



Finer Grounds Bible Study

1 Samuel

Lesson 7: 1 Samuel 6

In 1 Samuel 12:24-25, Samuel warned Israel and Saul to follow God with their whole hearts. If they did not follow God, the nation and the king would be swept away. Saul knew that he should follow God, but as we will see in this lesson, he did so half-heartedly. A

Read 1 Samuel 13:1-4

Saul established a standing army that he led with the help of his son Jonathan. Jonathan, acting with Saul's authority, defeated a fortified group of Philistines in Geba, a town in Benjamite territory. Saul announced to the Israelites that he had provoked war with the Philistines. It appears that he planned to finally drive them out of the lands of Israel.

Read 1 Samuel 13:5-7

The Philistines reacted to Jonathan's attack by proclaiming full-out war. They brought a large force to battle the mustering Israelites. Notice how fear plagued the Israelite response to this news.

List the ways the Israelites exhibited fear.

Some hid in any crag and crevice they could find, even making themselves ceremonially unclean by hiding in tombs. Some fled across the Jordan River, going as far east as they could since the Philistines approached from the west. Although the standing army of 3,000 still followed Saul, they did so trembling.

Read 1 Samuel 13:8-15

At first read, it may be unclear which command Saul broke. Some say that Saul's sin was defying Samuel's order to wait seven days before going into battle. As God's prophet, Samuel might have established this waiting period at the behest of God. Samuel gave similar instructions to Saul before he became king (see 1 Samuel 10:8). Perhaps Samuel used this time to inquire of God before Saul went into battle. Whatever the reason for the wait, when the seventh day arrived, Saul's impatience got the best of him. As his already small force of 3,000 men continued to shrink, Saul, fearing the hoards of Philistines, "forced" himself to offer the sacrifices without Samuel, signaling that he was willing to go to battle without hearing from God's prophet.

Some believe that Saul's sin was that he offered the sacrifice without the help of a priest. God appointed the priests to conduct the burnt offerings (Leviticus 1:3-9). It certainly would have been a sin if Saul had indeed offered the sacrifice himself, taking on the task reserved for the priests. Many years later, another king would try to take-on priestly duties and would pay dearly for it (see 2 Chronicles 26:16-20).

While both explanations have their merits, these verses certainly indicate that Saul's motivation for sacrificing was not correct. He sacrificed because he feared the approaching Philistines and felt obligated to offer a sacrifice. If he truly wanted to inquire of the Lord, he would have waited for Samuel, God's prophet, to arrive. Saul offered the sacrifice as a ritual of "good luck" instead of as the heartfelt worship and petition that it should have been.



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How did Saul justify offering the sacrifice (v. 11-12)?

Saul attempted to defend his actions in three ways.

1. The people were fleeing, and he feared not having enough manpower to fight the Philistines. Was this excuse valid? Not really. Hadn't Gideon, at God's command, defeated the Midianites with 300 men (Judges 7)? So, while Saul tried to put the blame for his actions on the steadily decreasing size of his army, he should have known that God would have given him the upper hand if it was His will to do so.
2. He blamed Samuel for not coming in time. The only problem with this excuse was that Samuel had come in time. He arrived just as Saul finished the burnt offering. Saul simply chose not to wait the full seven days for Samuel.
3. Saul tried to make his actions seem noble. He stated that he had to inquire of God before he went up against the Philistines. Saul's previous excuses imply that he had already formulated a plan, reliant on having what he thought was enough men at his disposal. He used the sacrifice to give the appearance of entreating God for help, while his actions showed that he trusted his own plan, and not the plans of God.

What excuses do people use to justify sin or to make sin sound reasonable?

What are some ways that we feign trust in God while really relying on ourselves?

What is the punishment that Saul received for disobeying God?

Due to his disobedience and lack of faith, God did not allow Saul to establish a dynasty. What is so sad about this story is that God desired to bless Saul with an everlasting kingdom (v. 13). Had Saul obeyed God's command, he could have been the first of a long line of kings over Israel. Unfortunately, his sin caused God to withdraw this blessing and give it another man "after His own heart."

Saul's sin had done nothing to help his cause. His force of 3,000 shrunk to 600 men, and Samuel had left without providing any guidance from God. Saul had sinned to gain an advantage but ended up in the very situation he hoped his sin would prevent.

Read 1 Samuel 13:16-22

The situation worsened for the Israelites. Saul and his forces moved to Geba (also called Gibeah of Benjamin) while the Philistines took the strategically important Michmash. The two cities were over a mile apart and were separated by a deep pass that allowed access to the tribal lands of Ephraim. From their perch at Michmash, the Philistines could see the valley below them, thus making any kind of surprise attack almost impossible. Feeling secure in their position, the Philistines sent out raiding parties to the surrounding towns.



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Besides having large forces and good battle position, what other advantage did the Philistines have over the Israelites?

Read 1 Samuel 13:23-14:5

Who was with Saul (14:3)?

Saul and his troops were accompanied by the priest Ahijah, who was the great-grandson of Eli. Remember that God had cursed Eli's descendants, but they had not yet been destroyed completely and still served as priests.

What is an ephod (see Exodus 28:1-30)?

Although the term ephod usually refers to the clothing of the priests, it sometimes refers to the function of the priestly clothing as well. The high priest used the Urim and Thummim that were contained in the priestly garments to inquire of God.

Read Numbers 27:18-21

How was Joshua to determine the will of God?

Just like Joshua, Saul had a priest with him to ask God for guidance in battle. He may have learned from his mistake at Gilgal and decided to keep the priest nearby to offer sacrifices properly and to make God-guided decisions during the battle.

While Saul waited, Jonathan prepared to act. Even though the Israelites were at an extreme disadvantage, Jonathan decided to fight the Philistines with just his sword and his armor bearer.

Read 1 Samuel 14:6-14

Compare Jonathan and Saul's beliefs concerning the number of troops needed to fight the Philistines.

Jonathan's bravery and faith in this passage sharply contrast Saul's fear in the earlier incident. While Saul was concerned about having only 600 men, Jonathan trusted that God could use just two men to defeat the "uncircumcised" Philistines.

Jonathan and his armor-bearer asked God for a sign to attack based on the Philistines reaction to seeing them. We will read later in 1 Samuel 14:21 that some members of the Israelite army had defected to the Philistine army. The Philistines at Michmash may have thought that Jonathan and the armor bearer were also defectors; certainly, two men were no threat to a garrison of at least 20 men. When the Philistines asked them to come up, Jonathan had an affirmative sign from God to attack. Jonathan and his armor bearer didn't hold back, and easily defeated 20 Philistine soldiers.

What other Israelite heroes asked God for signs to go into battle?

Read 1 Samuel 14:15-23

God supported Jonathan's attack by causing an earthquake. The Philistines, having dispersed themselves over the land in small groups, didn't know



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what was going on or how many men were attacking. Hearing the commotion and feeling the earth shake beneath them, they feared that a large force had broken their front lines; they fled in all directions.

What was Saul’s reaction to the report from his watchmen?

The uninformed king didn’t know that his own son had acted without him. Seeing the enemy army in flight, he decided to inquire of God through Ahijah the priest. As it became obvious to him that the Philistines were in retreat, Saul stopped the priest from inquiring and assembled the men for battle. “[Saul] commands Ahijah to seek divine guidance by means of the ephod, but, at a crucial time, he interrupts the consultation. Saul is a person who prays when he should act and acts when he should pray. Such inconsistency is one of Saul’s characteristics” (Tsumura 366).

When Saul’s men decided to join the battle, they found that the Philistines were doing most of the work for them. As the Philistines turned on each other, the Israelite deserters rejoined Saul’s forces and chased the Philistines north past Beth-aven.

Read 1 Samuel 14:24-35

As Jonathan had prepared to attack the Philistine garrison, Saul forced his men to take an oath not to eat until they achieved victory. Fasting is a commendable action, but it is usually associated with prayer, not with battle. Saul, focused on the small size of his forces compared to the size of the Philistine army, attempted to force God’s hand through a quid pro quo. “In his relationship with the Lord he was ‘rash and presumptuous’ and ‘he tried to manipulate the divine will through ritual formality.’” (Tsumura 368, McCarter 251). God doesn’t respond to quid pro quo, he responds to faith.

Compare Saul’s vow to Hannah’s vow in 1 Samuel 1:11. Consider the heart of the vow-maker, the reason for making the vow, and the outcome of the vow.

What is Jonathan’s response to the men who tell him about his father’s vow?

What did the men do when they were finally able to eat?

Why was this a sin? Read Genesis 9:3-4 and Leviticus 7:26-27.

Seeing the people sinning, Saul decided to make a place for the men to properly bleed the animals. In doing so, he attempted to prevent any further sin against God. He built an altar, most likely to offer a sacrifice of repentance for the men. While Saul’s attempt to correct the sin of his men was laudable, remember that the sin would not have occurred in the first place if Saul had not forced the men to fast.

Read 1 Samuel 14:36-46

Saul was ready to continue the battle with the Philistines through the night, but the priest reminded him to inquire of God first. God did not answer. This caused Saul to assume that someone had sinned against God. Remember that this occurred after the men had just eaten the blood of animals and after Saul himself was rejected as king. In those circumstances,



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Saul exhibited little zeal for holding the sinners accountable. In this situation, Saul was ready to execute whomever kept the Israelites from complete victory. His anger might have resulted from the fact that it was his command to fast that was violated.

Jonathan admitted to the fault when the lot fell on him. The people intervened on his behalf, realizing that Jonathan was the only man that acted out of faith and trust in God. His willingness to fight the Lord's battle led to the victory. The people were unwilling to let Saul kill the man who rescued them because of Saul's own misguided vow.

We may be tempted to praise Saul for his zealous behavior. After all, he was willing to execute his own son in keeping with the vow. While God revealed through the Urim and Thummin that Jonathan was the culprit, God did not force Saul to make his rash vow in the first place. God would have delivered the Israelites through Jonathan's action with or without Saul's vow.

Read Leviticus 5:4-6

What could an Israelite do if he had to break a rash vow?

In verse 45 (ESV), it says that the people "ransomed" Jonathan. Knowing that Saul's vow had to be broken in order to save Jonathan, they offered a sacrifice to atone for Saul's unreasonable vow.

Who else in the bible made a vow that cost them dearly?

Read 1 Samuel 14:47-52

How does this passage show God's faithfulness to keep the promise He made to Saul in 1 Samuel 10:1?

This section provides a summary of Saul's military victories and a list of his children. Even though God sought to replace Saul, He still gave Saul military victory as he had promised in 1 Samuel 10:1. God is faithful even when we are not.

What do Saul's actions in this lesson reveal about his attitude towards God?

Saul made the all too common error of trying to align God's will with his own rather than aligning himself with God. Saul only inquired of the Lord because he felt he had to, not because he trusted the Lord's guidance. He used sacrifice like a good luck charm, much like the Israelites had used the ark in 1 Samuel 4. He made an impulsive vow, hoping that it would entice God to support his cause. Saul knew what he wanted to do and tried to use acts of devotions to legitimize his decisions and influence God's will.

What do Jonathan's actions in this lesson reveal about his attitude towards God?

In contrast, Jonathan acted with faith and wisdom. He bravely fought the Lord's battle even when all the odds were against him. His faith brought about great victory for the Israelites. His actions were only thwarted by the actions of his own father, whose lack of trust in God cost them a greater victory, and almost took Jonathan's life altogether.



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If you were to compare yourself to these two men, which one would you be? Are you a Saul, who looks the part of Christ-follower but whose worship is done to benefit yourself and not to honor God? Do you try to make deals with God? Do you pray for Him to act in accordance with your will instead of trying to act in accordance with His?

I pray that we can act with a heart full of faith like Jonathan did. If we did, we would trust God's abilities rather than our own. We would rely on God to deliver us and guide us, even when the odds seem against us. Above all, we would wait for Him to make his perfect will known to us, and then boldly act in accordance with it.

Character Study: List any adjectives used to describe Saul's actions in 1 Samuel 13 and 14. Take some time to describe Saul's relationship with God. Also, note any new information you learned about Saul's family.

Consider Samuel's reaction to Saul's sin. What adjectives best describe his rebuke of Saul?
