

The Lord's Rebuke of Saul.

Introduction: It is helpful to remember how this passage fits into the overall context of 1 Samuel. Chapter 13 begins the intertwined stories of the decline of Saul and the rise of David that will be a major theme of the remainder of the book. Note the first indirect mention of David in verse 14 that “the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart.” (NIV) In this narrative, Saul serves as a foil for David. In literature, a foil is a character who serves as a contrast to another perhaps more primary character, to point out specific traits of the primary character. As the story develops, we will see Jonathan—first mentioned in this week’s passage—also emerge as another foil.

Q. 1. Chapter 13 describes yet another of the Israelites’ confrontations with the Philistines. Who starts this one; what is the consequence?

Jonathan seems to precipitate the confrontation by attacking the Philistines at Geba. (This is the Bible’s first mention of Jonathan). We are not told why Jonathan attacked Geba. It is possible to offer some speculation.

- Geba was allotted to the tribe of Benjamin and was one of the cities assigned to the Levites (Josh. 18:24; 21:17; 1 Chr. 6:60). Jonathan may have wanted to recover a Levite city for Israel.
- Geba is quit far eastward, making a major Philistine intrusion into Israelite territory.

It seems predictable that the Philistines would retaliate. The text emphasizes the massive size of the army the Philistine’s mobilized. This forces Saul to recall the men that verse 2 recounts he has recently sent home.

Note that although the verse 3 attributes the Israelite attack to Jonathan; in verse 4, the people think the credit or blame belongs to Saul. Either way, it is Saul, as King, who must deal with this crisis. How well he manages to do so will reveal much about his character, his faith, and his fitness to lead God’s chosen people. It is a lesson we as readers are to remember and recall later to compare with David.

Q. 2. Compare this confrontation with the previous confrontations:

- **with the Philistines in Chapter 7 and**
- **the Ammonites in Chapter 11.**

Comparison with Chapter 7 at Mizpah:

- In both cases, the Philistines vastly outnumbered the Israelites who consequently were afraid.
- At Mizpah, the Israelites turned to Samuel, asking him to cry out to the Lord in their behalf. Here many of them run and hide.
- Here, Saul, instead of waiting for Samuel, attempts to do himself what Samuel did, by sacrificing to the Lord.
- Mizpah is a story of trusting God. This is not.

Comparison with the Ammonites in Chapter 11.

- In Chapter 11, the spirit of God was with Saul. Here it is not.
- Against the Ammonites, 300,000 thousand Israelites mustered with Saul. That would likely have outnumbered the Philistines here, but fewer Israelites have answered the call and many of those who did are scattering.

The point of making this comparison is to recall the evident faithfulness of both Saul and the Israelite army in the two previous instances. In both previous instances, the Israelites prevailed over their enemies.

Q. 3. (a) Why is this sacrifice so important?

(b) What is wrong with Saul's sacrifice? Consider that both David (2 Samuel 24:25) and Solomon (1 Kings 3:15) will make similar sacrifices with no hint of rebuke.

3 (a). The sacrifice seems important because of the experience at Mizpah in Chapter 7 where Samuel cried out to God and sacrificed in the face of a Philistine attack. As a result, God intervened and the Philistines suffered a decisive defeat. Given the military situation here in Chapter 13, that seems the Israelites only hope.

But, for Samuel the sacrifice is important because it is a test of Saul's trust in God, as mediated through is prophet.

3 (b). The problem with Saul's sacrifice is not that as King Saul was forbidden to make sacrifices as the later examples of David and Solomon make clear.¹ Verses 13 and 14 repeat the reason. Saul has not kept the Lord's command. What command? The one given him by Samuel in 1 Samuel 10:8:

“And you shall go down before me to Gilgal; and behold, I will come down to you to offer burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings. You shall wait seven days until I come to you and show you what you should do.”

This is the test of Saul's faith. It is easy to understand Saul's anxieties. The people will hold him responsible (see verses 3 and 4). He faces a hugely superior army. The longer he waits, the more his soldiers slip away. Under these conditions, seven days is a long time to wait! That Samuel delays his appearance until the end of the end of the seventh day seems intended to emphasize the seriousness of this test. Will Saul (as the Israelites did at Mizpah) call on Samuel to cry out for the Lord's protection? Or, will he attempt to take matters into his own hand and assume an authority that is not his. Is Saul a king like other nations have who answers to no one, or is he a king of God's chosen people who answers to God?

Is Saul hoping his sacrifice will duplicate the experience at Mizpah? If so, it does not. Instead, it resembles the Israelites bringing the Ark to the battlefield as a lucky charm seeking to insure defeat the Philistines in Chapter 4. Similarly, Saul's sacrifice is not based on faith.

¹ Commentators and scholars differ here. Some do say Saul's failure was to intrude into a religious rite reserved exclusively for the priesthood – of which Saul was not a member. But, verses 13 & 14 both expressly say Saul's failure was in not keeping the Lord's command. The relevant command seems to be the one received through Samuel, to wait seven days.

Compare the example of God's rejection of Saul's sacrifice with His rejection of Cain's offering over Abel's.

In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD.⁴ And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,⁵ but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. Genesis 4: 3-5. (NIV)

Hebrews 11:4 explains:

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings.

To outward appearances, Cain's and Abel's sacrifices look the same. Saul's sacrifice looks the same as David's or Solomon's. The difference is in faith. Abel was commended "by faith." Cain was condemned. So too is Saul.

Q. 4. Samuel finally arrives. What is Saul's reaction? Samuel's? What is the result?

Saul, with his usually spiritual insensitivity, is initially oblivious to what he has done. He goes out to greet (literally to "bless") Samuel. If he expected Samuel to be happy with him, he was disappointed. Saul's excuse for usurping Samuel's role as priest and prophet is lame. He attempts to convince Samuel that he was "compelled" (NIV) or that he "forced himself" (NASB) (against his own will?) to do the sacrifice. Samuel is not impressed as his direct and stern words show. Saul's actions were foolish—because they were willful disobedience to Samuel's clear and direct orders. Saul's disobedience will cost him his dynasty. Though his reign will not immediately be terminated, his sons will never sit on his throne.

Rebuked by Samuel, rejected by God, Saul is left to face the Philistines with his army reduced to a paltry 600 men. The narrator does not even bother with telling us the military outcome. In the next verse, the narrator simply reports Saul and Jonathan at Saul's home city, Gibeah. How he escaped the massive Philistine army is unreported. The point of the passage is not Saul's military failure. Instead, it is his failure of faith and character in the face of grave crisis. The military outcome is irrelevant.

Q. 5. Just as Saul is a foil for David, giving us an example by which to compare, how does Saul compare to us?

The question is intended to stimulate open-ended discussion. Here are some points leaders may suggest to their groups:

- Like Saul, when we have no sense of our calling, we are headed for trouble.
- God's commands serve as a test of our faith and obedience.
- Emergencies are not excuses for disobedience to God's commands, but a test of our faith and obedience.
- God's judgment may be pronounced long before its consequences are apparent. Saul continued to be King for many years after this event.
- God works through less than perfect, less than ideal people.

APPENDIX

This Leaders' Guide ignores issues surrounding differing versions of verse 1. But, members of your group may observe these differences in their Bibles and ask about them. Here are examples from four common versions:

NIV 13:1 Saul was [thirty] years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel for [forty-]two years.

NASB 13:1 Saul was *thirty* years old when he began to reign, and he reigned *forty* two years over Israel.

KJV 13:1 Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,

ESV 13:1 Saul was . . . years old when he began to reign, and he reigned . . . and two years over Israel.

The modern translators supply the words “thirty” and “forty” bracketed in the NIV and italicized in the NASB. These words do not appear in the Hebrew Masoretic text. Modern translators supply them. There are theologically sound reasons for doing this. (For example, Acts 13:21.) Still, it is an informed amendment to the surviving text. The translation in the King James Version more accurately translates from the Masoretic text, but makes no sense. Most commentators think that the correct number has been lost in the process of copying and preserving the text over millennia. The use of ellipsis in the ESV is one recent method of acknowledging that the correct text here is unknown.