

SAUL REJECTED; DAVID ANOINTED
Teaching-Learning Resources
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Background Scripture: 1 Samuel 13–16
Key Passage: 1 Samuel 15:10–16. 22–23; 16:1

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This is the first of thirteen lessons in a new series entitled “The Kingdom and the Early Prophets: God’s Call to Responsible Decision.” During the next thirteen weeks we will study material from the historical books of First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, and the prophetic books of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. We will be looking at a limited period of Old Testament history, from the time of Saul (1020 B.C.) to the fall of Samaria (722 B.C.). It will not be history for the sake of history; rather, attention will be sharply focused on those events concerned with decision making. The traditions of Israel provide both positive and negative guidelines that can be used by Christians today as they attempt to make decisions which are compatible with the will of God.

How often we have shouted to ourselves in frustration: “Decisions! Decisions! Decisions!” But being forced to make decisions is not a new thing. Decision making predates the day of history, and we are the heirs of the decisions of the past—sometimes we are the benefactors, but often we are the victims. If there is anything more difficult than making decisions, it is trying to correct bad decisions. Difficult decisions were made in ancient Israel, and too few of these were good decisions. Because of bad decisions, the United Kingdom of the twelve tribes of Israel lasted for only one

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hundred years. The Northern Kingdom of Israel survived for only another three hundred years.

But the failures of yesterday provide the knowledge by which the decisions of today can be made more correctly and constructively. This study of the Old Testament is not intended to make us the arrogant critics of the ancient Israelites; rather, it is an endeavor to learn what we can from the past. In order to make responsible Christian decisions today, we must avoid the errors of yesterday while building on the successes of the past. Not all of the heroes of Israel provide a good model for Christian decision and action. In this study over the next three months we will examine some of the *good* men of Israel who made bad decisions, and we will look at some of the saints of Israel who made good decisions. Then, as Christians, we will have to decide which of these Old Testament characters can help us most to make decisions compatible with Christian responsibility.

The lessons will be divided into three parts: (1) Major Decisions in a Nation's Beginning, (2) Decisions That Shaped the Nations' Future, and (3) Appeals to Recommitment Rejected.

The Biblical Setting

In 1 Samuel 8:7 and 10:19 it is stated that the desire of the Israelites for a king was the result of their rejection of God (Yahweh) as the king of Israel. They wanted a human king like the other nations, that he might lead them out to war and fight their battles. Although Samuel warned them that the king they desired would bring them only trouble, the Israelites were insistent. Reluctantly, Samuel consented to their request, having been instructed by God to take them at their word and

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appoint them a king (8:22). The decision to have a king was recognized as sin. Later on, the people told Samuel, “Pray for your servants. . . for we have added to all our sins this evil, to ask for ourselves a king” (12:19).

A more positive view of the decision to have an earthly king survives in 1 Samuel 9:16, where God had revealed to Samuel that he wished to establish the monarchy since the people were suffering at the hands of the Philistines and God wanted to give them a deliverer. The more negative view of 1 Samuel 8:7 and 10:17 probably reflects the genuine attitude of the prophet Samuel, while the tradition behind 1 Samuel 9:16 retains the affirmative view of the tribal leaders and elders. Both traditions agree that there was a definite relationship between the institutions of the monarchy and war. The God who had led the Israelites without the aid of a single Israelite soldier to the Promised Land was no longer trusted as being strong enough to protect them in Canaan. They needed a king; they wanted to fight.

Two traditions survive as to the way in which Samuel chose Saul to be the king. According to 1 Samuel 10:20–21, Saul was selected by a process of elimination through the casting of lots. But according to 1 Samuel 9:15–16, God revealed to Samuel that he had chosen Saul, and Samuel acknowledged God’s choice and secretly anointed him “prince over his people Israel” (10:1).

Both events probably took place as described, but the significance of the events reflects the difference between the prophetic and the popular traditions. Both traditions agree that Saul did not seek the position. [page 19] To the contrary, it appears that Saul may have attempted to avoid the responsibility. First Samuel 10:22 relates that Saul tried to hide

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himself under all the baggage when the lots had been cast making him king.

Both accounts agree that Saul had the one major qualification for a king who was expected to lead his people into battle. *He was a big man*: “. . . and when he stood among the people, he was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward” (10:23; see also 9:2). The tall, dark, handsome son of a wealthy Benjaminite, who had a hard time simply finding his father’s lost asses, unexpectedly found himself elevated to king over Israel. He was poorly prepared for his new responsibilities. It is not surprising that he tried to hide.

Initially Saul was an excellent leader. He performed just as the people had hoped he would. Within a short period of time three of Israel’s major enemies had been destroyed: the Ammonites, Amalekites, and Philistines. Evidently, the military aspirations and ambitions of the Israelites and their new commander did not end with the destruction of their enemies. They even attacked treaty-bound friends, namely the Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:2–9). The quest for tribal survival through the introduction of the monarchy had been replaced by the quest for national and territorial sovereignty.

Beginning with Saul, the Israelites borrowed from their neighbors the institution of the monarchy. Long before this, they had borrowed the institution of “holy war.” During the patriarchal period the Hebrews followed a policy of accommodation with their neighbors. If there ever was conflict, then they permitted God to wage the battle without their assistance. But with Joshua holy war became a way of life.

But holy war was not an Israelite idea. The kings of ancient Akkad and Ashur in Mesopotamia believed that they were fighting imperial battles on behalf of their deities and by the

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power of the gods. Every victory was evidence that the will of the gods had been fulfilled. From Israel's eastern neighbor Moab one inscription survives (from around 850 B.C.), known as the Moabite Stone.¹ Lines 15–20 of that inscription indicate that Moab had an identical institution of holy war, except that in Israel the God who demanded war and the total destruction of everything that lived was Yahweh, but in Moab the god's name was Chemosh. Mesha, the king of Moab, "devoted" (i.e., "exterminated") seven thousand Israelites, including men, women, and children, for his god Chemosh.

In the ancient Near East, war was more than a human experience; it was considered a contest between the gods to demonstrate power and supremacy. During its earliest days in becoming a nation, Israel believed in and vigorously practiced this type of holy war which often demanded the total destruction of all living beings, human and animal. Frequently, the taking of anything from the enemy as the spoils of war was prohibited. This was a special type of holy war which was not concerned with subjugation of the enemy nor with confiscation of property. It was similar to modern "scorched-earth" fighting or saturation bombing. This was the type of warfare Samuel wanted Saul to conduct.

Saul rigorously engaged in holy war, but he did not demand from his troops the *total* and *immediate* destruction of enemy lives and property. His failure to exterminate the enemy probably contributed to his own destruction. His decision to permit

1. D. Winston Thomas, ed., *Documents from Old Testament Times* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, imprint of Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), pp. 196–197.

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himself and other Israelites to sacrifice choice captured animals to Yahweh later created the possibility for deception and dishonesty. The making of sacrifices could have been a pretense for converting the spoils of war into personal property.

To Samuel, Saul's gaining victories for Israel was not enough. Victory without extermination was not holy war but legalized looting. Saul had listened to the voice of the people (1 Samuel 15:24) and had permitted holy war to be degraded into organized piracy. Contrary to the opinions of others, Samuel did not want the property of his enemies. He wanted their death to demonstrate the power of his God.

Consequently, when Saul returned from his victory over the Amalekites, Samuel pronounced judgment against him. The partial destruction of the Amalekites was bad enough; but the partial confiscation of Amalekite property was too much to tolerate. The judgment against Saul was harsh: God had repented that he had chosen Saul to be the king of Israel. Therefore, neither he nor his son after him would remain as king or crown prince of Israel. The dismissal of Saul was not immediate, but it was definite. His days as king were numbered.

Perhaps Saul assumed that as the king of Israel he was free to make his own decisions. He made the decision to place more weight on the words of the people than on the word of the prophet. But the new institution of the monarchy did not destroy all of the older traditions. One tradition that survived throughout the lifetime of Samuel was that the civil ruler was subordinate to the religious leader. The king was expected to obey the prophet. Saul's failure to abide by this tradition led to Samuel's rejection of Saul; Samuel told him of Yahweh's

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decision: “I repent that I have made Saul king . . . ” (15:11; see also 15:23).

Saul violated another firmly established tradition when he offered a sacrifice which Samuel was to have made (13:8–14). The offering of a sacrifice was a priestly responsibility; but Saul decided to proceed with the sacrifice in Samuel’s absence. This decision led to Samuel’s charge: “You have done foolishly. . . . But now your kingdom shall not continue.” Saul’s decision to do his own thing proved to be his undoing.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

1 Samuel 15:11 — “I repent that I have made Saul king.”

These words are quite clear in stating that God changed his mind about the appointment of Saul as king. The same words are repeated in 1 Samuel 15:35: “And the Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel.” [page 20] The idea that God *repents*’ *is* frequently found in the Old Testament, as in Genesis 6:6: “And the Lord was sorry [repented] that he had made man”

First Samuel 15:29 seems at first to be a contradiction to the numerous statements that God does repent. It states, “. . . the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent.” These words might be the words of Saul, not Samuel. The initial words of verse 30, “Then he said,” were probably the original words of verse 29, i.e., “Then he [Saul] said, ‘. . . he is not a man, that he should repent.’”

The type of scribal error suggested for verses 29–30 appears occasionally in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where a scribal correc-

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tion was placed between the lines or in the margin.² The next scribe, correcting the mistake, could have inserted the word on the wrong line. Saul apparently disagreed with Samuel over the question of whether God would change his mind. Other Scriptures affirm what history confirmed, namely, that God did indeed repent that he had made Saul king. God was preparing “a man after his own heart” (13:14) to be the new king. If Saul and Samuel disagreed on the question of God’s changing his mind, they were both correct in recognizing that God did not lie. God is free to give and to take, even to *take away*. The words of Job were probably unfamiliar to Saul: “. . . the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

1 Samuel 15:16—”Then Samuel said to Saul, ‘Stop!’”

After Saul’s victory over the Amalekites, he returned to Gilgal where he had been made king (1 Samuel 11:14–15). There he intended to offer some of the spoils of war as a sacrifice to God. When Samuel finally caught up with him at Gilgal, Saul was apparently in the process of making his offering. The activities of Saul recorded in the Hebrew text made no explicit reference to his sacrifice. The Greek translation of the text indicates precisely what Saul was doing. It includes these words at the end of 1 Samuel 15:12: “He [Saul] was offering a sacrifice to the Lord of the best of the loot which he had brought back from Amalek.” Samuel’s order “Stop!” meant,

2. Miller Burrows, .ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls of St. Mark’s Monastery* (New Haven, Conn.: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1950), plate, 30–33.

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“Stop your sacrifice!”

In other contexts the word “stop” is used to reassure a person. It is the same word used by the psalmist who stated, “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). But for Saul the word introduced the judgment of guilt. Saul would not only stop sacrificing, but he would also be stopped from being the king over Israel.

1 Samuel 15:22—”To obey is better than sacrifice, an to hearken than the fat of rams.”

Saul thought that he had performed the word of God (1 Samuel 15:13, 20–21). But he had performed it according to his own interpretation. He realized too late that it was not a matter of just doing what he thought was wanted.

In a plea for pardon and forgiveness Saul confessed, “I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your [Samuel’s] words” (15:24). Obedience to God required Saul to obey literally the word of the prophet Samuel. Obedience to the prophetic voice was more important than ritual observances.

Applying the Lesson to Life

In the past many Christians, despite the example and teachings of Jesus, have made important decisions on the basis of this Old Testament material. The church in the past adopted the institutions of the holy war and the divine right of kings. Unfortunately, the desire to exterminate the enemy totally still survives, even among so-called Christian people. It was just within the past decade that the slogan “Bomb them back to the Stone Age!” was coined. And in seeking to “devote” (“exterminate”) our enemies, we have greatly improved upon the

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sword of Saul. We have beaten our swords into a nuclear arsenal.

On the other hand, we have long abandoned some of ideas of ancient Israel. Few Baptists, who value the separation of church and state, would agree with Samuel's idea that the king must be obedient to the prophet, that the civil servant is subservient to the religious leader. Few Christians today even want a king, and fewer still want a king that will lead them into war.

We need to be very cautious in using either Saul or Samuel as models for Christian decision making. We know ancient Israel believed this affirmation sincerely, namely, that God "is a man of war" (Exodus 15:3). We, however, follow Christ, the Prince of Peace! We need to beware that our obedience is not perverted and comes blind obedience to orders, such as was the case at Dachau, Buchenwald, My Lai, Watergate, or Jonestown.

Decision making is a constant demand placed upon all of us. That demand can be made easier if we recognize the errors of the past. Bad decisions made in ancient Israel do not become any better when they are repeated in modern America. Obedience to the word and will of God makes good decisions come naturally. We have an advantage that Saul and Samuel never had since we have the witness of the great prophets of Israel who followed after them and, especially, the Good News of Jesus to help us determine what is the will and word of God. To obey the Prince of Peace is better than sacrifice!