

## Week 2: *Why Saul Failed as a Leader*

### Hook



**Main Point: Godly leaders do not operate out of fear but out of faith.**

The television series “Fear Factor” debuted in 2001 and presented contestants with an opportunity to win cash prizes by overcoming fear. The terror-inducing challenges included submersion in a rat pit, jumping between two speeding trailer trucks, and eating slugs.<sup>1</sup> The victor of each episode won a cash prize in the neighborhood of \$50,000.

In a 2014 study, one-thousand Americans answered the question: “Which common fears scare you most?”<sup>2</sup> Break into teams and rank these common fears according to what you believe would scare an average American, most to least.

- A. Flying on an airplane
- B. Blood
- C. Snakes
- D. Heights
- E. Being closed in a small space
- F. Public speaking
- G. Needles and getting shots
- H. Clowns
- I. Spiders
- J. Dogs
- K. Crowds
- L. Darkness
- M. Mice

Answer: C (64% of those surveyed were frightened of snakes), D (57%), F (56%), I (48%), E (42%), A (38%), M (30%), G (29%), K (24%), L (24%), B (20%), J (17%), H (13%)

**Transition:** Today's lesson will examine the fear that gripped king Saul and eventually led to his downfall.

**RECAP:** In these first two weeks of this study, we are looking at the background, before David's story really begins, in order to understand what God is looking for in a king. In week 1, we looked at passages in Deuteronomy and Judges which describe what God's choice for a king would be like and what happened when there was not a godly leader in charge of Israel. Then we looked at the passage in 1 Samuel when the people asked Samuel for a human king to rule over them. This week, we'll look at Israel's first king, Saul, and how he failed as a leader of God's people. All of this will prepare us for understanding how David was the leader Israel needed.

## **Week 2: *Why Saul Failed as a Leader***

### **Book**

**Main Point: Godly leaders do not operate out of fear but out of faith.**

**1 Samuel 9:1–2, 15–21 and 10:1–2, 9–11, 17–24 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** Godly leaders have confidence because they trust in the Spirit.

**Q: Compare/contrast Saul's description with God's design for a king (lesson 1).**

**Q: Why did Saul hide among the baggage? What does this say about him?**

First Samuel 9 introduces us to Saul. He is described in contrasting ways. The description in verses 1 and 2 focuses on things that are considered positives in the eyes of the world: wealth, good looks, great height. But in verse 21, Saul described himself as being from the humblest clan in the smallest tribe in Israel. When God told Samuel that it was Saul who would be king, He described Saul in terms of military strength. He would be the one to save God's people from the Philistines (9:16). This didn't necessarily mean Saul would be a godly leader. Samson was a man of great physical strength who rescued Israel from the Philistines, and the Holy Spirit came upon him mightily several times, but he was a womanizer and a vengeful man (Judges 13–16).

In 1 Samuel 10, Samuel anointed Saul king over Israel, and the Holy Spirit rushed upon him, and he prophesied (vv. 1, 10). Saul seemed to have everything going for him – he was wealthy, strong and powerful. Not only that, but he was empowered by the Holy Spirit! Why then would he hide when Samuel was casting lots for who would be made king (v. 22)? If God was with him, what did he have to fear?<sup>3</sup>

A few chapters later, we will see a young David facing the giant Goliath with no fear but full confidence that the Lord would deliver Goliath into his hand (1 Samuel 17). This presents a striking contrast to Saul, who hid among the baggage. David – not just with Goliath, but throughout his life – trusted in the Lord despite being in many terrifying situations, including being pursued by Saul and later by his own son, Absalom. But David would write in Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1).

To be fair to Saul, many of the prophets responded with a lack of confidence when they were first called by God. Moses said he was not eloquent enough to speak before Pharaoh (Exodus 4:10). Jeremiah said he was too young (Jeremiah 1:6). But when God reassured them that He would be with them, giving them the words to speak and empowering them to do all He called them to do, they responded to the call. But Saul had already been empowered by the Holy Spirit, and still he hid in fear. This is a

foreshadowing of how Saul would act out of fear during much of his reign, and how his fear would eventually be his downfall (1 Samuel 13:12; 15:24; 18:15; 28:15, 20).

No one is saying it's wrong to *feel* fear. We all feel fear at various times. That feeling is something we can't control. David felt fear "on every side" at times (Psalm 31:13). But he did not *operate* out of fear. He chose faith instead. In that same psalm, David also said, "In you, O Lord, do I take refuge ... You are my rock and my fortress ... into your hand I commit my spirit ... I am in distress ... terror on every side ... but I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand" (Psalm 31:1, 3, 5, 9, 13–15). David felt fear, but he chose faith. This is the difference between Saul and David and why David was the right leader for Israel. When he felt fear, he didn't try to fix the situation in his own power. He chose to trust in God.

Saul did some good things for Israel, but the book of Samuel paints him as a foil for the character of David. Saul was the kind of king the people wanted – strong and successful in all the worldly ways. They were looking for a "strong man" type of leader to go out and fight their battles for them (1 Samuel 8:20). Strength is a great thing for a leader to have, and David had it too (1 Samuel 18:7), but when leaders rely on their own strength instead of faith in God, they will panic and begin to operate out of fear when that strength starts to fail. But when you rely on God, the times of fear are when you most find your strength in the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

**Q: In what types of situations do you typically feel fear? Why?**

**Q: How do you usually respond? What would it look like for you to respond in faith?**

**Q: How did Jesus respond to His disciples when they felt afraid?**

### **1 Samuel 13:1–14 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** Godly leaders wait on the Lord instead of taking matters into their own hands.

**Q: Why were Saul and the people of Israel afraid in this passage?**

**Q: Why did Saul feel he had to take matters into his own hands instead of waiting?**

The beginning of this chapter tells us that Saul chose 3,000 men for his army and defeated the garrison of Philistines (vv. 1–4).<sup>5</sup> But then the Philistines mustered up 30,000 chariots, 6,000 horseman and a multitude of troops "like the sand on the seashore" (v. 5), and the men of Israel were terrified (v. 7). Saul waited seven days, the time in which Samuel had said he would come to Gilgal and make an offering to spiritually prepare the army for battle (v. 8).<sup>6</sup> But Samuel was late in coming and the

army started to scatter from Saul, so Saul offered the sacrifice himself (vv. 11–12). Saul didn't wait on God's timing.<sup>7</sup>

Samuel told Saul that because he took matters into his own hands instead of waiting on Samuel to do the sacrifice the way that the Lord had commanded, Saul would be removed from his position as king and his family dynasty would not continue. Another man, a man after God's own heart, would take his place, and his dynasty would be the one to rule God's kingdom forever (vv. 13–14). Many of us might think this sounds awfully unfair. Saul was seeking the favor of the Lord before battle (v. 12). Wasn't that what he was supposed to do? Maybe he did the offering the wrong way, but wasn't his heart in the right place? Weren't his intentions good?

Samuel's response makes it clear that no matter what we may think as we read this story, Saul's heart was not in the right place when he made that offering. No matter what he said, he didn't do it out of faith, he did it out of fear. If he had really been seeking God's favor, he would have waited however long it took to offer the sacrifice the way God commanded him through Samuel (v. 13). He would have trusted God's instructions, even if they seemed foolish to him, and done things God's way, like the Israelites had done in the battle of Jericho (Joshua 6). Robert D. Bergen writes, "It is ironic – and symptomatic of Saul's spiritual dullness – that the king believed he could obtain the Lord's favor through an act of disobedience."<sup>8</sup>

Not only did Saul operate out of fear instead of faith and take matters into his own hands, but he also tried to shift the blame to Samuel (v. 11), just as Adam shifted the blame to Eve, and Eve shifted the blame to the serpent after the Fall. Samuel's question to Saul, "What have you done?", also parallels God's question to Eve (Genesis 3:12–13). This story links the sins of Saul to the very first sin, both rooted in a lack of trust in God's word and an attempt to take matters into their own hands instead. Adam and Eve lost the opportunity for eternal life in the garden; Saul lost the opportunity for an enduring dynasty in the promised land.<sup>9</sup>

**Q: What kinds of situations tempt us to take matters into our own hands instead of waiting on the Lord? Why is it so hard to wait?**

**Q: How can we find the patience to wait on the Lord's timing? What can we do as we are waiting to grow in faith and trust?**

**Q: Read Psalm 37:3–7. How is waiting patiently on the Lord an act of trust? An act of surrender? An act of commitment? An act of faithfulness?**

## 1 Samuel 28:3–20 and 1 Chronicles 10:13–14 [Read]

**Talking Point 3:** Godly leaders look to the Lord for guidance.

**Q: Why was Saul so desperate? How does this connect to the earlier stories we read?**

**Q: How can we know from the text that Saul knew it was wrong to consult a medium?**

The Law of Moses strictly prohibited any use of magic or divination to tell the future or to get any supernatural guidance (Leviticus 20:6). The Law calls following mediums and spiritualists “prostituting” ourselves. It’s “adulterous” to our relationship with God. Scripture often talks about idolatry in terms of “adultery” because of the image of God as our husband. Trusting in another god or any other source (magic, horoscopes or anything else) for wisdom and guidance is “cheating” on God with “other lovers” (Hosea 2:7). Saul knew this; the text even tells us that Saul had expelled the mediums and spiritualists from the land. By seeking out a medium, he was not only breaking God’s law, he was also going against his own.

But Saul was desperate. He had sought wisdom from the Lord, but the Lord hadn’t answered him. He had tried everything. He had consulted prophets and even the *Urim*, a special pair of stones the high priest could use to seek God’s guidance in making decisions for the people (Exodus 28:30).<sup>10</sup> (They were used only for big questions that affected the whole nation such as whether to go to battle with a particular nation. Only one question could be asked at a time, and it had to be a yes or no question. The *Urim* may have seemed like divination, but it was inquiring of the Lord, not other sources.<sup>11</sup>)

Saul had been cut off from the prophetic wisdom of the Lord. God had rejected him as king because of his disobedience, both in the story we read above and again in chapter 15, when he kept the best of the spoils from battle instead of destroying it all as God had commanded (15:15; 16:1). The Holy Spirit had departed from Saul by the time David was anointed (16:13–14). God was so upset at Saul’s disobedience that the text says He “regretted” making Saul king (15:35). This doesn’t mean that God thought He had done something wrong or made a mistake. This was all part of His plan. The word literally means to “be sorry” or “console yourself.”<sup>12</sup> God wasn’t saying He shouldn’t have made Saul king, but that He was saddened by how it had turned out, even though He knew this is what would happen. The only other time Scripture says the Lord had regret was right before the flood, when He said He was sorry He had made mankind (Genesis 6:7). But as with the flood, God didn’t completely give up on His people. Just as He saved Noah and his family and started humanity anew with them, God anointed David and started the monarchy anew with him.<sup>13</sup>

We see Saul's great fear of the Philistines that caused him to make this desperate move, but after Samuel's words, Saul fell flat on the ground in an even greater fear. This reminds us of what Jesus would later say in the Gospels: do not fear man, who can only kill the body, but only fear God who can destroy both body and soul (Matthew 10:28). Saul lived in an unholy fear of all the wrong things, but what God calls us to is the godly "fear of the Lord" that is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7).

**Q: In what ways are we tempted to compromise on things we know are wrong because we feel desperate or out of control?**

**Q: What can we do when we feel like we aren't hearing from the Lord?**

**Q: How can we find God's wisdom? How is that connected to proper fear of the Lord?**

**Q: Read Psalm 56. What feelings did David experience here? How did he respond?**

## **Week 2: *Why Saul Failed as a Leader***

### **Took**

**Main Point: Godly leaders do not operate out of fear but out of faith.**

Mark Hall is the lead singer and songwriter of Casting Crowns. The strength and faith of a family inspired Hall to pen the song "Praise You in the Storm." Watch this video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDtHf5J3ZLE>) to hear more about the faithfulness of a family who stood firm amid fear and tragedy.

**Q: How does someone's choosing faith through fear impact their witness?**

**Q: Describe the kind of comfort that the Lord has provided to you when you've faced fear or tragedy in the past. In what ways did your faith grow through this experience?**

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** Think about the things or situations that tend to make you feel afraid. Why do you feel fear? What is the root of that feeling? Is it a lack of control or something else? What can we do when we feel fear or lack of control?

**PRAY** for your faith to be strengthened. Bring all your fears before Him in prayer and surrender them to Him. Be honest with about your feelings. Tell Him you're scared and how and why. Then ask God to fill you with His Spirit and give you the confidence to trust in Him and His ways.

**ACT:** Fight fear with faith. Choose a few verses to memorize that you can speak over yourself whenever you feel afraid. When we speak God's Word over ourselves, it can banish the fear and fill us with confidence in the Lord. Below are some verses you can memorize this week to use in the future:

- Joshua 1:9: "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."
- Psalm 32:7: "You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance."
- Psalm 56:3–4: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?"

- Isaiah 41:10: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”
- Philippians 4:6–7: “Do not be anxious for anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

**NEXT TIME in *The Life of David*:** Next week, we’ll finally get to the story of David himself. We’ll see the story of God’s choosing David as king and how God doesn’t look at external qualities, but at the inner person. We’ll also see how God empowered David with his Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1015655/?ref\\_=ttep\\_ep1](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1015655/?ref_=ttep_ep1)

<sup>2</sup> <https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2014/03/27/argh-snakes>

<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (London: W. W. Norton & Co, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (London: W. W. Norton & Co, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> There is debate about the translation of the Hebrew text in verse 1 giving us the time frame of this story. For more detail on this debate, see the footnote in the ESV Study Bible.

<sup>6</sup> Connected to the difference in translations of verse 1 and the timing of this story, scholars also disagree about whether this period of waiting for seven days is the instructions that Samuel gave Saul in 10:8 or a different set of instructions he gave many years later, which told him the same thing, to wait for seven days at Gilgal.

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Bergen, 1–2 Samuel, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Bergen, 1–2 Samuel, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Robert D. Bergen, 1–2 Samuel, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Sometimes they are called the *Urim* and *Thummim*; sometimes, like here, just the *Urim* for short.

<sup>11</sup> Aelred Cody, *A History of the Old Testament Priesthood, Analecta Biblica, Vol 35* (1969).

<sup>12</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson Academic, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Robert D. Bergen, 1–2 Samuel, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 1996).