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POOR CHOICES AND MISSED OPPORTUNITIES
The Mistakes Of King Saul

Once we catch a glimpse of how much God loves us, we will better understand why the Bible records the tragic mistakes of a man like Saul. In so many ways, Saul’s natural instincts for self-protection and control mirror our own.

In the following pages, RBC Associate Bible Teacher Bill Crowder uses the story of a king who was not “a man after God’s own heart” to help us understand the importance of our choices and to see that our past failures don’t have to determine our path for today—or for the days to come.

Mart De Haan

Managing Editor: David Sper
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The movie *Pearl Harbor* follows two cocky young pilots into the opening days of the United States’ involvement in World War II.

In the months before America entered the fray, one of those pilots, Rafe McCawley, goes to England to join “Eagle Squadron”—American pilots flying with the British Royal Air Force in the skies over England. Arriving at the airfield, Rafe reports to the commanding officer while surveying the carnage of English losses. Upon seeing the wreckage of lost pilots and planes, McCawley says, “From the looks of things, we better get me in a plane and in the air as fast as possible.” The CO answers, “Are all you Yanks so anxious to get yourselves killed?” Rafe’s response is classic: “Not in a hurry to die, sir, just to matter.”

That’s powerful. Very few things in life are more difficult to bear than feeling that our life doesn’t matter. And few things in life are more important than finding ways to make a difference in this world.

In the real world, however, few of us will be a war hero or invent a longer-lasting lightbulb. Our lives are marked by goals more ordinary and by dreams more average.

Still, all of us desire, deep down inside, to know that somehow, someway, our lives have made a difference. We don’t want to believe that we are merely taking up space on this planet. In our hearts, like Rafe McCawley, we all are in a hurry to matter. And the potential for our lives to have a meaningful impact on our world is a very real potential indeed.
The Blessing and Curse of Potential

There are few events in life more dramatic than the birth of a child. My wife Marlene and I have had five children, so I can certainly relate to the apprehension, concern, and anticipation that attends the coming of a new life. With a normal birth comes the potential for immeasurable good—or evil.

- The child could grow up to cure cancer, or
- The child could grow up to be a mass murderer.

Admittedly, most of us land somewhere in between those two extremes—but the possibilities that lie undeveloped in a newborn life are as sobering as they are remarkable.

So it was with the life we will consider in this booklet. Saul, the first king of Israel, was blessed with potential and opportunity. But through a series of bad choices, he became a tragic example of a wasted life. In so many ways he would become the flesh-and-blood illustration of John Greenleaf Whittier's statement:

For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these:
"It might have been!"

So why consider such a man? I submit that this study is important because Saul was more like us than we might care to admit. By looking carefully at the defining moments of his life, we get a chance to see our own inclinations before unintentionally falling into some of the same consequences that robbed him of so much potential for good. By learning from his mistakes, we will see what caused a life that began with so much potential, to turn out so badly.
SAUL’S TROUBLED TIMES

Every generation is marked by its times. I grew up in the 1960s with the musical British invasion, the horrors of political assassinations, the controversial war in Vietnam, and the rise of a new morality that was dramatically different from previous generations. To say that I made it through the 60s unmarked by those events would be naive at best and foolish at worst. To understand ourselves, we must at some level understand the times that helped to shape us.

The same is true of Saul. He came on the scene in approximately 1043 BC, when Israel had been in the land of promise for some 360 years. During those years, the nation had functioned as a theocracy—a kingdom where God Himself was king. This kingdom was managed by a series of judges (seen in the biblical book by that name).

Over time, however, the judges had lost the people’s respect, and chaos reigned in the land. The signature statement on the times that shaped Saul sounds eerily similar to the 1960s that shaped my generation:

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Jud. 21:25).

The downward plunge from living under the rule of God to living under the rule of self was catastrophic—and Israel crumbled under the weight of its rebellion.

Into this time of crisis stepped Samuel, the last of the judges, who would also act as prophet, priest, and king-maker. Burdened with the oversight of a wayward people, Samuel watched as God’s chosen people...
decided that being ruled by God alone was not giving them the protection and provision they needed.

It was into this time that Saul appeared on the pages of biblical history—a new leader for a new day.

**AN IMPATIENT PEOPLE**

Not only was Israel hungry for new leadership, they were impatient for it. This impatience was fueled by the people’s two motives for wanting the kind of king they saw in other nations.

**The Pursuit Of Human Leadership.**

Israel’s impatience began with a misdirected and misguided understanding of who ruled them in the first place. In 1 Samuel 8, we read:

> Now it came to pass when Samuel was old that he made his sons judges over Israel. . . . But his sons did not walk in his ways;

they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice (vv.1,3).

The people’s eyes were on an aging Samuel who was 65 to 70 years old, and on his openly corrupt sons who had been appointed as judges. What would happen to the nation if Samuel died?

In their focus on human leadership, however, the people had forgotten that God Himself was their King and that He is the God who raises up kings and removes them (Dan. 2:21).

Admittedly, the corruption of Samuel’s sons was a legitimate concern. But in the people’s call for a king, they failed to see God as the solution to their needs. They had taken their eyes off Him and were looking for human answers to their problems. They were forgetting that the God who had raised up Samuel as a replacement for Eli’s corrupt
sons (1 Sam. 2:12,22) could also deal with the problem of Samuel’s sons and provide the leadership Israel needed.

But the people of Israel were impatient. The question of the hour was, “Who will lead us?” They wanted an answer—and they wanted it now.

The Desire To Be Like The Nations. The elders of Israel weren’t just demanding answers because of Samuel’s age and the immorality of his sons. They were also envious of the way other nations were led.

_Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “Look, you are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations” (8:4-5)._ 

God had chosen Israel to be an example of what it means to trust the King of heaven. At Sinai, God had told Moses to tell the people of Israel:

_You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:4-6)._ 

The Creator of the universe had set the nation of Israel apart to hear His words and to rely on Him for their provision and protection. He didn’t want them looking to a powerful king, as other nations did. But the people were determined to have it their way. They turned from their God, and they broke the heart of Samuel in the process.
A GRIEVING PROPHET

When the people demanded a king, Samuel took it personally. He may have even felt a sense of failure. After all, the elders of Israel were correct in seeing his sons as unworthy of the people's trust. He might have even blamed himself for giving the nation an excuse for wanting to take matters into their own hands.

But when Samuel expressed his concern in prayer (1 Sam. 8:6), the Lord told him not to take the rejection personally. Instead, He said:

Heed the voice of the people . . . for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. . . . They have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also (8:7-8).

The Lord then told Samuel to listen to the leaders of Israel, but also to put them on notice that their demand for a leader would put them on a path that would eventually lead to regret and sorrow that included:

• Military draft (vv.11-12)
• Servitude (v.13)
• Widespread land confiscation (v.14)
• Taxation (v.15)
• Loss of personal freedoms (vv.16-17)
• Loss of fellowship with God (v.18)

Sounding the alarm, Samuel said:

You will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, and the LORD will not hear you in that day (v.18).

If the people had believed Samuel, they would have avoided so much pain. If only they had realized that someone else's sin is
never a reason to risk losing the favor of God.

A SIGNIFICANT CHOICE

Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, “No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles” (8:19-20).

Samuel relayed God’s warnings to the people, but they refused to listen. They repeated their demand for a king. So the Lord of heaven granted them the king they had asked for (vv.21-22)—and more.

God gave them what they wanted—but not what He wanted for them. His response echoes what He had given to their forefathers during their days in the wilderness:

He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul (Ps. 106:15).

Once again, Israel was about to learn a difficult lesson. The answer they thought would solve their problems ended up multiplying their pain.

Choosing their own path would have been dangerous enough—but doing so in the face of God’s clear warnings was reckless.

I’m not saying that it’s difficult to understand Israel’s mistake. Who among us doesn’t often lose sight of our invisible God? As William Inge wrote:

If we spend 16 hours a day dealing with tangible things and only 5 minutes a day dealing with God, is it any wonder that tangible things are 200 times more real to us than God?

No wonder we give in to short-sighted choices.
SAUL’S
CONFLICTED
BEGINNING

An event took place in 1960 that changed the face of American politics forever. It was the televised Kennedy-Nixon debate. From that day forward, “electability” was not only to be anchored in issues and ideas, but also in the ability of candidates to perform and to use the media. How they looked on television could be even more important than what they said or did.

A NEW KING
A parallel to the danger of image marketing happened in Samuel’s day. As a result of demanding a king like the other nations, Israel would get more style than substance. In Saul, God gave them what they asked for. He had all the marks of “electability”—good looks and a powerful physical presence—but without the character to lead.

In our own day, if a candidate with good looks like Saul’s could be given a skilled speech writer, our first impression might be that he’s made for TV. But the Bible does not introduce Saul to us through the narrow lens of a camera. Instead, 1 Samuel 9 offers us several ways of seeing him.

In the Eyes Of Society

There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish . . . , a Benjamite, a mighty man of power. And he had a choice and handsome son whose name was Saul. There was not a more handsome person than he among the children of Israel. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people (9:1-2).

Here, Saul is revealed for the first time—and it’s both
positive and negative. In terms of being what people look for in a leader, Saul seems to have had a lot to offer. He is described as “choice,” “handsome,” and taller than anyone in the land.

An imposing physical presence doesn’t hurt—but since the people wanted to be like other nations, God gave Israel a man whose appearance was stronger than his character. He was allowing His people to miss what the prophet Zechariah would later write: When God offers His solutions, it is “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). That’s why He can use weak and imperfect people that we might never choose (see 1 Cor. 1:26-29).

**In The Eyes Of Kish**

*Now the donkeys of Kish, Saul’s father, were lost.*

*And Kish said to his son Saul,* “Please, take one of the servants with you, and arise, go and look for the donkeys” (9:3).

The fact that Saul’s father sent a servant along with his son might seem insignificant—simply a thoughtful consideration. But it could be revealing Kish’s lack of confidence in his son. Some scholars believe that Saul was not the kind of son that Kish, a “mighty man of power” (v.1), had wanted. Whether or not this was the case, it’s evident that the servant showed a level of spiritual awareness that Saul did not have.

**In The Eyes Of The Servant.** In verse 5, Saul suggested (after an extensive search) that if they didn’t return home soon his father would begin to be more worried about them than about the donkeys.

Here, however, the servant showed a spiritual bent that Saul didn’t seem to
have. He told Saul that the prophet Samuel lived in the area and that he could help them find the donkeys (9:6).

When Saul pointed out that their bread was gone, leaving them no gift with which to honor the prophet, it was the servant who offered the solution (v.8).

Admittedly, it’s unclear how much to make of these details, but it seems that Saul would not have sought out the prophet without the servant’s spiritual initiative.

**In The Eyes Of Samuel**

*Now the LORD had told Samuel . . . , “Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him commander over My people Israel, that he may save My people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have looked upon My people, because their cry has come to Me” (9:15-16).*

Notice that although Samuel was in a sense anointing his own replacement, there didn’t seem to be any jealousy on his part. Instead, he showed an ongoing commitment to help appoint the man of God’s choosing.

Keep in mind, however, that Samuel knew that even though Saul had been chosen by God, he was not God’s first choice. He fit the mind and mold of the people, but did not—as a substitute for the King of heaven—fit the heart of God to the extent that his successor David would. Still, the people had demanded a king to replace God—so Samuel anointed a man who gave the people what they wanted: a king like the kings of other nations.

*Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on his head, and kissed him and said: “Is it not because the LORD has anointed you*
commander over His inheritance?" (10:1).

It’s important to note that although God knew Saul was more like a “people’s choice” than His own plan for Israel’s leadership, He did not abandon him. In fact, God showed what He Himself could do through Saul—even providing (through Samuel) three confirming signs of Saul’s kingship:

1. At Rachel’s tomb, two men would tell him that the donkeys he and his servant were searching for had been found (10:2).

2. At the terebinth tree of Tabor, three men would greet them and give them two loaves of bread (vv.3-4).

3. At the hill of God (the city of Gibeah), Saul would meet a group of prophets and prophesy with them and “be turned into another man” (vv.5-6).

Everything happened just as Samuel had said it would (vv.9-13), confirming to Saul that God had chosen him to lead the people as the first king of Israel.

As we will soon see, however, even though Saul was equipped by God, he lacked the spiritual character to be a man after God’s own heart. Because the people had rejected God in asking for a king, and because God’s relationship with Saul appears to have been one-sided, this new king would not solve Israel’s problems. Saul’s anointing merely exposed a fresh example of an age-old problem.

AN AGE-OLD PROBLEM

A life based on external appearance and strength rather than internal character will inevitably unravel. It was true with Jacob and with Samson. It would also be true with Saul. Externals are
never sufficient—either for
now or for eternity.

Yet when Samuel
introduced Saul to Israel
as God’s answer to their
request, they didn’t see what
was happening. Saul stood
head and shoulders taller
than any other man in
Israel. Samuel said, “Do you
see him whom the LORD has
chosen, that there is no one
like him among all the
people?” (10:24). The people
cried, “Long live the king!”
but they didn’t realize they
were celebrating the kind of
king they wanted rather than
the kind of king they needed.

Did Saul have the
internal qualities of a true
leader that could meet the
need of the hour? Consider
the following:

- When confronted by
  Samuel, Saul expressed
  his inadequacy (9:21), as
  Moses had done many
  years earlier (Ex. 3–4).
- When confronted by
  his uncle, Saul was too
  frightened to speak of
  the kingship (10:14-16).
- When confronted by the
  nation, Saul hid in the
  baggage (10:20-22).

Perhaps Saul was
intimidated by living in
the shadow of his powerful
father, Kish. Or maybe he
sensed his lack of a personal
relationship with God (a
reality that will slowly be
exposed).

Still, in a sense, there
would never be another
moment in Saul’s life when
he would be more usable.
Why? Because at this
moment he realized his
own inadequacy. In the end,
however, Saul would prove
to be an “empty suit”—
looking good on the
outside but hollow within.
God would give him an
opportunity to trust Him.
But when the nation would
face a series of crises, his
lack of trust in God would
bring disaster—both
personally and nationally.
SAUL’S IMPATIENT CHOICE

One choice can alter the destiny of a person, family, or nation. Wise choices can alter our destinies for good, and foolish choices can be catastrophic.

This was true in World War II in America’s 101st Airborne. In his historical account of Easy Company in the book Band of Brothers, Stephen Ambrose tells how Easy’s first commanding officer used bullying and trumped-up disciplinary actions to intimidate his men. But when he tried those tactics on Lt. Dick Winters, it backfired on him. The CO’s dreams of leading Easy Company to combat faded away and he was forced to take a rear-echelon support role—never seeing combat. Winters, however, became a military hero, winning the Distinguished Service Cross, and advancing to the rank of major. One choice had dramatically altered both of their destinies.

Admittedly, we make hundreds of choices every day and seldom see lasting repercussions from many of them. But because the next choice could be the one that changes everything, we have reason to acknowledge our reliance on the protection and leading of God in every circumstance (Prov. 3:5-7).

Saul’s future would also be shaped by his choices. Having become king, he had the responsibility to lead and to set an example for the people. As we’ll see, he started out well. But he had a flawed follow-through.

THE PRESSURE OF CRISIS
One of life’s challenges is learning how to manage a crisis. Dallas Seminary
professor Howard Hendricks refers to this as “keeping the elephants off your air hose.”

This is a practical issue, because crises, problems, and difficulties are all part of our existence on this broken planet. Being a follower of Christ does not exempt us from crises, and neither did being the king of Israel.

After becoming king, Saul faced a series of wartime events that tested his integrity, patience, and loyalty as a servant of God.

Saul passed his first test with flying colors. When the people of Jabesh Gilead were attacked by the Ammonites, the Spirit of God came upon Saul. He rallied Israel, defeated the enemy, gave God credit for the victory, and was confirmed as king by the people (1 Sam. 11:1-15).

Saul seemed to be off to a good start. In fact, in Samuel’s farewell speech, he assured the people of Israel that even though they had sinned in asking for a king, Saul and the nation could still experience God’s blessing if they would remain faithful to the Lord (12:20-24). Samuel was also clear that if they did not serve the Lord, they and their king would be “swept away” (v.25).

Unfortunately, Saul’s initial success in leading Israel seemed to go to his head. In an ensuing war with Philistia (13:1-7), Saul set the defenses while his son Jonathan attacked a Philistine encampment. Then Saul blew the ram’s horn to signal to the people that he had attacked the Philistines and that they were to gather for war at Gilgal (13:3-4).

The Philistines’ anger was aroused, and they mobilized their forces in a huge show of strength. But the Israelites responded in a way that indicated they felt
Saul had started something he couldn't finish.

When the men of Israel saw that they were in danger (for the people were distressed), then the people hid in caves, in thickets, in rocks, in holes, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews crossed over the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. As for Saul, . . . all the people followed him trembling (13:6-7).

The people had the king they wanted to lead them into battle (8:20). But it was now apparent that they needed more than Saul. Some were so underwhelmed by Saul's leadership that they hid wherever they could (13:6).

From verse 8 we learn that Samuel had earlier told Saul to wait 7 days at Gilgal for him to arrive and tell him what to do. But inactivity is painful for externally oriented people, for they feel the need to make something happen rather than to wait on the Lord to work. This desire to force the action would be the first step in Saul's undoing.

BUCKLING UNDER THE PRESSURE

Ironically, a nation marked by impatience got a king who was also impatient.

Sometimes waiting is the most difficult thing for us to do. It must have been for Saul, as he watched the Philistine troops arrive day after day. The pressure continued to mount as Saul's men began to desert him. And after an agonizing week of watching and waiting, the pot still didn't boil. Samuel had not yet arrived.

So Saul said, “Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me.” And he offered the burnt offering (13:9).
In an apparent attempt to gain God’s blessing, Saul offered sacrifices. It’s important to note that there is a serious difference of opinion among Bible scholars as to exactly what happened here:

• Some say that Saul was justified in offering sacrifices, as Solomon did at the inauguration of the temple (1 Ki. 8).
• Others say that Saul was simply seeking God’s blessing and provision for the upcoming battle and should not be judged too harshly.
• Still others say that Saul was almost superstitious, treating the offerings of sacrifices like a lucky charm instead of the serious act of worship they were.

At the very least, Saul’s action exposed a weakness in the fabric of his character—a weakness revealed by an impatience familiar to many of us.

As Larry Richards wrote in The Teacher’s Commentary:

Saul had been effective in action. But he was unable to stand the pressure of waiting!

How like so many of us. As long as there is something to do, we’re all right. But when there are pressures, when we don’t know what to do and we have to wait, we too are tempted to act foolishly.

What happened? As the smoke was still rising from the offering, Samuel arrived. Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him (13:10).

It seems that Saul assumed that Samuel’s arrival confirmed his decision to offer a sacrifice. He went out to meet Samuel expecting to be affirmed—but he was sadly mistaken.
RECEIVING A SURPRISING CORRECTION

Samuel said, “What have you done?” (13:11a). Samuel must have been deeply disappointed. He confronted Saul with his failings, but Saul tried to justify his behavior. Saul said, “When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered . . . , I said, ‘The Philistines will now come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not made supplication to the LORD.’ Therefore I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering” (vv.11b-12).

In other words, “It’s not my fault! It’s the people’s fault because they ran. It’s the Philistines’ fault because they threatened us. It’s your fault, Samuel, for being late. But it isn’t my fault!”

Sadly, Saul played the all-too-familiar game of blame shifting, concluding with the equivalent of, “What else could I do? Sacrifice means success, so I had no choice.” Notice, however, that Samuel knew Saul had not followed the instructions he’d been given. Samuel said to Saul, “You have done 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 continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you” (vv.13-14).

These strong words can
be boiled down into two hard facts:

- Saul had not passed the test. His failure to listen to the voice of God through Samuel revealed his unfitness to lead.
- He was unwilling to wait for God on His terms. The result? There would be a new king. A man after the people’s heart failed, so a man after God’s heart would be needed. Saul’s impatience in acting on his own disqualified him, and God would remove his crown. Saul had it all, but he began to lose it all through an impatient decision.

**SAUL’S INDEPENDENCE**

Benjamin Franklin said, “He who cannot obey, cannot command.” It seems that there are few life-lessons more difficult to learn than the value of listening to and aligning ourselves with the voice of truth and authority. Perhaps that is because self-centeredness comes naturally to us. We don’t have to be taught what we want to do. We have to be taught what we need to do. And learning to follow wise and appropriate direction is a difficult lesson to learn.

Saul, however, showed the price paid by disregarding the wise counsel of God.

**UNDERSTANDING THE MOMENT**

The background of Saul’s next test is drenched in a 400-year history of bad blood. The Amalekites (descendants of Esau) were ancient enemies of Israel. When Israel fled Egypt, the Amalekites attacked them in the Sinai peninsula, so God declared that He would punish them. After centuries of the ongoing hostility, God was now preparing to carry out His judgment.
In 1 Samuel 15:3, we find God telling Saul, through Samuel:

*Go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.*

In spite of the Amalekites’ history, I struggle with texts like these. Humanly speaking, it seems unfair to punish a clan of people 10 generations later for the actions of their ancestors. But I also realize that it’s likely that the Amalekites’ actions were not a one-time event. Their willingness to attack the people of the Exodus may have continued to play out in other ways in the centuries that followed.

In any case, this kind of judgment gives us reason to believe that the God who showed His wisdom and power in the creation of the universe makes no mistakes. We have so many reasons to retreat to what we know about the character of the merciful and compassionate God who is “not willing that any should perish” (2 Pet. 3:9) and who takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezek. 33:11). In the things I cannot understand, I must rest in the perfect wisdom of the God who said:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord. “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8-9).

Still, Saul was given the command to destroy the Amalekites, and once again he had to choose between God’s purposes and his own interests.
DEFYING GOD’S COMMAND

After preparing his army and warning the friendly Kenites (15:4-6), Saul went to war with the Amalekites. But he failed to complete God’s command.

Saul attacked the Amalekites . . . . He also took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them (15:7-9).

Saul kept King Agag as a trophy of war and kept the healthy livestock to build his own personal wealth. And if there are questions about the inappropriateness of Saul’s motives, they become clearer once we discover that he erected a monument to himself and his victory:

It was told Samuel, saying, “Saul went to Carmel, and indeed, he set up a monument for himself” (v.12).

This monument exposed Saul’s swelling ego. How far he had fallen from the insecure appointee who hid among the luggage! (10:22). Rather than honoring God for the victory, he praised himself—a dangerous choice.

RECEIVING A STINGING REBUKE

When Samuel arrived at the camp, Saul stepped forward to welcome the prophet:

Then Samuel went to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed are you of the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD” (15:13).

It wasn’t exactly the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, was it? The command of God
was to destroy everything. So Samuel responded with a stinging question:

*What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?* (15:14).

All around them was the not-so-silent evidence that, in fact, Saul had *not* obeyed the Lord’s command. Once again, Saul was quick to shift the blame for his obvious disobedience:

*Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed”* (v.15). Notice the change in pronouns. In verse 13, it was “I have performed,” but here in verse 15 it is “they have brought them.” By shifting blame from himself to the people, he avoided admitting his personal disobedience in sparing Agag. After Samuel confronted him again (vv.16-19), Saul was adamant:

*Saul said to Samuel, “But I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen . . . to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal”* (vv.20-21).

Notice how Saul resisted Samuel’s correction:

- Saul claimed compliance, though he had *not* done what God told him to do.
- Saul blamed the people for his own actions.
- Saul excused the presence of the animals by saying they were to be sacrificed to God.

Once again, Saul’s own words exposed the true condition of his heart as:

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• A willful heart that altered God's instructions to suit his own desires.
• A closed heart that didn’t know God (as revealed in verse 21 by his reference to the God of Israel as Samuel's God rather than making a personal claim of God as his own).
• A self-centered heart that was willing to sacrifice others in order to protect himself and his own self-interests.

These elements spin together to create a spiritual undertow that pulled Saul ever deeper in personal rebellion against the God who had allowed him to be king. His final words in verse 21 seem to form a rejection of God, as if he were saying to Samuel, “He’s your God, not mine. You be concerned about what He thinks.”

Samuel then cut to the heart of the matter with one of the greatest spiritual truths in all of Scripture:

*Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice . . . . Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He also has rejected you from being king (vv.22-23).*

Samuel exposed the cloak of outward religion that Saul had been hiding under. He reminded Saul that God is not interested in mere religious activity. He is concerned about our heart relationship with Him—a relationship marked out by reverent submission to the wisdom of God. As Samuel said, “To obey is better than sacrifice.” Why?

In the Old Testament, the word translated “to obey” (shammah) is the word that means “to hear.” This is the issue. The compliance that God desires is not an enforced, legalistic
subjugation to a God who will crush us if we fail. Far from it. The obedience God desires is seen in the heart of those who, because of a personal relationship with their heavenly Father, long to hear His words and keep and cherish them.

Christ Himself drove this point home when He said: *My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me* (Jn. 10:27).

Why should His sheep follow Him? Because He knows us personally and we hear His voice. This is what keeps obedience from becoming a drudgery or a burden. It is the heart-response of the child of God who hears the Father's loving voice and longs to please Him.

Sadly, Saul appears to have had no such relationship. So his response to God was as empty as his show of remorse (v.30). It was just external—an outward regret without true repentance.

Saul did not know God. He engaged in performance without a heart that was aligned with God's heart.

The final result of Saul's destructive choice was God's reaffirmation that he would be replaced. Although Saul would sit on Israel's throne for another 15 years, on this day the kingdom was torn from him. Because Saul was more concerned about looking good in front of the people than being right with God, his monarchy was a hollow shell.

Whether expressed in his rash acts of impatience or his reckless choices of rebellion, Saul became a living parable of warning, which reminds us of Paul's words in Galatians 6:7.

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*
Saul tried to deceive God, Samuel, the people, and even himself. But he sowed the seeds of self-will, and he would reap their bitter harvest.

SAUL’S ULTIMATE UNRAVELING

As a boy, in the summertime I liked to play in a small creek that ran near our house. I couldn’t help but notice that this little creek was an ever-changing environment. The water was continually pounding away at the banks of the creek and wearing away the soil. You wouldn’t notice this erosion at a glance, or even with a second look. But over the course of the summer, the water eroded a large amount of the bank.

This is what makes erosion so insidious. It’s very patient. It doesn’t happen immediately, but its effects are eventually realized. Time and disregard guarantee that erosion can ultimately achieve devastating results. This also pictures the slow, erosive impact that resistance to God has on the lives of men and women. Little by little, bit by bit, it eats away at the very substance of our lives until one day we are not even remotely close to the person we used to be—or could have been apart from the erosion of sin.

This was the case with Saul. His choices led to results which together caused the fabric of his inner world to unravel like a cheap sweater. In the years since the debacle with Agag and the Amalekites, Saul’s life had spun into a downward spiral that seemed irreversible. His ongoing choices deepened the plunge. Consider the following:
• Saul battled a dark spiritual oppression that seemed to be relieved only by music (16:14-17).
• Ironically, that music was played by a young David—the man after God’s heart who would replace Saul (16:18-23).
• Samuel anointed David as king (16:13), after which David defeated Goliath and the Philistines, winning the deep friendship of Saul’s son, Jonathan (17:1–18:4).
• Because he was jealous over David’s success, Saul waged a relentless campaign to kill him (18:6–30:31)—at one point slaughtering priests he thought had assisted David’s escape (22:6-19).

For 15 long years, Saul fought God, David, and anyone else he saw as a threat. Then the Philistines returned to rip out the final threads of his life—making Saul’s unraveling complete. In this crisis, Saul’s heart would again be exposed—and what is most noticeable is what was missing.

**HIS LACK OF RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

The Philistines were gathered against Israel, prepared to attack and plunder. And where was Saul?

Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had lamented for him and buried him in Ramah, in his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the spiritists out of the land. Then the Philistines gathered together, and came and encamped at Shunem. So Saul gathered all Israel together, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. And when Saul inquired of
the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by the prophets (1 Sam. 28:3-6).

The setting is simple: Samuel was dead. Israel was in mourning. And Saul was an old man—alone and terrified by his spiritual isolation. In fact, his fear was so great that the phrase “trembled greatly” (v.5) was also used to describe the quaking of Sinai at the giving of the law. For years, Samuel had been Saul’s conduit to God, but now that Samuel was gone, Saul had no access to God.

In desperation, Saul cried to the God he had rejected. He used all the means available in that era (prophetic revelation, dreams, the Urim and Thummim), but he had no way to communicate with God. Saul’s isolation reveals his lack of relationship with the God he didn’t even claim to know in 1 Samuel 15. He had maintained outer form without inner substance—but now the outer form was gone as well. And God’s response was silence.

The silence of God is a frightening thing. Saul had been given ample opportunities, but he had repeatedly turned away from God—and now God turned away from him. It’s a chilling reminder of the lesson of Psalm 66:18.

*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.*

**HIS LACK OF PERSONAL INTEGRITY**

After receiving no answer from God, Saul should have done some self-examination. But rather than deal with the sin that had separated him from God, Saul looked for spiritual shortcuts. Having always depended on Samuel, Saul once again
turned to the now-dead prophet—this time through a medium.

Then Saul said to his servants, “Find me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her.” And his servants said to him, “In fact, there is a woman who is a medium at En Dor.” So Saul disguised himself and . . . came to the woman by night. And he said, “Please conduct a séance for me, and bring up for me the one I shall name to you.” Then the woman said to him, “Look, you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the spiritists from the land. Why then do you lay a snare for my life, to cause me to die?” And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, “As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.” Then the woman said, “Whom shall I bring up for you?” And he said, “Bring up Samuel” (28:7-11).

The woman reminded Saul that he had driven the spiritists out of the land. Yet now he was turning to them for help! He sought a spiritual shortcut through the occult—and it was a disastrous choice. Saul turned to necromancy, a demonically mediated interview with the dead. According to 1 Chronicles 10:13-14, this was, in part, the reason for his death. It was inexcusable for God’s anointed to turn to the occult. This revealed Saul’s lack of integrity in two ways:

- He turned to spiritism rather than face the wrongs of his life.
- He violated the laws against spiritists that he himself had established.

Integrity is clearly absent in those who won’t do what they themselves declare to
be right. That’s Saul. He broke his own laws and God’s commands—but he couldn’t break the silence. Seeking counsel from the dead only moved him further from God.

To the shock of the medium, instead of her familiar spirit (demon) impersonating the one Saul was seeking, the real Samuel actually arrived:

When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. . . . saying, “Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!” And the king said to her, “Do not be afraid. What did you see?” And the woman said to Saul, “I saw a spirit ascending out of the earth.” So he said to her, “What is his form?” And she said, “An old man is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle.” And Saul perceived that it was Samuel, and he stooped with his face to

the ground and bowed down (28:12-14).

But to Saul’s disappointment, Samuel didn’t come to counsel. He came to pronounce God’s judgment on the fallen king:

Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. Moreover the LORD will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also deliver the army of Israel into the hand of the Philistines (vv.18-19).

Saul had chosen self-direction and self-reliance over a willingness to listen to God, resulting in a spiritual isolation that ended at En Dor. I’m sure that when Saul began his downward spiral with what seemed like a relatively
minor act of impatience, he never dreamed he would wind up in this place. But the fact is that in a relationship with God, our rejection of His ways has erosive implications. And the spiritual silence born of Saul’s rebellion wouldn’t be broken at En Dor—it was only intensified. As Rudyard Kipling wrote:

Oh the road to En Dor is the oldest road and the craziest road of all!
Straight it runs to the witch’s abode
as it did in the days of Saul,
And nothing has changed of the sorrow in store
for such as go down the road to En Dor!

**HIS TRAGIC END**

The final pull of the gravity of Saul’s spiritual failures culminated with the hardened king taking his own life because he had not lived in relationship with the God who had granted him so much opportunity and blessing.

And the Philistines killed . . . Saul’s sons. The battle became fierce against Saul. The archers hit him, and he was severely wounded by the archers. Then Saul said to his armorbearer, “Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it, lest these uncircumcised men come and thrust me through and abuse me.” But his armorbearer would not, for he was greatly afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword and fell on it. And when his armorbearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell on his sword, and died with him (1 Sam. 31:2-5).

This is the tragic end of a wasted life. Rather than turn to God in repentance, Saul took his own life—after years of protecting himself at the expense of others.

David, Saul’s successor, mourned (2 Sam 1:11-12).
He wept and fasted for a man who refused to acknowledge God. A man with a form of religious awareness, yet without a relationship with God. A man he would now replace.

Having begun with promise, potential, and opportunity, Saul’s life ended with his own failures serving as his judge—providing us with some serious lessons to consider in our own lives:

• Be aware of the first subtle steps of erosion that, unchecked, will lead to pain and destruction.

• Be aware that religious form without truly knowing God carries with it eternal consequences.

• Be aware that our choices expose our true hearts. Will we honor God or gratify self?

• Be aware that the silence of God can only be resolved by the confession of sin.

Saul made self-destructive choices and suffered the consequences of those choices. All of us face the same ultimate choice—will we choose to listen to God, or will we willfully pursue our own self-protection, self-reliance, and self-satisfaction?

Saul made his choice, and we must make ours. As Joshua declared to the people of Israel, Saul’s story of tragedy declares to us:

And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . . But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD (Josh. 24:15).

THE PATH TO FORGIVENESS

Few things are more heartbreaking than seeing or experiencing the painful consequences of poor choices. Saul failed in
that most critical of all life-decisions: Will I serve myself, or will I serve God?

Having read through this booklet, do you identify with any aspect of Saul's life? Is it possible that you have made a series of unwise choices that, over time, have eroded your relationship with God? If so, maybe it seems that the result of those choices is irreversible. But it doesn't have to be that way. If you are tired of carrying the burden of sinful choices and deep regret, Jesus says to you:

*Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light* (Mt. 11:28-30).

And if you have already trusted Christ as your Savior but have allowed spiritual erosion to cause you to drift from Him and His work in your life, there is hope for you. He calls you to return to Him by admitting your waywardness and then turning back to follow Him. The apostle John wrote:

*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 Jn. 1:9).

God is full of grace, and He loves to forgive. All we must do is turn to Him, acknowledge our wrong, and ask His forgiveness. The question before us is this: Will we turn to Him and ask? We need not allow the failures of the past to determine our path for today—or for the days to come. The God of forgiveness can restore us to Himself—the only place where we can find a life that really matters.

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