**Saul’s sinful sacrifice**  26/6/22 dkm

Read: 1Samuel 13, Matthew 9

Text: 1Samuel 13

Psalms: 146, 119:17-24, 44:1-7, 134a

Saul led Israel in the defeat of the Ammonites after the Spirit of God came upon him and he rallied men from all the tribes of Israel. We are not told much about the battle but the element of surprise seems to have been key to the victory (12:11). Samuel then gathered the people at Gilgal to crown Saul king, and to renew the Lord’s covenant with Israel. Samuel was old but was still active as God’s prophet, and in praying for and teaching the people, including the king (12:23). Saul was a head taller than any other man and was showing potential as leader. To this extent he was like the kings of other nations, but Samuel warned him, and all the people, not to depart from the commandments of the Lord. The prophet would continue bringing God’s word to the people and their king.

The time gap between that gathering at Gilgal and the events of this next chapter is not clear. Our translation had a period of two years, but the Hebrew text is difficult. Some translators refer to the formula used of kings in the OT, namely, ‘so and so became king when he was X years old and ruled for Y years’- the ESV actually reads in this way. But most conclude that Saul had reined for two years when the events of this chapter occurred. This was not long into his forty year reign (Acts 13:21). Whatever the time frame, this chapter records a tragic mistake made by Saul, leading to condemnation by Samuel and indeed, divine judgment. Our subheadings are: ‘Saul’s army in retreat’, ‘Saul’s sinful sacrifice’ and, ‘Saul and Jonathan have the only swords’.

**1. Saul’s army in retreat**

Saul’s defeat of the Ammonites across the Jordan in Gilead does not seem to have fazed the Philistines to the west. Saul made Gilgal his base for operations, as Joshua had done. It was a safer distance from the Philistines than his home town in Benjamin territory. But this chapter begins with Saul assembling two thousand troops at Micmash in the hills near Bethel, while his son Jonathan commanded a further thousand troops nearby, in Gibeah of Benjamin. For some reason, Saul sent the rest of the men to their homes (13:2).

As we just said, the Philistines were not fazed by Saul leading Israel in victory over the Ammonites. The picture we get in this chapter is of the Philistines establishing outposts throughout Israel to keep the people in subjection. They shut down all blacksmiths in the land to stop the making of swords or spears. All the Israelites had was bows and arrows, and slings like David. Mind you, sharp arrows can be made from bamboo, but otherwise it was sticks, stones, and garden tools!

Jonathan decided to attack one of the Philistine outposts, probably the one near his home town. Remember the reference to a Philistine garrison on the hill of God when Saul returned from his meeting with Samuel. At that time, Samuel told Saul to go up to Gilgal and wait seven days till Samuel came to make burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings, and tell Saul what to do (10:8). There seems to be a connection between that command and what happens here in chapter 13.

When the Philistines heard of Jonathan’s attack upon their outpost in Geba or Gibeah they were enraged. The Israelites were rebelling and had to be dealt with. Their domination of Israel amounted to taxing and plundering from time to time, but still any rebellion had to be quickly crushed. We wonder at Putin’s plan in his invasion of Ukraine; it is driven by ego or by a desire to plunder this neighbouring country? He is certainly acting like a Philistine. We might extend the comparison to the paucity of weapons possessed by the Ukrainian army. But the Ukrainians are not as dispirited as the Israelites were.

With the Philistines on the war path, Saul blew the trumpet to call the Hebrews to arms (13:3). The message the Hebrews heard was that Saul had attacked a Philistine outpost, making the Israelites an abomination, or literally, a stench to the Philistines. I am sure propaganda was as much a part of war then as it is now. Was it propaganda from Saul that made him the attacker of the Philistines rather than his son, Jonathan? Was Saul taking the credit, or was it simply a case the king being ultimately responsible? The question remains, why was it Jonathan and not Saul taking a stand against the Philistines? In the next chapter we again see Jonathan taking the lead, and trusting in the Lord, while King Saul sat under a tree.

Having ‘blown the trumpet’, Saul gathered the troops at Gilgal. Meanwhile, the Philistines gathered their troops at Micmash. They had a massive army, as numerous ‘as the sand on the seashore’, along with thousands of chariots and horsemen (13:5). Chariots were not much use in the hills, but their army was still well equipped and ready to fight in the hills of Israel. Saul’s poorly equipped army had ‘retreated’ to Gilgal, where he was trying to rally more men for the fight. But the men of Israel were scared and started hiding in caves, in thickets, in holes, and in pits (13:6). Some even fled across the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Even the troops with Saul at Gilgal were trembling in fear of the Philistines, which is strange because Gilgal was a long way from Philistine territory. Note that there is no mention of Samuel thus far, or of the Lord. Was Samuel leaving Saul to be tested?

**2. Saul’s sinful sacrifice**

‘In 1Samuel 12 Gilgal is the place of covenant renewal; in 1Samuel 13 it is the place of royal failure’. Saul, now King Saul, had gone to Gilgal to assemble an army to take on the Philistines; was he calling up reservists? I hear that reservists in the Russian army are not so keen to fight in Ukraine, where there is a high chance of getting killed. Saul’s men were not keen to fight the Philistines even though they were invading their land. Was this because of poor leadership or lack of arms, or both? Saul was king but he depended on Samuel for advice and was waiting for Samuel to come as arranged.

Samuel told Saul to wait seven days in Gilgal for him to come (10:8). Saul was aware of what Samuel said but his men were deserting in droves and he was getting worried. On the seventh day he decided to act without Samuel. Samuel was coming to make burnt offerings and sacrifice peace offerings, ‘and show you what you should do’ (10:8). But Saul ran out of patience, or, more to the point, failed to trust in the Lord and His prophet. He ordered the burnt offering and peace offerings to be brought and ‘he offered the burnt offering’ (13:9). As soon as he had finished Samuel showed up, and Saul went out to greet him (13:10).

Was it wrong for Saul to offer a burnt offering? At a later time King Uzziah was struck with leprosy for entering the holy place of the temple to burn incense; he transgressed into the ministry of the priest (2Chron 26:1f). Some think that Saul had a priest make the burnt offering for him. In any case, David built an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings without being reprimanded (2Sam 24:25). Saul, on the other hand, was severely reprimanded by Samuel. Why? Because he disobeyed Samuel’s command. Saul knew the importance of sacrificing before a battle but not the importance of obeying God’s command. He never learned that to obey is better than sacrifice (15:22). Some Christians never learn this lesson either- their worship is a matter of ritual and lip service, as Isaiah says (Isa 29:13).

‘What have you done?’ said Samuel (13:11). Saul explained how the Philistines were threatening, and his men were deserting him, and Samuel had not come within the appointed time. Samuel had actually come, even if was late on the seventh day. Saul’s problem was that he feared the Philistines more than he feared the Lord. He feared the Philistines would come all the way to Gilgal before he had made supplication to the Lord. Notice all the ‘I’s in his excuse to Samuel: ‘I have not made supplication’, and, ‘I felt compelled’ (13:12). He thought everything depended on him, when he should have been trusting in the Lord and waiting, as commanded by Samuel.

It is easy to slip into the mode of thinking that everything depends on me, and if I don’t do something it will never get done. Whatever we do, let us do it to the Lord (Col 3:23). Let us know that, if it is the will of the Lord, the Lord will see that it gets done, with or without me! If the job will not get done without you maybe it is not the Lord’s work. Saul had forgotten the promise given by the Lord not long before this- in the previous chapter in fact: ‘The Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake’ (12:22). He had also forgotten the great deliverances of the Lord, even in his lifetime.

The second part of Samuel’s command was the promise to, ‘show you what you should do’ (10:8). Saul was about to go off to battle without any word of guidance from the Lord. How disastrous that would be. Imagine getting married without any guidance from the Lord. Imagine getting a job without any guidance from the Lord. Imagine simply living without any guidance from the Lord. ‘It is one thing to be in terrible distress; it is another to be alone in that distress’. Yet how many Christians, and how many churches, are going it alone, depending on rituals and programs and paraphernalia, but without the Lord’s guidance, without the preaching of the word?

Samuel reprimanded Saul telling him, ‘You acted foolishly’, and, ‘You have not kept the commandments of the Lord your God’ (13:13). Remember what Samuel said at the covenant renewal ceremony? If you do not obey the voice of the Lord ‘you will be swept away’ (12:25). Samuel told Saul that because he failed to obey the Lord’s command he would be swept away, or more particularly, his kingdom or dynasty would not continue; this was rather tragic given the bravery and the faith of his son.

Saul would have no place in God’s great plan to bring salvation to the Hebrews, and also the Gentiles. In his foreordaining whatsoever comes to pass, the Lord had already chosen another man, a man after his own heart (13:14). That man was David, although his name has not yet appeared in the record- we often fail to locate this wonderful description of David because it appears here in the record of Saul.

‘Then Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal to Gibeah’ (13:15). How tragic! Tragic for Saul and tragic for the nation. Their king, who promised so much, failed to trust and obey the Lord. Samuel went off without showing Saul what he should do (10:8). Saul was on his own. He had an army of just six hundred men to fight the Philistine army of thousands still camped at Micmash, and no word from the Lord.

**3. Saul and Jonathan had the only two swords**

The people thought that having a king like other nations would ensure victory over their enemies. They were mistaken. Jonathan attacked the Philistines, but when they came up to Micmash the Israelites fled, and with good reason- their king was a failure and they had no weapons. Their king has no guiding word from the Lord. It is interesting that they all end up back in Gibeah: Samuel, Jonathan, and Saul with his depleted army (13:15, 16). In the next chapter we find Saul sitting under a tree with his men (14:2).

The Philistines sent raiders out in all directions across the land (13:17, 18). They must have occupied the land for some time because they had shut down all blacksmith shops in Israel (13:19). They did not want the Israelites making any weapons. To sharpen their farming tools they had to pay a high price for the Philistines to do it.

After Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost at Gibeah, the Philistines assembled a huge, fully equipped army at Micmash; they would teach Israel not to rebel. Here at the end of this chapter we find a depleted and dispirited army led by King Saul. They had no spears or swords, apart from two swords, one with Saul and one with Jonathan (13:22). They would have to fight with forks and axes.

What a hopeless situation they were in. How did it come to this? Would this be the end of Israel, the end of God’s chosen people?

It has come to this because of Saul’s failure to trust and obey the Lord. Saul took matters into his own hands, and this meant disaster. Saul and the people were in a helpless and hopeless situation. But remember Samuel’s promise: ‘The Lord will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake’ (12:22).

A thousand years later, as Jesus of Nazareth went through the same land of Israel, he found the people were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Mat 9:36). At this time they were being oppressed by the Romans, but it was spiritual oppression that Jesus saw. Jesus was moved with compassion for the people, so moved that he went to the cross, where he defeated our greatest enemies, Satan and death. Because of his victory in the cross and the resurrection we, his chosen people, now live free from the dominion of sin. We live in the wonderful saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.