

# ***“What Happened to Saul?”***

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***The picture is always bigger than you can see.***

***1 Samuel 15:10-23***

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***Saul: A king's gotta do what a king's gotta do***

Every story has two sides. Nobody tries to understand mine.

I never asked to be king. I never thought I was the right person. I was terrified when Samuel said “the desire of Israel” had turned to me and to my family (9:20). When Samuel anointed me with oil, he had to give me three very specific signs that God was with me (10:2-7). God changed my heart that day (10:9), and I was willing to serve.

Nobody knows what life is like when you hear, “Long live the king!” (10:25). There’s a weight that comes on you. Suddenly everyone looks to you as the decision-maker. They want a hero. From that moment, a king’s gotta do what a king’s gotta do.

Almost immediately after I was chosen by lot at Mizpah, the Ammonites, our nemesis to the east, threatened one of our cities. The citizens of Jabesh could live if they allowed the Ammonites to gouge out their right eyes (11:2). The people started weeping, but the Spirit of God came on me and I burned with anger (11:6). A king’s gotta do what a king’s gotta do. I led the warriors in a slaughter of the Ammonites, and only then did Samuel lead a coronation feast for me at Gilgal (11:11).

That same day occasion Samuel made his farewell speech (12:1). On my coronation day he reminded the nation that it definitely wasn’t God’s choice for them to have a king. He called down an out-of-season thunderstorm that terrified them into confessing their sin of asking for a king (12:17-19). That was the ominous start to my reign.

Years passed, and the threat emerged again from the Philistines, our nemesis to the west. We had become so complacent we had allowed them to monopolize the manufacture of iron tools and spears (13:19). When they turned against us we had no weapons to fight them.

My son Jonathan had become a mighty warrior and general, and he defeated them in the first skirmish. The Philistines then brought their entire military machine to fight – six thousand chariots plus as many warriors as the grains of sand on a beach (13:5). My few thousand troops were terrified. Our people hid in caves or fled across the Jordan River (13:6-7).

Samuel had told me whenever I needed him to go to Gilgal and wait seven days (10:8). It was Day 7 and he was still not there. He had sent no messenger. I didn't know if he was dead. I did what I had seen Samuel do. I offered a sacrifice to God before going to war. Just as I finished, Samuel arrived asking, "What have you done?" (13:11).

"With the odds stacked against us I knew our only hope was in the LORD. I wanted to seek God's favor. A king's gotta do what a king's gotta do (13:12).

I expected Samuel's affirmation. Instead he arrived with, "The king has done a foolish thing. Your dynasty is done. God will seek "a man after his own heart" (13:14) to rule Israel. Seriously? The Philistines are preparing their assault, I ask for God because the old man is slow arriving, and I'm the one who is foolish?

Samuel disappeared again, so I made sure I had one of priests in the camp. Ahijah had in his possession the ephod with the Urim and Thummim so we could properly inquire of God (14:3, 18-19, 41). I even required my men to fast before the Lord. No one was to eat anything (14:28). I wanted to do it right this time.

As we prepared to ask Ahijah what to do next, we heard the clamor of panic in the Philistine camp (15, 19). I told Ahijah, "Never mind," and we headed toward the enemy. Even before we got there, the Philistines were in total confusion and running away. We pursued them.

As we did, we came across some honey oozing out of trees. We were all hungry, but I reminded my troops of the oath. "Nobody eats anything until we finish the job with the enemies!" (14:24) When we finished, then we ate! We feasted on beef and mutton, and I made sure we followed our ritual laws. No one was to eat bloody meat (14:34-35). Then I built an altar to sacrifice to the LORD. (14:35).

What I didn't know is that the rout had started when my son Jonathan and his armor bearer left the camp without permission and assaulted some Philistines on their own. (14:1-2). Two of them had killed a Philistine troop, and that had started the panic. An earthquake terrified the enemy even more (14:15). I also didn't know that Jonathan had come across the same honey trees and had eaten some.

I was furious! He should not have gone out on his own. He had violated the oath. A king's gotta do what a king's gotta do, and I was ready to have my own son executed on the spot for violating the oath. My soldiers saved him from my wrath.

From there I won battle after battle against Ammonites, Edomites, Zobahites, and Amalekites (14:47-48). The people had the king they wanted – a warrior who won battles. A king's gotta do what a king's gotta do.

After a long absence Samuel emerged again, with another command from Yahweh (15:1). Apparently just defeating the Amalekites was not enough. I was told to dedicate all of them to God – to kill every human and every animal then burn them all as a sacrifice. It wasn't my idea, not even my desire. This was an act of punishment on idolaters whose ancestors had ambushed our people when they came up out of Egypt (3). I mustered a huge army and did the job. I knew how to kill and destroy (7-8). I killed every weak, helpless, whimpering soldier and their families too.

With the total victory over all our enemies on all side, it was time to erect a monument in honor of my exploits (12). We did that in Carmel of Judah and moved on to Gilgal for a victory feast. My generals wanted to save some of the best Amalekite cattle and sheep to sacrifice to God. Though we killed everyone else, I didn't execute King Agag so that in humiliation he could see the desolation, grieve the loss, watch the party, and, best of all, bow at my monument.

We proceeded to nearby Gilgal, where I had been crowned king. I knew if I went there, Samuel would come within seven days. I wanted him there. I hadn't seen him in years. I wanted him to be proud of me for winning God's battle.

Samuel met us all right. I expected him to say, "I was wrong about the kingship. You have done well, my son. When he arrived, I said, "The LORD bless you, Samuel! I carried out the Lord's instructions! (13) We totally destroyed the Amalekites. I saved Agag so he could see what happens when you defy Saul. Look at his face. We also saved the best cattle and sheep to sacrifice to the LORD your God!"

***Samuel: Pray, wait, listen, and obey***

There are two sides to every story. Saul never understood mine.

It is true that Saul did not seek the kingship. It is true that I did not want Israel to have a king "like all the nations." The people were rejecting God as their king. Since the time of Moses this stiff-necked group nation has never wanted God to rule them.

As a boy in the temple, I learned if you want to know what God wants of you, you must pray, wait, listen, and obey. The first prayer was that of my mother, Hannah. From Eli I learned to wait, listen, and obey – even when it's hard. In the night I heard God's voice. I waited, listened, and obeyed.

When the people asked for a king, my response was to pray, wait, listen, and obey. God told me to give them a king. So I did. I told Saul, your direction from God is to go to Gilgal and wait seven days. I will meet you there.

I crowned him as king in Gilgal. I publicly turned the nation over to him. I brought my own sons to the occasion so they and all Israel would know Saul was now God's anointed (12:2-3). I reminded the people that they had never won battles with the help of kings (12:6-12). But God would be with this king and with them if they would fear the LORD and keep his commands (12:13-15). I prayed for a sign from God. I waited and listened. The answer to my prayer was an out-of-season thunderstorm reminding them and me that God was speaking through me (12:16-18).

The storm terrified the people, and they asked me to pray for them since they had sinned against the LORD by asking for a king (12:19). I warned them again against serving false gods but reminded them they were still God's chosen people (12:20-22). I would always pray for them; it would be my sin not to. But they and their king need to pray, wait, listen, and obey (12:23-25).

Saul had already won a great battle against the Ammonites. When threatened by the Philistines, he went to Gilgal and waited six days, but not seven. "What have you done?" I asked him when I learned he had already offered the sacrifice (11). He felt "compelled," he said, because he needed God's help (12).

I withdrew again – for years. I stayed out of sight when Saul and his people turned their weapon factories over to the Philistines. I remained hidden as Jonathan grew up and became a mighty warrior. I was silent when the Philistines gathered their massive military machine. This would be a battle that the king and his army would have to learn to pray, wait, listen, and obey.

Had it not been for Jonathan's courage to trust in God while he took action, I don't know what might have happened. God gave him victory and God sent an earthquake and Israel was spared in spite of Saul's rash vow of a fast. He had done right in seeking God's favor and direction with the priest and the ark and the ephod.

In those days Saul began to trust his instincts instead of his God, his sword instead of his faith. He concluded, as so many leaders do, that it was his giftedness, his leadership, his skill and instinct that defeated the Ammonites, Philistines, Moabites, Edomites, and Amalekites. He knew what to do. When he had assembled a loyal, fierce army he didn't need God and didn't need me. So I stayed out of sight.

Then it was time for another test. God sent me to Saul with a word from the LORD. I reminded him that I was the one who had anointed him (15:1). He was now to enact the punishment on the Amalekites for their idolatry – the same fate that all of Canaan had suffered under Joshua's conquest. They had also not allowed Israel pass through their territory on the way out of Egypt. They were to be destroyed and

dedicated as an offering (15:3-4). God's punishment had been delayed, but it was time. Saul would do the work. The instructions I passed on to Saul were not imprecise. "Totally destroy. Do not spare anyone or anything."

When the Lord came to me to tell me that Saul had disobeyed and God was grieving the choice, I was furious. But I prayed and I cried. Well, to be honest I shouted, I agonized, I wrestled with God all night long (15:11). Had I not prayed when they first asked for a king (8:6, 21), but God had said to give them what they asked for? And was it not God who chose Saul, a king "like all the other nations"? I hated to say, "I told you so" to God, but I had told him so!

In my agony I prayed, I waited, and I listened – all night long. The word of the Lord was that I should confront Saul. I obeyed. Saul's excuses and defenses, even his confessions wouldn't work with God, and they didn't work with me.

So what happened with Saul? Two words: rebellion and arrogance. To Saul, the ritual of sacrifice was the point. That was never the point. Saul had become too successful, and his success made him proud.

When Saul was successful, he ignored God. When he was desperate for God, he was impatient. Saul went from asking for God's help to fighting and winning battles on his own, or at least thinking he had. Power corrupts, and Saul's soul had been corrupted. He thought his sins were excusable, not as bad as divination or idolatry.

To obey is better than sacrifice. Pride in your own achievements is idolatry. He had never learned how to hear the word of the Lord – you pray, wait, listen, and obey.

### ***God – I don't pick sides***

There are never only two sides to every story. No human should ever presume to fully know my side. I don't pick sides – not in any story, not in any conflict, not even in any war. My purposes in time and eternity far exceed anything any human in any moment can imagine or articulate. My side in this story sounds like this –

*First, the picture is always bigger than you can see.* Why did I choose Saul if I knew he would fail? Why did I choose Israel if I knew they would reject me? Why did I create humanity if I knew they would sin?

I do not owe you explanations. My ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. I work in each generation, in each situation, in each person, in ways you humans cannot possibly grasp. Must I justify my choices to you? Do you know who I am? Did you speak stars and oceans into existence? Did you create hearts that beat and eyes that see and souls that live forever? Can you?

Imagine if I had gone directly from Samuel to David. That's what you would have done, right? David would never have been David had it not been for Saul. Saul was my

instrument to make David learn to pray, wait, listen, and obey. Even Samuel could not possibly have known how critical Saul was for the development of David. I needed to show the entire nation, and David himself, that a rocket shot to a place of power will destroy a man. To be sure, David had his own flaws, but imagine a David without years of watching Saul's mental and spiritual decline, years of learning to pray on the lam.

Widen your lens to all of Israel's history, all of human history. How could you possibly know that the choices I make which seems terrible in the moment are not working toward a larger purpose? Those who know me trust my heart.

The ways you speak of me – I “regretted” this or I “chose” that – are true but only in the sense that they are the closest your limited understanding and language can express. To say that “I was sorry I chose Saul” is simply a way of making me more human so you can grasp it. I grieved Saul.

*Second, my heart is bigger than you can imagine.* I loved Samuel. I loved Saul. I loved the Amalekites. I love you. My motive is always love.

All of human history is a story of love seeking you. I appointed Saul knowing he would fail. I chose Israel knowing they would rebel. I created humans knowing they would sin. Love takes risks, but more importantly, love gives freedom. Saul had every opportunity to do the right thing. He was appointed and mentored by one of my finest servants so that he could learn by observation to pray, wait, listen, and obey.

I wanted so much more for Saul. My heart ached when he disobeyed. I sent Samuel with harsh rebukes that seemed disproportionate because I knew where his arrogance would ultimately lead. Even with multiple stories of Saul in the pages of Scripture, some of you still do not accept the warnings from my servants and my word. My call to repentance is real, and it's now. If you have become complacent in your victories, if you have ignored my warning shots, you risk the same fate as Saul. My heart is always bigger than you imagine.

*Third, the change you seek will take longer than you want.* These stories in the history of my people are there to teach you of me. They are there to teach you not to place your trust in any human leader. They are there to teach you that I do not share your limited view of history – that everything must be fixed in the moment, that you are even capable of knowing what “fixed” looks like.

I withdraw strategically, like Samuel does, from visible intervention in nations and persons. But I'm never done. I'm still not done. Saul's story led to David's and David's led to Jesus' and his led to yours. In your moment, you want rapid response from me, but I'm not in your hurry. I will not be rushed by you. I will complete what I started in you, and I will finish what I started in this world. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. Trust me. Amen.