a symptom of something much more fundamental – the problem of a rebellious heart. In **Matthew 12:35** we read;

“A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things.”

A rebellious heart does not bring glory to God – it does evil, and brings upon itself the wrath of God (**Hebrews 3:8-11**).

Even in the dire times of **1 Sam. 28**, Saul did not seek to make things right with God. He wanted God's help (**1 Sam. 28:6**), but there is no indication that he had a repentant heart. And so he consulted a medium, knowing what God had said about such things (see Introduction), and he justified it by implying to Samuel that he had no choice (**1 Sam. 28:15**). Brethren, when it comes to sin, we always have a choice – we can choose to either sin or not to sin (**1 Corinthians 10:13; Matthew 4:3-10**).

Right to the very end, Saul is still trying to justify sin rather than repent and turn to God. Saul was prepared to bow down before the spirit of Samuel (**1 Sam. 28:14**), but it seems that he was not prepared to get down on his knees and plead for God's forgiveness.

¹ An object worn by the priests in the breastplate, and used to determine the will of God (**Exodus 28:15-16; 30**)

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The next day, the Philistines had a victory over Israel. Saul and his three sons died in the battle, along with many others of the house of Israel - (**1 Sam. 31:1-6**). Based on what happened during the time of Joshua, and what we see later in the Books of Kings, God could have wiped out the Philistines with a single blow (e.g. **2 Kings 19:35**). But God in His wisdom allowed things to run their course, and so the army of Israel was defeated in the battle.

4) Application for us

The story of Saul is a tragedy. But an even greater tragedy would be if we didn't learn the lessons from it (**Jeremiah 3:6-11**). In **1 Corinthians 10:11** we read that the things that happened in the Old Testament are there for us to learn from. One of the lessons that we can learn from Saul is the danger of trying to justify sin. I'm sure that most of us can think of ways in which we have tried to justify the sins that we have committed. For example;

- when we do something to hurt someone else, we “justify” it by saying things like;
 - *“She did it to me first”*
 - *“He deserves all he gets”*
- when we gossip about someone in order to show them up in a bad light, we “justify” it by saying things like;
 - *“Well, what I said was true, what I said was right”* – what you said may well be true, but did you really need to be say it. And what was your motive? - to try and seek help for the person ? or to try and discredit them ? - **1 Timothy 5:13**.
- when we choose to do things in a way that we know will cause offence to others, while at the same time knowing that we can do it in another way that won't offend others, we “justify” it by saying things like;
 - *“It's my right. I'm allowed to do this, people just need to get over it.”* - the lesson from **Romans 14** and **1 Corinthians 8:12** is that, if we deliberately stand on “*our rights*” knowing that it will cause offence to others, then doing it is sinful.
- when we know something is wrong, but we want to do it anyway, we “justify” it by saying things like;
 - *“It's just a little sin. It won't make much difference”*
 - *“Anyway, other people are doing it, nobody says anything”*
 - *“God will forgive me. I just need to repent later on and God will forgive me”* – consider **Galatians 5:13**

The “*liberty*” being talked about here is the liberty, or freedom, that we can have from the guilt of sin – **Romans 8:1**. But we should never abuse God's grace or take it for granted - **Romans 6:1-2, 15; 1:28**

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One of the problems in rationalizing sin is that we can convince ourselves that there is no need for repentance. If we think that the sinful act was justified, then we won't be inclined to have a godly sorrow and seek God's forgiveness (**2 Corinthians 7:9-11**).

In **Hebrews 10:26-27** we read;

“For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.”

This passage is *not* saying that if a christian willfully sins then they are automatically lost forever and that there is nothing left but condemnation at judgment. God acknowledges that we sin (**1 John 1:8, 10**), and the Bible clearly teaches us that a Christian who sins can be forgiven – we see that in passages like **Acts 8:22** and **1 John 1:7-9**.

I suspect that what this passage is talking about is the situation where a Christian sins, but has no intention of repenting of it. This is the situation where the Christian says something like, *“I don't care if it is sinful. This is what I want to do and I don't care what others think about it, I'm going to keep on doing it anyway.”*

The Hebrew writer says that when we think like this and refuse to repent, we *“trample underfoot the Son of God, count the blood of the covenant by which we were sanctified (as though it were) a common thing, and insult the grace of God”* – **Hebrews 10:29**.

Another danger is that, if we sin and “justify” it often enough, our conscience can become seared (**1 Timothy 4:2**) – our sin won't bother us any more, because we have convinced ourselves that what is wrong is actually right. **Hebrews 3:13** talks about the *“...deceitfulness of sin..”*. Sin can eventually deceive us into thinking that what we are doing is right, when in reality, and more importantly, in God's eyes, what we are doing is wrong.

We all sin (**Romans 3:23**). But a key factor that separates the righteous from the unrighteous is what we do after we have sinned.

- the unrighteous will excuse their sins. But making excuses for sin and trying to rationalize sin doesn't make sin right. Sin is still sin no matter how we try to justify it to ourselves.
- the righteous have a genuine, godly sorrow (**2 Corinthians 7:10**). They understand the terrible price that Jesus had to pay in order for us to be forgiven (**1 Peter 1:17-19**), and they pray to their Lord and Master with a sincere heart for His grace and mercy (**Luke 18:13b**).

If you have sin in your heart, I would encourage you to consider the lessons that we can learn from the life of Saul, and not to make the same mistakes that he made.