

The Rise & Fall of King Saul

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*Except as noted, quotations are from 1 Samuel,
all in the New American Standard Bible.*

The Larger Context

The true God is eternal spirit who rules over the universe from His throne in heaven. But He also chose to create a material world, which displays His glory, and to rule it through a creature noble like Himself. This kingdom of God on earth is the main theme of the Bible: its preparation, its inauguration (at the Exodus), its old covenant history, its suspension (when the temple was destroyed), its renewed approach (Jesus' first advent), and its coming triumph.

The Book of Genesis reveals how God made the earth and heaven, and living creatures climaxing in man. He let man choose to rebel—but began the process of providing salvation. Ultimate blessings, He said, will come through Abraham (Gen. 12), who trusted God when He speaks and acts. He promised that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars and would include kings (Gen. 15, 17). From him He made His elect nation, the twelve tribes of Israel. He preserved Israel by moving them to Egypt, where they lived as slaves. At the right time through Moses He brought Israel out of that bondage.

At Mt. Sinai God made Israel His "kingdom of priests" (Exod. 19:4-6). He had them construct the tabernacle as His earthly dwelling and the ark of the covenant as His earthly throne. From that throne He ruled over Israel, giving them laws through Moses, His prophet and spokesman (Exod. 25:22). Moses was unique; only to him did God speak "face to face, clearly and not in riddles" (Num. 12:8). Priests also had the privilege of consulting God, using "the Urim and the Thummim" (Exod. 28:30; Num. 27:1). But God said to watch for another prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:14-19; Acts 3:22-23; 7:37).

God foretold the day when Israel would insist on a human king rather than only God. He gave Moses divine laws for the choice of such a king and for his success (Deut. 17). Meanwhile, after Moses' death He provided other temporary leaders. Joshua, for example, cooperated with "the commander of the LORD's army" (Josh. 5:13-15) and led Israel to victory in the Promised Land. Israel repeatedly "forsook the LORD" and were bitterly disciplined through other nations. But whenever they cried out in distress, the LORD raised up judges to save them.

The last of these judges was the great prophet Samuel. Samuel was born in answer to prayer and was all his life dedicated to God's service. The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel are about him and the first two kings of Israel, whom he anointed to rule. He oversaw the transition of God's earthly kingdom from being ruled by judges to being ruled by kings in dynasties. The first king, Saul, was just what Israel wanted. His story reveals the issues both for him and for the nation. He was strangely like Israel in his advantages and in his responses and outcome—in his rise and his fall.

The Rise & Fall of King Saul

Saul's Rise (especially his early advantages)¹

His Selection (chosen by God & commended to Samuel)

- God revealed His choice to Samuel, who revealed it to Saul (1 Sam. 9:14 to 10:8). This involved Saul's unforeseen visit at Samuel's town, where he met Samuel, who pointed him to kingship. It included a banquet already prepared in Saul's honor, news that the lost donkeys were found, lodging, and private discussion of important issues.
- Samuel anointed him with oil as symbol of God's anointing with the Spirit (10:10).
- Samuel gave three predictions fulfilled on Saul's return home and representative of God's provisions to rule (10:1-13).²
- God ratified His choice by means of lots before all Israel (10:17-24; renewed 11:14).

His Counsel

- God had revealed His ways for Israel and the king through history and the covenant at Sinai. This included rules for selecting the king and for his success (Deut. 17). The king was obligated to make his own copy of the law and to read in it daily.
- Samuel became Saul's confidant and mentor (10:25; 12:20-25), and a great example to follow (12:3-5). Samuel loved Saul dearly.

His Characteristics

- From Benjamin, which tiny tribe did not arouse much jealousy from other tribes.
- Imposing presence: tall and handsome (9:1-2; 10:23-24).
- Sense of responsibility: He diligently searched for strayed donkeys (9:3-4); showed concern for his father (9:5).
- Humility: He didn't tell his uncle about the kingdom (10:14-16); hid himself when chosen by lot at Mizpah (10:22);³ said nothing when some troublemakers showed they despised him (10:27); would not destroy them even after his great victory (11:13). Years later Samuel said, "you were once small in your own eyes" (15:17).

His Early Companions

- A wise and faithful servant (9:5-8)
- Brave followers, whose heart God touched (10:26)
- The prophet Samuel
- His son Jonathan

His Good Beginning

- He took decisive action to defeat the Ammonite Nahash and spare Jabesh Gilead (11:1-11). This began when the Spirit came upon him (11:6).
- He and Israel celebrated with offerings to the LORD (11:15).
- He won victories over many of Israel's enemies (14:47-48).

Saul's Fall

Saul did not obey fully the God who appointed him. He was like Israel—and the kind of king they wanted. But his failure prepared Israel for God's kind of king.

The Trajectory of His Fall

1. Saul failed to wait for Samuel to come to Gilgal and offer sacrifice to God (13:6-14). Samuel had instructed him (in 10:8) to wait seven days until he would arrive. But just before the time was up, Saul made a burnt offering to seek the LORD's favor. He felt his impatience was justified. The Philistines were assembling against him at Michmash (13:11-12), and his own warriors were deserting (13:6-8, 11). Only he and his son Jonathan had swords and spears (13:22).

Consequence: Samuel told Saul that God had rejected his royal line and would seek "a man after His own heart" (13:13-14).⁴

2. Saul made an impetuous oath that led his warriors to sin and aborted their victory (14:24). First, Saul saw growing tumult in the Philistine camp (14:18-19) but was unaware that Jonathan had initiated battle and was winning. Without divine guidance Saul pursued the Philistines.⁵ He bound his warriors with an oath to eat nothing before evening, "before I have avenged myself on my enemies" (14:24). Not knowing about the oath, Jonathan ate a bit of wild honey (14:25-27).

Consequence: At dark the ravenous warriors ate meat without draining the blood (14:31-34). Eager to continue, Saul got no answer from God. Then God revealed that Jonathan had violated the oath. Saul would have Jonathan killed, but the warriors would not allow that.

3. Saul obeyed incompletely when ordered to annihilate Amalek (15:1-35; 28:18).⁶ He excused himself as responsive to the soldiers—and willing to sacrifice to God (15:15, 21). But obedience is far more important than sacrifice (15:22).

Consequence: God rejected him as king (15:23, 26, 28)—and chose another king (16:1-13). God's Spirit departed from Saul and an evil spirit came on him (16:14-16, 23; 18:12; 28:15-16). The LORD ceased answering his inquiries (28:6).

4ff. Saul grew insanely jealous of David, seeking for years to kill him (though David loved him and spared his life). This jealousy first appeared when the women of Israel praised David above Saul for military victories (18:8-9).⁷ Feigning madness, Saul tried to kill David with a spear (18:10-11). Soon his murderous heart became apparent to Jonathan and all others, whom he ordered to kill David (18:17, 21, 25; 19:1, 10, 11, 15, 20-24). He "put to the sword Nob, the town of the priests" who had innocently helped David (21:1-9; 22:6-23). He pursued David into the arms of Israel's enemies (chs. 21—27).⁸

Consequence: Saul's tragic demise. Having lost his access to God, he found a necromancer to consult dead Samuel (28:7), his friend and mentor. Saul's royal career had begun at a banquet provided by Samuel. It ended with a banquet provided by the "witch of Endor" (28:24-25). Then he led his army to defeat (28:19). Three of his sons died, then he took his own life (31:5-6). The Philistines mutilated and publicly displayed their dead bodies (31:8-12).

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The Reason for His Fall

(in words directly from God or through Samuel)

“I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has **turned back from following Me**, and **has not carried out My commands**” (15:11). “Why then did you **not obey the voice of the LORD...**?” (15:19; cf. v. 22). “For **rebellion** is as the sin of divination, and **insubordination** [arrogance, NIV] is as iniquity and idolatry” (15:23). “You **have rejected the word of the LORD**, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel” (15:26).

In summary, Saul distrusted God, which led to intense jealousy and fear of David. Much of 1 Samuel relates Saul’s persecuting David. In contrast, David kept trusting God and refusing to take vengeance over Saul. This gave evidence why David was “a man after His own heart” (13:13-14). The climax to this story was God’s covenant with David: “your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16).

NOTES

¹ Apparently Saul knew little if anything about the great prophet Samuel before Samuel anointed him as king. Yet Samuel had had a long ministry only a few miles away from Saul’s family. Alexander Whyte considers that ignorance evidence of religious disinterest, a significant defect. At least Saul showed little interest in politics.

² Samuel’s three predictions symbolized provisions for Saul’s rule: a) Intelligence: The two men near Rachel’s tomb verified Samuel’s message that the donkeys were found. b) Material provisions: The three men going to Bethel shared food intended for use in worship. c) Spiritual resources: Saul prophesied with the prophets near Gibeah, his hometown. This showed new spiritual potential but not necessarily a lasting spiritual change.

³ I assume it was because of humility that Saul hid himself when chosen by lot at Mizpah. However, Eder-sheim (*Old Testament Bible History* [Wilmington, Delaware: AP&A, nd]) thinks it revealed an ungodly lack of faith.

⁴ Eder-sheim (*OT Bible History*), p. 275, says this was neither “personal rejection” nor “dethronement” but the loss of an enduring monarchy.

⁵ Saul asked the priest to seek instructions from God—but apparently decided there was no time to wait. According to the Septuagint, his request involved the “ephod” rather than the “ark” (14:18).

⁶ Amalek had been under God’s ban for centuries (Exod. 17:16). Saul started to obey, calling on all Israel (1 Sam. 15:4) and warning the Kenites to beware (15:6; Num. 10:29). But obedience goes beyond a start.

⁷ David often fought Saul’s enemies—and ministered to Saul and married into his family. Saul felt natural affection and gratitude. But when he became angry (1 Sam. 18:8) and fearful (18:15, 29), he let those emotions control him.

⁸ Perhaps in a bid to regain God’s favor, Saul massacred Gibeonites, who were non-Israelites (2 Sam. 21:1-14). Yet, Israel had sworn to spare the Gibeonites (Josh. 9).