

# 1 Samuel 13:1-22

## Introduction

Hopes can be cruelly dashed.

If you follow the England men's football team, you know how that feels.

Every time a big tournament comes around, we get our hopes up once again.

We dare to believe that this time it will be different. This time, we can win. This time, football really will be coming home.

And then as surely as day follows night the inevitable happens. We get knocked out. Normally after penalties. And once more, our hopes are dashed.

Something like that happens, here, in chapter 13.

Before we look at the story, it would be helpful to look back briefly and remind ourselves what we've already covered in 1 Samuel.

So, that's our first heading: Looking back.

## Looking back

All the way back in chapter 2, we read Hannah's prayer following the birth of her son, Samuel.

Having suffered the pain of childlessness, she had cried out to God, and he had graciously answered her prayer and given her a son. So, she had sung with delight to the God of reversals, who humbles the proud and exalts the humble. And we saw that this principle applies particularly to kings. It is not by their own strength that they will prevail but by humble dependence on God.

That principle is key to the whole book of Samuel. And it lays the groundwork for the appointment of Saul as the first king of Israel.

In chapter 9, God linked his appointment with the deliverance of Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

In chapter 10, Samuel anointed him in private, and gave him clear instructions. He was to go to Gibeah, the location of a Philistine outpost. As he arrived, he would be empowered by the Holy Spirit, and he was to do whatever his hand found to do. The implication was that he was to attack the Philistine outpost. It was an action that would be sure to provoke a full conflict with the Philistines.

Then, he was to go to Gilgal and wait seven days until Samuel came. The crucial part of that command was not waiting for seven days but waiting for Samuel's arrival. Samuel would make known to him what he was to do. In other words, Samuel would bring guidance from God about how to conduct the battle and defeat the Philistines.

Yet, strangely, Saul didn't do that. Instead, he went home.

In chapter 12, having publicly made Saul king, Samuel instructed the Israelites that both they and the king were to serve and obey the Lord. If they did that, all would go well. But he warned them that if they rebelled against God's commands, God's hand would be against them.

It was a public call for the people and their king to do what Hannah had sung about, and to live their lives in humble dependence on God, through obedience to his word.

So, we come to chapter 13.

We may have high hopes for Saul. We've seen him acting as a kind of Super-Judge, delivering the people of Jabesh from Nahash the Ammonite. Interestingly, the name 'Nahash' means 'snake'. As we look back to Genesis and remember how the serpent enticed Adam and Eve to sin, we might also remember God's promise that a person will come who will crush the serpent's head. Someone would come who would defeat the serpent and destroy him. And we might wonder whether that person is Saul. Could he be the great rescuer whom God's people need?

Well, sadly, this week, those hopes are dashed. Any optimism we might have had about Saul comes to an end.

So, then, let's look at the story. And it begins with Saul being given a second chance.

That's what I've called our next heading: A second chance.

### A second chance

In verse 1, we're told: **Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel for forty-two years.**

That's a formula that will be used throughout the rest of the Old Testament to introduce the reign of kings. It reinforces that Saul is to be viewed as the first in a long line of kings of Israel.

Then, in verse 2, we're told that Saul chooses three thousand men from Israel. The rest are sent home. It reminds us of Gideon, who chose an army of 300 men and sent the rest home. So far so good.

But we're also told that two thousand of those men were with Saul in the hill country of Bethel, while one thousand were with his son Jonathan in Gibeah.

Now, Gibeah, also known Geba, is the location of that Philistine outpost we read about back in chapter 10.

And we're told that Jonathan now does what Saul should have done back then. He attacks the Philistines, provoking all-out conflict.

Saul takes the credit, and the news is broadcast throughout Israel. The country is about to go to war. He summons the people to join him at Gilgal... where he should have gone in chapter 10.

This is a second chance for Saul. It's another opportunity to do what Samuel had instructed him to do back in chapter 10: to await instructions from God and then to act under God's direction.

As expected, the Philistines assemble. And their army is vast. Their soldiers are as numerous as the sand on the seashore. God had told Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore. But now it's Israel's enemies who are described in those terms. This doesn't look good.

And not only are the Philistines numerically superior. They've got superior technology too. They have chariots and charioteers. It's the ancient equivalent of an armoured tank division.

Not surprisingly, the Israelites are terrified.

Look at verses 6 and 7.

**When the Israelites saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.**

**Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear.**

What will Saul do?

Well, he waits.

We can imagine him scouring the horizon, day after day, looking for any sign of Samuel's arrival with instructions from God. But then, on the seventh day, with his men abandoning him, he gives up. The pressure's too much. Finally, when Samuel doesn't arrive, he takes things into his own hands. He dispenses with the need to have guidance from God. And he goes ahead anyway. He orders his men to bring the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings to him. And he offers the sacrifices himself.

Just at that moment – and we should probably understand that this is still the seventh day – Samuel arrives.

But now the message he delivers doesn't contain directions for winning the battle. Rather, it contains a rebuke. When Saul explains what he's done, Samuel tells him that he's acted foolishly. What's more, Samuel tells Saul that his kingdom will be taken away from him. And then, critically, Samuel leaves.

Do you see that, in verses 15?

**Then Samuel left Gilgal and went up to Gibeah in Benjamin, and Saul counted the men who were with him. They numbered about six hundred.**

Saul is now completely isolated. His prophet has left. He no longer has God's favour. And most of his men have deserted him.

He's on his own.

And the verses that follow emphasise how hopeless the situation is.

The Philistines are preparing to attack with chariots and charioteers. And the Israelites can't even arm themselves.

Look at verse 19.

**Not a blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel, because the Philistines had said, 'Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears!'**

The Philistines had taken all their blacksmiths away. Even if it was only their farming equipment that needed to be sharpened, they had to go to traipsing down to the Philistines to get it done. And, of course, the Philistines made them pay through the nose for it.

The point is that without blacksmiths there are no weapons.

**So, verse 22, on the day of the battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand; only Saul and his son Jonathan had them.**

The situation for Israel looks completely hopeless.

Saul's prophet has left. His men have left. And those that remain don't even have any weapons to defend themselves against the vast and well-equipped army of the Philistines. This is bad.

But, as Hannah's story has taught us, it's under precisely these conditions, when things look utterly hopeless, that God loves to act.

We'll find out what he does in chapter 14.

But we can't leave our passage this morning without getting to the bottom of Saul's error, because, as we read this story, we may feel some sympathy for him.

So that's what I've called our final heading: Saul's error.

### Saul's error

The key verses are verses 11 to 14. Please look at them again.

When Samuel arrives, he asks Saul, **'What have you done?'**

It's like the question God asked Adam in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve had disobeyed God and were hiding among the trees in the garden. 'Where are you?' God asked. It's a similar question here: 'Saul, what have you done?'

And just like Adam, who pointed the finger at Eve and even tried to blame God himself, Saul tries to shift the blame.

**Saul replied, 'When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, I thought, "Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favour." So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.'**

'It's not my fault', says Saul. 'My men were deserting. And where were you, Samuel? You weren't here. I had no choice.'

And we might feel sorry for him. The pressure *was* on. It was a difficult decision under stressful conditions.

When Samuel rebukes him, we might feel that he's being unduly harsh.

Verse 13.

**'You have done a foolish thing,' Samuel said.**

But Samuel isn't being harsh. He's calling Saul out. He *did* have a choice.

To say, 'You've been foolish' isn't to say, 'You've been a bit of an idiot'. It's got a more specific meaning.

Psalms 14, verse 1, says: **The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'**

Saul's error, here, is that he hadn't depended upon God.

Remember Hannah's song: **'It is not by strength that one prevails...'**

It doesn't matter that you face a vast and well-equipped army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore, if God is fighting for you.

Gideon had defeated the Midianite army with just 300 men, because God had given him the victory.

And he could do the same again with the Philistines.

Saul's error was that he acted as though God couldn't be depended on. His lack of trust was revealed in his lack of obedience.

Rather than waiting to receive guidance and direction from God through Samuel, as he had been told, he thought that a ritual sacrifice would be enough to earn God's favour, and then took matters into his own hands.

And that was his mistake.

Deuteronomy 8, verse 3, says: **...man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.**

God's word is essential for life, just as food is essential for the body. There are many things we can live without. I can live without a subscription to Sky Sports. I can live without the latest iPhone. At a push, I could live without a mobile phone at all. There are many things we can live without. But God's word is not one of them. The degree to which we are listening to the instruction of God's word is the degree to which we are depending upon God. God's people are to be listeners before we are doers. That's true of every one of us. And it includes the king.

But Saul, Israel's first king, had treated God's word as though it were dispensable.

And now he would live with the consequences.

Verse 13.

Samuel says, **'You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command.'**

The Lord will replace Saul with another, a man after his own heart.

That means a man of God's choosing.

We use the term slightly differently.

I might say, 'Oh, you like cheesy beans! You're a man after my own heart.' Or I might say, 'Oh, you like 80s rock music! You're a man after my own heart.'

What I mean is we share the same tastes and interests.

That's not quite how Samuel's using those words, here.

He means, something like, a person who fits God's will. It's the language of election or choice.

God will replace Saul with someone else of his choosing, who fits his desire for a king.

### Conclusion

Israel's new start with a human king has failed before it had got going.

And that's because the underlying human failure to trust God's word and live by it, that goes all the way back to Adam, hasn't changed.

After Saul will come a long line of kings who will do the same as Saul. They will repeat Saul's error because they too are human kings.

And we so easily do the same.

We profess faith in God and yet, so easily, we live each day as though there is no God. We act and make decisions without pausing to consider the direction he has given us in his word, the Bible. We treat God's word as though it were dispensable rather than essential for life.

This passage reveals not only Saul's error but our own.

We need a different kind of king.

One who can lead us by his own good example.

One we can learn from and follow.

One who listens to God and does God's will in all circumstances. Even when staring death in the face.

Most importantly, we need a king who can rescue us from our own sin and failure.

Saul is not that man.

The kingship will pass to another. A man after God's own heart. That will be David.

And although David's reign will also end in failure, it will be from his descendants that the true king – the king we need – will come.

On this first Sunday of Advent, we celebrate the good news that the king we need has indeed come.

Jesus is that king.

Through his example, he teaches us how to live each day in humble dependence on our heavenly Father, by listening to his word. Through his perfect obedience, he has defeated sin and liberated us from its grasp.

And he will never let us down.

If our hope is in him, we will not be disappointed.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for Jesus. Thank you for sending the king we need. Please help us all to learn from his example, as we follow him. Please help us to depend on you through humble obedience to your word, as he did. And thank you that through his perfect obedience our weakness and failings are covered and forgiven.

We praise you, heavenly Father.

Amen.