

1 SAMUEL 13 - AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

Study 14

SAUL'S PHILISTINE WAR

Once when I was windsurfing, my board met with a sudden hurling me through the air. I had hit a kayak. Ruin can come so quickly. That is the impression that 1 Samuel 13 makes. Saul's kingship, as approved by God, finds a quick end.

Nonetheless, the chapter begins on a high note. Saul finally gets around to obeying the Word of God as given through the prophet. The command of 1 Samuel 10:7-9, was for Saul to "do what your hand finds to do." This instruction is for Saul to do kingly things, such as defeat the occupying Philistines forces. Instead, in 10:22 Saul is hiding among the baggage, and in 11:5 Saul is doing farmwork. Hardly the work of a king!

But now, Saul has gathered an army, and his son Jonathan has defeated the Philistines (1 Sam. 13:3). At this moment, Saul has endeavoured to obey the Word of God.

The Philistines hear of the attack (13:3). There is now open hostility between these two nations. Saul sends a message to gather a force to stand against the mobilised Philistine force (5). Saul was not content that with enemy occupation in the promised land.

And neither should we be content! Our enemy is not a physical force, but the spiritual forces of evil. We don't pick up a sword in this battle, but the spiritual weapons that God has given us.

We fight against the satan, who has blinded our world to seeing the wonders of Jesus. That might mean a voice of resistance in an ungodly culture. But more likely, it will mean gospel proclamation and service to a broken world.

READ 1 Samuel 13:1-4

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?

SAMUEL'S FAILURE

The Philistines respond exactly how you would expect, with overwhelming force (5). The Hebrew word for thousand can also refer to a military unit. So verse 5 could read as 30 chariot regiments. Either way, Israel is outmatched and Saul's army fled (6-7).

In obedience to Samuel (1 Sam. 10:8), Saul had gone to Gilgal, and waited the prescribed seven days. But we read ‘Samuel did not come to Gilgal.’ What a difficult trial. Saul has endeavoured to be faithful, but now his nation is falling apart.

How should we understand all this? This is the nature of faith, God tests our faith to prove that it is genuine (1 Peter 1:7). Saul’s trial was difficult, but it was not unique, others have faced similar trials. The proper response for Saul was for him to trust God.

What did Saul do instead? He offered the burnt offering, moments before Samuel arrived on the scene (9). Sometimes we fail because we didn’t persevere just a little longer. Samuel cries out “what have you done?” (11). Saul tries to excuse his actions (11-12). But Saul was not the priest, it was not his role to offer the sacrifices. As king, Saul needed to set an example of faithfulness. But rather, he failed to obey the word of God.

We might say that Saul was merely trying to look out for his people. Should we believe that God is more concerned with obedience in worship than he is about the wellbeing of a nation. This passage would answer with a resounding yes! God’s sacrifices were holy. We are not to mess around with holy things. The sacrifices ultimately pointed to Christ. A hope that rises above momentary wellbeing and national crises.

There are a number of lessons we can draw from Saul’s failure:

1. We see a Biblical definition of foolishness. Foolishness is to disregard the Word of God;
2. We see that obedience to God, is obedience to God’s word;
3. If we want to do God’s work, we have to do it God’s way;
4. Matters that seem insignificant to us, may be of vital importance to God.

READ 1 Samuel 13:5-14

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. Are our ‘explanations’ as to why we did not do God’s will ever adequate?
3. Saul undervalued the Holy Sacrifices. Do the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:23 put this matter into a proper perspective.
4. Saul departed from God’s Word. Do you think we sufficiently value the Word of God?

DESPERATE TIMES

Samuel now leaves the scene. Saul is left in a position of despair. Everything has gone wrong, including his attempt to honour God.

Saul returns to the army to number them. In the face of the Philistine war machine, only six hundred men remain. Verse 17-21 detail the Philistines spreading throughout Israel, taking control and tightening their grip. Thanks a lot King Saul!

The chapter ends in a scene of despair. Saul is cornered in the garrison that he captured, and Israel has no weapons with which to fight back (22). But help is closer than Saul could imagine.

One of the key themes of this passage is God's desire for a man after his own heart (13:14). In this chapter, God gives Saul the opportunity to be that man. Saul's obedience was tested, and he failed.

The man after God's heart would partially be fulfilled in King David, but completely fulfilled in Jesus. We have the hope that we are also being transformed into men and women who are after God's own heart.

READ 1 Samuel 13:15-23

QUESTIONS

1. What features of this passage stand out to you?
2. The Christian may feel helpless, but are they never hopeless. What should situations of helplessness do for the believer?