



Community Group Discussion Guide

October 27, 2024

1 Samuel 13: 1-15 | Saul's Folly

MOTIVATE

⇒ **Starter question: What is something foolish you've done and what were the consequences?**

DISCUSS

1 Samuel 13-15 deals with the early reign of King Saul. The events of these chapters serve as a bridge between the justification of kingship as an Israelite institution, the rejection of Saul as Israel's first king, and the rise of David. 1 Samuel 13 and 14 are devoted to Saul's battles with the Philistines, who reappear as Israel's main enemy. The Philistines had precipitated the crisis when they captured the ark of the covenant in 1 Samuel 5.

Saul came to the throne for one main purpose: to lead Israel in battle. Saul began his career by doing just what the elders of Israel had demanded—serving as king in the fight against Israel's enemies. Saul triumphed over the Ammonites and continued to have momentary successes against the Philistines. But this was also the beginning of Saul's undoing. 1 Samuel 13:1-15 contains the first of two confrontations between Saul and Samuel, in which the prophet announced God's rejection of Saul.

⇒ **Discuss this quote: As is often the case in biblical history, the ultimate failure of our hero is not his inability to defeat the enemy. Rather, all is not right in his relationship with God.¹**

1 Samuel 13:1-4: Saul lived for one year and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel, **2** Saul chose three thousand men of Israel. Two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin. The rest of the people he sent home, every man to his tent. **3** Jonathan defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was at Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, "Let the Hebrews hear." **4** And all Israel heard it said that Saul had defeated the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become a stench to the Philistines. And the people were called out to join Saul at Gilgal.

This chapter begins with a typical chronological notation about Saul's age when he ascended to the throne and the duration of his reign. It is approximated that Saul was about thirty when he took the throne and that he reigned for forty-two years.²

In an effort to drive the Philistines out of Benjaminite territory, Saul assembled a force of three thousand soldiers. Saul may have discussed this strategy previously with Samuel, but the text does not indicate Saul sought the Lord before attacking the Philistines.³ In 1 Samuel 11, Saul led in battle as he was prepared and anointed to do as Israel's king. In that conflict, Saul was empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh and led his people to a decisive victory. It's important to note that no "Spirit-language" is present 1 Samuel 13.⁴

Two thousand of Saul's soldiers went with him to Michmash overlooking a pass leading up to the Philistine outpost at Geba. One thousand camped with Jonathan, Saul's son, at Gibeah, the capital of

¹ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (pp. 196–197). Zondervan.

² Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 92). Holman Reference.

³ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 92). Holman Reference.

⁴ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (p. 201). Zondervan.

Israel at the time. The rest of the recruits Saul sent back home.⁵ Saul's plan was to attack the outpost and then assemble all Israel at Gilgal to repel the Philistine counterattack.

Jonathan appears here for the first time with little fanfare. He is not identified specifically as Saul's son until verse 16. Yet he will play a significant role in the rest of 1 Samuel as the crown prince and expected heir to Saul's throne. While Saul remained with the larger body of troops, Jonathan was the courageous commander of a military division and the one who initiated the assault on the Philistines at Geba. Jonathan was successful and Israel "became a stench to the Philistines." A full-fledged war was on the horizon.

- ⇒ **Does Saul's lack of presence with Jonathan and Jonathan's success possibly foreshadow a future problem with Saul's leadership as king?**
- ⇒ **In what ways is Saul acting foolishly as king?**

1 Samuel 13:5-7: And the Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude. They came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth-aven. **6** When the men of Israel saw that they were in trouble (for the people were hard pressed), the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns, **7** and some Hebrews crossed the fords of the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.

Israel was unprepared for the serious reaction of their enemy. Learning of Saul's movements, the Philistines sent an overwhelming counterforce of chariots, horsemen, and ground troops. When Saul's soldiers and the people observed the seemingly insurmountable size of the Philistine army, many panicked and scattered. Some hid in caves, holes, rocks, tombs, and cisterns. Others went east of the Jordan in an attempt to escape. Needless to say, great fear came on all the Israelites.

- ⇒ **What does the Israelite response indicate about their faith in God?**
- ⇒ **Why did Saul's actions fail to inspire confidence?**
- ⇒ **Are you prone to "hide" or "escape" when faced with what seems to be an unsurmountable circumstance? What keeps you from doing so?**

1 Samuel 13:8-9: He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him. **9** So Saul said, "Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings." And he offered the burnt offering.

Obeying Samuel's previously given directions, Saul and his remaining troops camped at Gilgal for seven days, awaiting Samuel's arrival before going back into battle against the Philistines. As a priest, Samuel was the only one qualified to offer the appropriate sacrifices and to commission Saul and his troops.

It had been established through God's law that before the armies of Israel went out to war, several preparations were necessary ([Deuteronomy 20:1-9](#)). The priest would come forward to address the army and offer a sacrifice to God. The warriors who marched into battle had to be pure and consecrated to Yahweh. These offerings were made before fighting to atone for their sins. Those who had built a new house or vineyard or who had become betrothed in marriage were allowed to return home. The fearful and faint-hearted were also excused.⁶

When on the seventh day it seemed to him that Samuel was not coming, Saul himself began performing prebattle sacrificial rites that should have been carried out by the priest. Saul's desperation and impatience led him to disobey Samuel's instructions, as well as the law regarding sacrifices. Though he was Israel's king, Saul was not to be above the covenant. He was to remain accountable to its ethical standards and to stand faithful to its requirements. As a covenant leader, he was to display

⁵ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 92). Holman Reference.

⁶ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 104). Holman Reference.

courage in the face of overwhelming odds, trusting that God would fight for His people. Saul could not second-guess God or adapt the divine command to his own liking or will.⁷

- ⇒ **How did Saul show he was unfit to lead God’s people?**
- ⇒ **Are there difficult circumstances in which you are tempted to second-guess God or adapt His Word to your situation?**

This episode illustrates the way Israelite kingship was intended to function. The king was not free to initiate warfare whenever and against whomever he wished. He had to answer to a higher authority. He could only receive marching orders from Yahweh and his prophet—in this case, Samuel. Thus, the text demonstrates the unique nature of the Israelite version of ancient monarchy as well as the unique nature of prophecy in Israel. Standing beside every Israelite king was to be a prophet speaking God’s Word for the situation. The degree to which the king obeyed or rejected that prophetic word was the determining factor in the Bible’s evaluation of his reign. In a sense, Yahweh remained Israel’s king, represented by His prophet, who ordered His anointed one.⁸

- ⇒ **How do you apply the function of Israel’s king to your life today?**
- ⇒ **How do you avoid functioning like the world in desperate situations?**

1 Samuel 13:10-12: As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came. And Saul went out to meet him and greet him. **11** Samuel said, “What have you done?” And Saul said, “When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, **12** I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the Lord.’ So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering.”

Just as Saul finished the offering, Samuel arrived. Samuel asked Saul directly, “What have you done?” Rather than taking responsibility for his actions Saul placed the blame on the people scattering, Samuel’s delay in arriving, and the Philistine presence. Showing a lack of courage, Saul associated himself with the sin only by stating that he offered the sacrifice under duress.⁹

Saul’s guilt derived from his determination to usurp power rightly belonging only to Yahweh and His servant, Samuel. More generally, this text presents us with a portrait of Israel’s first king, who had received all the blessing and empowerment any of us could hope to receive from God. Yet when pressed on every side by the approaching Philistine army, Saul was still inclined to disobey God’s command.¹⁰

- ⇒ **“What have you done?” Why is this an important and challenging question to consistently ask yourself?**
- ⇒ **Why are we prone to justify our disobedience rather than confessing it?**

1 Samuel 13:13-15: And Samuel said to Saul, “You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the LORD your God, with which he commanded you. For then the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. **14** But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.” **15** And Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal. The rest of the people went up after Saul to meet the army; they went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people who were present with him, about six hundred men.

⁷ Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). *1, 2 Samuel* (Vol. 6, p. 106). Holman Reference.

⁸ Arnold, B. T. (2003). *1 & 2 Samuel* (p. 198). Zondervan.

⁹ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., Whitehead, M. M., Grigoni, M. R., & Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). *Faithlife Study Bible* (1 Sa 13:9–11). Lexham Press.

¹⁰ Arnold, B. T. (2003). *1 & 2 Samuel* (p. 201). Zondervan.

On the surface of the narrative, Saul's offense was a failure to wait for Samuel's arrival before consecrating battle. But more generally, this was tantamount to disobeying Yahweh's instructions as given through Samuel, which in turn exposed Saul's larger problem: he failed to accept the structure of authority established for him by Yahweh and His prophet Samuel at the time of his appointment.¹¹

- ⇒ **As believers, do we have a structure of authority established for us?**
- ⇒ **Why is it important we follow this structure?**
- ⇒ **Is there any excuse you can give that will justify disobedience to God and His Word?**

Samuel condemned Saul's action as foolish. No excuse could justify disobedience to God's command and covenant. The term *command* specifically refers to the stipulations of the Torah (Exodus 24:12), and it is used here to indicate that Samuel's words spoken in his role as a prophet were to be equated with those of Moses on Mount Sinai.¹² Saul usurped Samuel's prerogative to seek guidance from God and to give instructions about the conduct of the battle. By his actions Saul implied that it was not necessary to wait on God or to seek His will. Believing he could function by himself, Saul proceeded as if did not need to remain faithful to the covenant. Saul's punishment for acting like a king from other nations and disobeying God's commands produced two consequences.

First, God had intended to give Saul a dynasty, but because of his sin, Saul would be the last of his line to rule over Israel. Since Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin rather than the tribe of Judah, these verses are difficult to interpret. God, in His providence, knew Saul would be unable to fulfill his role as king. It's also important to note in God's promises to Saul in 1 Samuel 9:16 and 10:1 that an eternal kingdom was not mentioned. The emphasis was on God's promise that Saul would defeat the enemies of the Israelites—which God did allow him to do.

Second, God had already taken measures to seek out "a man after His own heart" to replace Saul as leader of His people. The same word *leader* used to describe Saul's position is used here. Clearly, Saul's leadership position was based on his faithful obedience.¹³ Saul lost the opportunity to establish an eternal dynasty. He himself will keep the throne, but it will not pass to his descendants and endure forever, as eventually will be promised to David (2 Samuel 7:15–16).¹⁴

- ⇒ **As a penalty for his disobedience, God took away Saul's opportunity to have his heirs sit on Israel's throne. Saul illustrates that our obedience to God brings blessings to our families and our disobedience can pull them down. What blessings could be lost to your family because of your sin?**
- ⇒ **While the story does not yet reveal David's identity, what contrast is made between his character in comparison to Saul's?**
- ⇒ **How will David's selection as God's choice be different from Saul's?**
- ⇒ **What does it mean to be a man or woman "after God's own heart?"**

It appears that Samuel then left Gilgal without offering any sacrifices. Saul abandoned his plan to attack the Philistines and returned to his hometown of Gibeah. His army of 3,000 had dwindled down to about 600. The situation looked very bleak for Israel.

- ⇒ **What must the Israelites have thought of their new king at this point?**

¹¹ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (pp. 200–201). Zondervan.

¹² Andrews, S. J., & Bergen, R. D. (2009). [1, 2 Samuel](#) (Vol. 6, p. 93). Holman Reference.

¹³ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (p. 198). Zondervan.

¹⁴ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (p. 198). Zondervan.

TRANSFORM

1. Make personal application: Saul was blessed with the Spirit of God and was assured he was God's choice. Saul exemplified God's power in his life during the war with the Ammonites, which was a similar situation as the one he faced here. But even all this was not enough to make him faithful in obedience to God's Word through Samuel in the midst of the Philistine crisis. When threatened with apparent defeat and with his enemies pressing from every direction, he personally took charge and trusted his own ability to lead.¹⁵ Saul failed to see that the kind of leadership that pleases God can only be built through obedience to His will.

- ⇒ **How do you learn to trust God when you see your own resources slipping away?**
- ⇒ **How do you learn to trust God even when you think your resources are sufficient, when you think you can handle it by yourself?**
- ⇒ **How do you learn to completely rely on God alone?**
- ⇒ **Why does God require faithful obedience?**

2. Pray: Praise God for being sovereign and providential. Thank Him for narratives like this one about Saul that teach us about God's desire for faithful obedience. Ask God to reveal a pattern of sin in your life in which you attempt to take matters into your own hands.

STUDY

Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:

- *Holman New Testament Commentary, 1 and 2 Samuel*, pages 92-94, 104.
- *The NIV Application Commentary, 1 and 2 Samuel* pages 195-203.
- *Shepherd's Notes, 1 and 2 Samuel*, pages 23-24.

¹⁵ Arnold, B. T. (2003). [1 & 2 Samuel](#) (pp. 201–202). Zondervan.