

A Formula for Failure

1 Samuel 13:2-14

Nearly two decades have passed. During that time, there have been battles which are not recorded in God's Word. But this one is.

The account begins with a summary of military maneuvers and commands.

Now Saul chose for himself 3,000 men of Israel, of which 2,000 were with Saul in Michmash and in the hill country of Bethel, while 1,000 were with Jonathan at Gibeah of Benjamin. But he sent away the rest of the people, each to his tent. Verse 2 Israel's army was really a militia: citizen soldiers who were called up and sent into battle when they were needed. And for a time, they were not needed.

So Saul sent them home. But he did keep a standing defense force of three thousand. He stationed two thousand of them at his headquarters atop a steep hill at Bethel. The rest were stationed a few rugged miles southwest near Saul's old home at Gibeah under the command of the king's son, Jonathan.

Israel had defeated the Ammonites. But that does not mean God's people were without a threat. Their old enemies, the five lords of Philistia, still oppressed them.

The Philistines were especially interested in metallurgy. They dug iron ore out of rocky ridges. Then blacksmiths heated and hammered the ore into swords and spear heads.

To be sure the Israelites did not do the same, Philistine commando squads arrested and killed all the Jews who worked with metal. So Israeli farmers had to go to Philistine smiths to have their scythes and sickles, their hatchets and hoes sharpened.

Now no blacksmith could be found in all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, "Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears." 1 Samuel 13:19

The result was catastrophic for God's people. While the armies of Philistia were armed with razor sharp swords and spears, Jewish troops had none at all.

So it came about on the day of battle that neither sword nor spear was found in the hands of any of the people who were with Saul and Jonathan, but they were found with Saul and his son Jonathan. 1 Samuel 13:22

Greek tragedies depicted the downfall of men because of some character deficiency they called a fatal flaw. Failure, the Greeks insisted, was the result of that shortcoming

Saul had such a fatal flaw. Eventually, it bought about his complete downfall, too. And if we indulge it, it will do the same with us.

The Will of God

All his life, Saul had seen armed thugs from Philistia oppressing and enslaving his family and friends. And as king, he was determined to put a stop to it.

So, sometime after he sent his citizen soldiers home, he ordered his son to attack a Philistine outpost at Geba.

Jonathan smote the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, Verse 3

In all the Old Testament, few men measure up to Jonathan. He was strong yet sensitive, full of faith and trust in his Lord. And his attack upon the outpost at Geba was an example of his great daring.

After all, the thousand men who followed him into that battle had no real weapons. They fought with farm tools and sharpened sticks for swords and spears.

Nevertheless, Jonathan led his soldiers to victory at Geba. And that is praiseworthy. However, his father's command, which initiated the ambush was not.

It was an old problem with Israel. After long years, the seminal mistake which caused the arc of the covenant to be captured by the Philistines, was repeated.

The attack might have been militarily sound. And it was obviously carried out with bravery. But no

one, certainly not Saul, stopped to seek God's will and ask Him if they should attack the outpost at all.

The ambush of the outpost at Geba was the opening volley in a war against the lords of Philistia. Yet Saul never asked God if He wanted him to order the attack.

Neither did the king ask the Lord where, how and when he should attack the enemy. Saul merely ordered his son to assail the outpost.

Many years later, Jehoshaphat joined king Jehoram to fight the Moabites. But he refused to go into battle until he had spoken with the prophet Elisha to seek God's will. That godly king knew it was folly to initiate any endeavor until and unless, he knew it was God's will.

That is just as true for Christians today. There are any number of good and godly things that believers might do. But we cannot do them all. And we dare not do any of them until we have spent precious time in prayer seeking our Savior's perfect will.

King Saul never seemed to learn the same lesson we must master. No one who serves God is not free to make his own decisions and do as he thinks best. We are to do those things our Lord commands us to do.

And we are not to do anything else.

The Ways of God

We can only speculate why Saul ordered his son to attack Geba. Perhaps, he hoped to find some weapons for his army. But whatever the reason, it is doubtful Saul foresaw Philistia's enraged reaction.

All Israel heard the news that Saul had smitten the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become odious to the Philistines. Verse 4

The attack enraged the Philistines. They had lived in relative peace with Israel. So Jonathan's ambush of their outpost was looked upon as unprovoked attack. So they mustered the full might of their army.

Now the Philistines assembled to fight with Israel, 30,000 chariots and 6,000 horsemen, and people like the sand which is on the seashore in abundance; and they came up and camped in Michmash, east of Beth_aven. Verse 5

Dust filled the air. And the ridges rang with the clop of hooves and the clatter of armor. So Saul ordered Israel's citizen soldiers to leave their homes and join his army to meet the attack.

Jonathan smote the garrison of the Philistines that was in Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. Then Saul blew the trumpet throughout the land, saying, "Let the Hebrews hear." All Israel heard the news that Saul had smitten the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become odious to the Philistines. The people were then summoned to Saul at Gilgal. Verses 3-4

The people's reaction was far from what Saul hoped for. Instead of being emboldened for battle, God's people were terrified.

When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait (for the people were hard_pressed), then the people hid themselves in caves, in thickets, in cliffs, in cellars, and in pits. Verse 6

Instead of joining Saul's retreating army at Gilgal on the tropical plain near the Jordan, many people hid themselves. Others scurried across the Jordan to Gad and Gilead.

For one long week, Saul waited on the plain. Meanwhile, high on the ridge to the west, the vast army of Philistia prepared to attack.

It was not the king's idea to wait. It was God's. The Lord had commanded Samuel to tell Saul it was His will that the king camp for seven days near Gilgal.

But each night, soldiers crept away in the moonlight. Saul's army was already vastly outnumbered. And at each morning muster, the king saw his army had shrunk even more.

Saul was on the edge of outright panic. He felt something simply had to be done. Soon he would have no army at all. And when the seventh day dawned, the king did not feel he could wait any longer.

Now he waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him. So Saul said, "Bring to me the burnt

offering and the peace offerings.” And he offered the burnt offering. Verses 8-9

If Saul had a motto, it would be, “Desperate times demand desperate measures.” Yes, God’s Law clearly stated that he was not to offer sacrifices to God.

But any moment the Philistines could pour down off the high ridge and attack. And Saul knew he dare not go into the battle without seeking God’s favor. There might have been a priest among Israel’s encamped army. But if there was, it made no difference. Saul commanded that the sacrificial animals be brought to him. Then he himself offered the sacrifices.

That was the very first time, Saul’s seminal sin caused him to make decision which Samuel later described as foolish. The king foolishly believed that God’s Law could be bent or even broken if desperate times and dangerous situations demanded it. Later, Saul defended his actions.

Saul said, “Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, therefore I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the Lord.’ So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering.” Verses 11-12

Because he felt the desperate situation demanded it, Saul broke God’s command by refusing to honor the order the Lord laid down in His Law

But kings were raised up to rule. They were never to presume to fulfill the roles of either prophets or priests. And God’s commands are not pliable putty that can be twisted and formed to fit special situations.

After all, God knew the threats Saul faced. In fact, He knew them much better than the king ever could.

So Saul was faced with a choice. He could trust God and keep His Lord’s commandments, or he could strike out on his own. And that is the same choice every saint faces at one time or another.

When that time does come, we dare not duplicate Saul’s mistakes. After all, if the king had sought God’s will before ordering the initial attack on the Philistine outpost, the people might not have been so terrified. And the enemy army might not have been such a dire threat.

It is good that Saul wanted to seek God’s blessing. But he waited too long. The time to seek God’s favor is before we begin a campaign, not after we have already begun.

In every church, pastors and elders are presented with ideas. And the vast majority of them are good and godly things to do. But no matter how wise an idea might seem to be, we dare not initiate it without prayer.

As God’s people, we serve an eternal Master. And we must do what He would have us to do when He would have us do it.

Every bit as important as that, we must also do things God’s way. Saul knew that. In fact, when he defended his actions to Samuel, he admitted that he had to overcome the pangs of his own conscience to offer the sacrifice.

Then and now, God’s Word specifically outlines an order His people are to follow. And we dare not abandon God’s commands merely because we feel our situation demands it.

No matter how desperately hungry we might be, we still cannot and must not steal. And even if we are under great pressure, we must speak the truth. No ministry or mission is so vitally important that we are free to use deception and subterfuge or be unloving and unkind to achieve it. At all times and every situation, we are to be as pure and loving as our Savior was.

Culture cannot be allowed to force us to disobey God’s Word, either. For instance, our society says that men and women are not only equal; they are essentially the same. But God’s Word declares that women are not to preach and teach in the church.

So, even if we must endure an avalanche of criticism, we must trust God deeply enough and be committed to Him completely enough to obey His Word. And we must do so at all times in all situations.

Waiting for God

Saul was desperate. Yet he did not run away and hide like many of his subjects did. But He did run away. He ran away from God’s Word.

Sometime earlier, Samuel told Saul that God had commanded the king to wait at the old assembly ground near the Jordan at Gilgal. He would come, the prophet said, in seven days and tell Saul what God would have him do.

So Saul waited and watched his army dwindle. In fact, by the time he did go to war, even most of his defense force had deserted and only six hundred soldiers were left.

There was a reason why God commanded Saul to wait that long week, of course. It was a test of the king's faith in the Lord who had called and commissioned him to rule over Israel.

Saul nearly passed that test, too. But on the morning of the seventh day, the king could wait no longer. So he acted on his own, offering the sacrifice in place of a priest and seeking God's guidance in place of the Lord's prophet.

But while the smoke of the sacrifice was still drifting toward the sky, Samuel walked into the camp. Just as he had promised, the prophet arrived the seventh day.

As soon as he finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him and to greet him. Verse 10

There is no doubt that the situation was desperate. But God has never prevailed by greater numbers and better weapons. Yes, Saul's army was deserting. But it was not nearly as small as Gideon's was.

Just like Saul, Gideon was a farm boy who was called to lead God's army against a strong enemy. And the Amalekites were every bit as numerous and powerful as Saul's enemies, the Philistines, were.

Yet Gideon determined to follow God. And at the Lord's command, he whittled his army down to a force of thirty men. He dared to trust God even when his mind was clouded with confusion and the Lord's directions seemed disastrous.

Saul's great test was the same as Abraham's. Time! The patriarch waited for a quarter of century, all the time believing God would keep His promise and give him a son.

Israel's first king was asked to wait a mere seven days. And quite often our Lord also will demand that we wait for Him. In fact, God's Word commands us to wait for God.

Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage; yes, wait for the Lord. Psalm 27:14

God tested Saul by commanding him to go against every evidence around him, to resist his fears and wait at Gilgal. And He will test us in the very same way.

It is easy to trust God when difficulties do not threaten and it does not seem disastrous to fail to act and act quickly. But that is just what God demands of us. He demands that we trust His promises when we see no evidence they will be fulfilled. He demands that we trust Him, wait for His time, and refuse to act on our own.

Saul had a fatal flaw. When season and situations seemed desperate and pressures were profound, fear overwhelmed his faith. And he not only acted on his own; he also willingly disobeyed God's commandments because he felt the situation demanded that he do so. That, Samuel told the king, was a seed of failure.

Samuel said to Saul, "You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you." Verses 13-14

If we do not have the faith to wait on God and do things His way and His way only, failure is as sure for saints today as it was for Saul. God cannot and will not work within us if we are impetuous and impatient. He needs people who will follow after Him, not run before Him.

In the pastures of Bethlehem, God already had His eye upon a shepherd boy named David. He was a man after God's own heart.

Thousands of years later, our God still seeks men and women who are patterned after His own heart: people who will trust Him without evidence or omens, who will do things His way and wait for Him no matter what it might cost them.

Saul's service for God was not yet denied, but it was doomed. Still, the final confirmation of his failure had nothing to do with what the king did do, but what he did not and would not do.

When he was rebuked by Samuel, Saul responded with explanations and excuses. He refused to confess his sin.

And without repentance, victory is always out of reach.