

“A King Won’t Solve All Our Problems”
(The Great Story of the Bible, Chapter 75)

1 Samuel 12 – 15

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It’s about the year 1040 BC, and Saul has just been named as Israel’s first-ever king. Samuel, the spiritual leader of Israel, says to all the people: “Here is the king you chose, the one you asked for. Yes, the LORD has put a king over you! If you will fear the LORD, worship him, obey him, and not rebel against the LORD’s command, and if both you and the king who rules over you follow the LORD your God – all will be well. But if you don’t obey the LORD and rebel against the LORD’s command, then the LORD’s power will go against you and your king to destroy you.” (1 Samuel 12.13-15) It’s very simple, really: God is asking for *obedience*. Obedience not to the *king*, but to the *Lord*. “Don’t turn back from following the LORD,” Samuel pleads. “Serve the LORD with all your heart.... Fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart.” (1 Samuel 12.20, 24) Samuel says they *all* need to be obedient ... yes, even the king.

Years pass. Saul and his wife have six children – four boys and two girls. The oldest son’s name is Jonathan. He becomes a commander in Saul’s army, which is comprised of three thousand men – two thousand under Saul’s command and one thousand under Jonathan’s. The Philistines are once again causing distress for the Israelites. They seize a town called Geba, right in the heart of Israel’s hill country, and set up a garrison there. Jonathan’s men attack the garrison, hoping to reclaim the town for Israel. The Philistines respond by sending a massive army out to battle: “thirty thousand chariots ..., six thousand cavalry, and as many soldiers as there is sand on the seashore.” (1 Samuel 13.5) The Israelite army is outnumbered and outmatched. “When the Israelites saw that they were in trouble and that their troops were threatened, they hid in caves, in thickets, among rocks, in tunnels, and in cisterns.” (1 Samuel 13.6) Some Israelites sold themselves out to the Philistines; others fled across the Jordan River.

Thus begins a war with the Philistines that endures throughout the rest of Saul’s reign. As the war progresses, Saul makes a series of blunders that cost him his kingdom. Blunders of *obedience*.

His first blunder: he usurps Samuel’s spiritual authority. Saul is waiting for Samuel to arrive, to offer sacrifices and to give Saul advice. Samuel sends word: *Wait. I’ll be there within a week*. But seven days pass and Samuel doesn’t arrive. Saul’s men, terrified of the approaching Philistines, are deserting in droves; of the three thousand, only six hundred remain. Saul, desperate, gives up waiting and offers his own sacrifice. When Samuel arrives, he is outraged: “What have you done? ... How stupid of you to

have broken the commands the LORD your God gave you!" (1 Samuel 13.11, 13) Saul had no business offering those sacrifices on his own. Saul was Israel's military and political leader, not its spiritual leader; he usurped his authority; he acted in the name of God when no one had given him permission to.

Saul's second blunder: he makes a rash vow that God didn't want him to make. Jonathan and his armor-bearer sneak into the Philistine camp and start causing havoc, giving the Israelite army an opportunity to attack. Saul tells his men not to eat anything before the day ends, on pain of death. That leaves the men hungry, so they aren't fighting well. Jonathan wasn't there when the instruction was given, so when he comes across a honeycomb, he scoops some honey and eats it. When he learns about his father's vow, he exclaims: "My father has brought trouble to the land.... It would have been even better if the troops had eaten some of their enemies' plunder today when they found it! But now the Philistine defeat isn't as thorough as it might have been." (1 Samuel 14.29-30) By evening, the Israelite troops are so famished they start eating uncooked meat from the Philistines' livestock, violating the dietary laws. When Saul learns that Jonathan ate the honey, he prepares to carry out his vow. Jonathan protests: "I only took a very small taste of honey on the end of my staff, and now I'm supposed to die?" (1 Samuel 14.43) Saul says *yes*. The troops protest: "Why should Jonathan die when he has won this great victory for Israel? No way!" (1 Samuel 14.45) They know that the victory belongs to God, and God certainly doesn't want Jonathan dead. They have to save Jonathan from his own father!

Saul's third blunder: Saul disobeys Samuel, and disobeys God's Law. Samuel tells Saul to attack the Amalekites, who had butchered the Israelites when they were defenseless in the desert (way back in Exodus 17). Moses had told the Israelites: "Once the LORD your God gives you relief from all the enemies that surround you in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you must wipe out Amalek's memory from under the heavens. Don't forget this!" (Deuteronomy 25.19) So Samuel instructs Saul to carry out Moses' instructions, to "put everything that belongs to them under the ban." (1 Samuel 15.3) Not one thing belonging to the Amalekites is to survive. Saul does partially as Samuel instructs, but he spares the Amalekite king, "along with the best sheep, cattle, fattened calves, lambs, and everything of value." (1 Samuel 15.9) Samuel confronts Saul: "The LORD sent you on a mission.... Why didn't you obey the LORD?" (1 Samuel 15.18-19) Saul replies: "But I did obey the LORD! ... I captured Agag the Amalekite king, and I put the Amalekites under the ban. Yes, the troops took sheep and cattle from the plunder ... but in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God." (1 Samuel 15.20-21) Notice his words: "the Lord *your* God." Not: "the Lord *our* God." Saul has rejected God as king. Samuel delivers the judgment: "Does the LORD want entirely burned offerings and sacrifices as much as obedience to the LORD? Listen to this: obeying is better than sacrificing, paying attention is better than fat from rams, because rebellion is as bad as the sin of divination; arrogance is like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected what the LORD said, he has rejected you as king." (1 Samuel 22-23)

Saul did some good things for Israel; he successfully waged wars against the Ammonites, the Philistines, the Amalekites, the Moabites, the Edomites, and more. But his military success in no way made up for his spiritual weaknesses. He was disobedient, rebellious, and arrogant. He made rash vows that God hadn't told him to make. He listened to the Word of the Lord, but *only* the parts he wanted to hear. He felt he could pick and choose which portion of the Lord's Word to obey. He didn't really believe that God's Word *mattered*. By rights, Jonathan should have been the next king of Israel.

Because of Saul's disobedience, that distinction will fall to someone else – in Samuel's words, "a man following the LORD's own heart" (1 Samuel 13.14), a man "more worthy" than Saul (1 Samuel 15.28).

And aren't we a lot like Saul? Disobedient. Rebellious. Arrogant. We listen to the Word of the Lord, but *only* the parts we want to hear. We follow Jesus when it's convenient, when it's easy, when God's will for our life meshes with *our* will for our life. But when God asks us to do the harder things, the things we don't want to do, the things that strike fear into our hearts, we run, we hide, we stop listening, we pretend it doesn't matter, and then we justify our actions, and we try to argue our way out of it. Every time we do that, we disappoint God, and we betray our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

We have a King, my friends. A King who *matters*. A King who is *trustworthy* and *true* (cf. Revelation 21.5; 22.6). A King whom we *say* we worship and serve. A king who hung on a cross for us, and now sits enthroned in the heavens. If we call ourselves "Christians," that means that we choose to *listen* and *obey*. We do not just get to pick and choose which portions of God's Word we wish to follow. If we arrogantly think we know better than *Jesus* does what we should do with our lives, then we are no better than Saul: disobedient, rebellious, arrogant. Sinful. Our job is to *submit ourselves to God's will*. There's joyful freedom in that; don't get me wrong; this is not about turning ourselves into lifeless puppets. Jesus offers us *life*, the only kind of life worth living – but to have that Life, we have to *obey*.

When you start taking obedience seriously, all sorts of things begin to change. Your prayer life changes. You pray less for specific outcomes that *you* want, and you pray more that *God's will be revealed to you*. You start asking Jesus to give you *signs* to point the way. Some of those signs may surprise you; they may come from unlikely places. When the road starts to become clear, you may discover that it's a harder road than you ever expected it would be. So you start praying that God would give you *courage* to take the next hard step, and *strength* for the journey. Sometimes, God reveals to us that we're going *entirely* the wrong way, and we need to make a 180-degree course correction. That's what happened to the *other* Saul, a thousand years later, on the road to Damascus; Jesus told him that *everything* he was doing had to change. When you hear a message like that it can be really daunting, really disorienting, really difficult. But God won't give you a vision of what you need to change about your life without providing people and resources in your path to help you get there.

Friends, make no mistake: the life Jesus Christ calls us to is a life of *faithful obedience*. This was the critical point that the first Saul did not understand, the critical point that cost him his kingdom. He thought he could pick and choose which portions of God's Word to listen to. *That is not how this works*. That's not what the Christian life is about. *We have a King*. We have *the* King, the *only* King worth following. Our job is to seek his will ... and then *do* it. Period. No "if"s, no "and"s, no "but"s. No selective listening, no selective obedience. We are *Christians*. We boldly say, "*Jesus Christ is our Lord*." That means when he wants us to do something, *we do it*, and when he *doesn't* want us to do something, *we don't do it*. Of course, we'll slip up along the way. That's what confession and repentance and forgiveness are all about. But *God does not let us off the hook*. If Jesus is telling us to do something different with our life, then *we don't have a choice*. *We have to obey*. He won't tell us to change something that can't be changed. *Who among us wants to be like Saul?* We're Christians. *We obey*.

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