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Studies in Character and the Crown (1 Samuel)

Lesson Five

A Rash Decision and a Stinging Rebuke

Focal Text

1 Samuel 13:1-14

Background

1 Samuel 13:1-14

Main Idea

Saul panicked and made a foolish decision.

Question to Explore

How can we avoid panic and foolish decisions?

Quick Read

When he landed in a dangerous situation, Israel's inexperienced King Saul panicked and desperately tried to fix things himself instead of looking to God for help.

Introduction

I met Brenda Kabler from Wichita, Kansas, in a freshman English class at Dallas Baptist College in August 1968. Our professor sat us in alphabetical order, so we sat side by side. We developed mutual friends. These friends began talking about several of us driving Brenda home so we could meet her parents. The trip was planned. Five of us would be going, three girls and two boys. Then one by one, for assorted reasons, persons had to cancel. I cannot say whether God was at work or not. What I do know is that only two people made that trip. I drove Brenda on that six-hour trip to Wichita and had the privilege to meet her family.

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During that first year at DBU, a friendship developed. Since I worked every night until midnight at a trucking company, Brenda had a social life of her own. We did sometimes attend church together, although frequently I went to my home in Decatur on the weekends to fulfill preaching assignments at small churches. We maintained communication during the summer of 1969 and were happy to see each other when the fall semester began.

We had our first official date in September of that year. Both of us sensed that God was doing something between us. On Sunday night, November 16, 1969, we attended church and then enjoyed a meal together. We were sitting in my car in the dorm parking lot not long before Brenda was required by a curfew to be in her room. (That sounds strange to me even when I type it.)

I had not reflected at length on that moment. I certainly had not planned to do it. I had not thought about a romantic place or a romantic strategy. I had no ring. The fact that I had done none of those things did not seem to matter to me. I made a rash decision and asked a very significant question. I said to Brenda, “Will you marry me?”

It was as if I had used a stun gun on her. She was so shocked (as she has told me often since then). She thought that I was going to ask her “to go steady” or to enter an exclusive dating relationship and blurted out “Yes.” She made a rash decision with her response.

In less than a year, we made pledges to live together faithfully in marriage for the rest of our lives. More than 48 years later, we are in unanimous agreement that our rash decisions made on that November Sunday evening were good ones.

It is generally better to think through important decisions. Many decisions made quickly have a negative impact. Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman are consultants in leadership development. They recently collaborated on an article for the *Harvard Business Review* entitled “9 Habits That Lead to Terrible Decisions.”¹ One of the nine habits they articulated was “Not Expecting Unexpected Events.” They define this habit as failing to consider what the negative consequences might be, not doing the due-diligence, or not anticipating the potential problems that might result from a particular decision.

King Saul made a rash decision. He did not think through the consequences of his decision and paid a terrible price for it.

Commentary

The people of God clamored for a king, and God responded to their request. Samuel anointed Saul, the one whom God selected, to become the first king of Israel (1 Sam. 9:1—10:24). Saul responded to the cries of the Israelites who lived east of the Jordan River and defeated the Ammonites, to the delight of the people (1 Sam. 11).

1 Samuel 12 contains Samuel's farewell address to the people, although his death was not recorded until chapter 25. These important speeches marked transitions or seams between historical periods.² This farewell speech by Samuel is also a dividing line for the evaluation of Saul's reign as king. The writer pictures Saul in a positive light before chapter 12 and in a completely negative light after it.

King Saul and the Philistine Threat (13:1-4)

The work of textual scholars is an incredible one. They do the meticulous work of comparing ancient manuscripts and translations of the Scripture to determine the accuracy of the biblical text. **Read this carefully.** We can be fully confident of the accuracy and truthfulness of the English translations that we read today due to the work of this scholarship. The Bible is the most rigorously examined and studied of any ancient document, religious or non-religious.

The overview of the reign of Israel's first king (1 Sam. 13:1) contains two of the elements that all overviews of subsequent kings would include. These elements are the age at which the individual became king and the number of years of the reign.

The textual work required for this verse has to do with the numbers. Notice that The New International Version translation has two numbers "thirty" and "forty" in half brackets and refers us to footnotes. The content of the footnotes relates to the presence or absence of these numbers in the ancient manuscripts. The NIV differs sharply from the KJV rendering: "Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,".

The KJV reading is faithful to the Hebrew (Masoretic) Text. The latter does not have either one of the numbers, thirty or forty. (That is what the NIV footnotes acknowledge.) The lack of confidence in that reading, however, is based on the fact that the events of Saul's reign (1 Sam. 9-31) can hardly be squeezed into two calendar years. In addition to that, the form of the number "two" is one that most frequently is used for the second number in a two-number sequence.

Accepting the reading that Saul was thirty-years-old when he became king is problematic as well. Is that old enough to have a son (Jonathan) who is old enough to be a recognized military leader in Saul's army? Translators may have established his reign as forty-two years in length to correspond to the round number of forty Paul used about Saul (Acts 13:21).

Saul defeated the Ammonites, but the Philistines were a more formidable threat. Saul strategically deployed a militia group to maintain a status of readiness if the Philistines attacked. Saul was the king of all twelve tribes of Israel, but he deployed three units of men in the territory of his own tribe, Benjamin.

Saul was in command of two of the units. This was possible since "Micmash" and "Bethel" were less than a mile apart (1 Sam. 13:2). The other unit was stationed at

“Gibeah,” Saul’s hometown, under the command of “Jonathan” (13:2). It seems curious that the writer does not tell us that Jonathan is Saul’s son.

Jonathan was either an older adolescent or a young adult. This demographic takes more risks than any other age group. A growing body of brain research explains why this is so. The advancements in Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) suggests that adolescents are more distressed than older adults by negative peer evaluation. At this age a brain region known as the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (PFC) is still developing. This area helps someone cope with negative peer pressure. Adolescents and young adults take risks to avoid experiencing a negative peer reaction.³

While his father Saul deployed his troops defensively, Jonathan, the young adult, risked a pre-emptive or offensive attack against the Philistines. “Geba” (13:3) was just three miles from where he was deployed at Gibeah. Saul realized the implication of this attack. The Philistines would surely respond militarily. “The trumpet” (13:3) was probably a ram’s horn transformed into an instrument to alert the people of God (Judg. 3:27; 6:34). The Israelites used it to summon the people either to worship or to warfare.

It is very unusual for Saul to refer to the Israelites as “Hebrews” (1 Sam. 13:3). This was the designation more often used by non-Israelites to describe Israelites. Saul responded, and the people reacted. This reaction held Saul responsible for the impulsive act of his son Jonathan (13:4).

“Gilgal” (13:4), a city in the tribal territory of Benjamin, was an important location in the early history of the Israelite people in the land of Canaan. It was the first place of encampment when Joshua led the people into the land (Joshua 4:19-20; 5:9-10). Samuel included Gilgal in his circuit of dispensing justice (1 Sam. 7:16). It was also the place where the people popularly accepted Saul as their king (1 Sam. 11:14-15).

Saul’s Rash Decision (13:5-9)

The Philistines enjoyed a definite military superiority over the Israelite forces for two reasons. Their available personnel outnumbered the Israelites. The phrase utilized to describe the “number” of men they could put on the battlefield was the one used to describe Abraham’s descendants in God’s promise to him (Genesis 22:17). The number of charioteers doubled the number of chariots since war chariots required at least a two-man crew. One man would drive it, while the other served as the archer, shooting arrows.

The 3,000 and 6,000 numbers for chariots and charioteers are quite impressive in size. The Canaanite army under Sisera only had 900 chariots in the field when he fought against the Israelites led by Deborah and Barak (Judg. 4:3). The hill country terrain where the Philistines and the Israelites generally met in battle was not the most ideal for the advantageous use of chariots.

The other reason for the military superiority of the Philistines was a technological one. The Philistines developed and implemented the use of iron before the Israelites did. They enjoyed a monopoly with this metal. The Israelites, therefore, struggled to secure the necessary number of swords and spears to match the Philistines (1 Sam. 13:19-22). The picture of the Philistine regular army incredibly equipped vis-à-vis the Israelite militia using farm implements as makeshift weapons compares favorably with the contrast between the British regular army so well-equipped and dressed in their “red coats” and the inexperienced colonial militias with their individual muskets in the American Revolutionary War.

The Israelites, including Saul, were very afraid to face the Philistines in battle. They possessed none of the confidence that they had demonstrated against the Ammonites (1 Sam. 11). Since Saul had gathered his men at Micmash (13:2), and now the Philistines were “camped at Micmash” (13:5), it is reasonable to assume that Saul was retreating from the enemy, hoping to avoid a fight.

The Israelites knew they were at a severe disadvantage. “Their situation was critical” (13:6) means to be narrowed down or squeezed. They were “between a rock and a hard place” with few options. Some of them chose the option of leaving Saul’s army by hiding wherever they could. The many caves in this area, created out of the soft limestone, were ideal places for hiding. Archaeologists have discovered inscriptions on the cave walls written by persons who sought safety and refuge there. David, in fact, hid from Saul in a cave (1 Sam. 24).

They also hid in areas with heavy bramble bush vegetation and in natural crevices in the rocks. “Pits” (13:6), literally “tombs,” may be slits in the earth where bodies were lowered and buried. “Cisterns” (13:6) were “ditches” naturally occurring or manmade, that were lined with plaster to catch and retain rain water.

While some hid in the immediate area, others chose to run away. Since the Philistines occupied territory west/southwest of this hill country, they fled eastward across the Jordan River. “Gad” was one of the tribes of Israel, while “Gilead” is a geographical term describing where the tribes of Gad and Reuben lived (13:7).

Saul retreated from Micmash to Gilgal. The troops that did not hide or flee were filled with fear. The Hebrew verb translated “quaking with fear” (13:7) denotes people who are terrified by something and tremble as a result. It is also the word used for the trembling of the earth or an earthquake. When God met with Israel at Mt. Sinai, the people “trembled” (Exod. 19:16), and the mountain “trembled” (Exod. 19:18). Even these persons who initially stayed with Saul “began to scatter” (1 Sam. 13:7). His fighting force was diminished from 3,000 (13:2) to 600 (13:15).

We should give Saul credit for remaining at Gilgal for a week while most of his army abandoned him. He waited there for that length of time because it was “the time set by

Samuel” (13:8). Does this refer to the same time frame previously established by Samuel at Gilgal (10:8)? The same two sacrifices, the burnt offering and the fellowship offering, are mentioned (10:8; 13:9). On the other hand, it seems unlikely and maybe impossible for all the events recorded in 1 Samuel 10:8—13:8 to have occurred in one week of time. Samuel may have set another time frame for Saul to wait on him to perform the act that was authorized to be done only by a priest.

Saul waited but became impatient when Samuel did not appear. Saul watched his army disappear for the most part; therefore, he realized the only way for the Israelites to prevail was for Yahweh, Israel’s God, to fight in their behalf. This was the tradition of Holy War. Since Holy War was a religious or sacral event, it was initiated by offering sacrifice to God to bolster morale and calm the fear in a hopeless situation. Samuel had offered the burnt offering before a previous battle with the Philistines (7:9), but Samuel was not present here.

Saul considered this to be an impossible circumstance. He felt as much fear as his men felt. He panicked because of his fear. He made a rash decision. He determined to do what only a priest was authorized to do. “And Saul offered up the burnt offering” (13:9). The article in the *Harvard Business Review* might have been helpful for Saul to read. Saul did not think through this decision. He did not anticipate what the negative consequence of this decision might be.

Samuel’s Stinging Rebuke (13:10-14)

Have you ever walked into an “ambush” by not knowing that a friend or family member was very upset with you? You greet them with “Hey, what’s up?” and they respond by “chewing you out” with strong emotion. It is similar in force to that “blindsided” block in football when a defensive player never sees it coming.

Samuel essentially blindsided Saul, who never saw this coming. When Samuel arrived at Gilgal, Saul was elated and greeted him appropriately (13:10). Seemingly Saul had no uneasy thoughts about offering the sacrifice considering Samuel’s absence. He learned quickly that was not the case with Samuel.

Samuel skipped the pleasantries of a greeting. His question was harsh and accusatory. Saul’s explanation of why he had offered the sacrifice was direct and pragmatic, but not apologetic (13:11-12). Saul asserted that the longer he waited, the fewer fighting men he had with him. He then reminded Samuel that he himself had not come in the time frame he had said. He placed some blame on Samuel as the pronoun “you” is emphasized by its position in the sentence.

His panic was compounded by the fact that the Philistine attack was imminent. Only at the end of his explanation does the reader find any word about God. The legitimate way to seek “the LORD’s favor” (13:12) was to offer the required sacrifice. He had no choice. He was forced into doing what he did.

On the surface, Saul's explanation seems perfectly pious and justifies his action, but Samuel did not accept it. The prophet replied as a prophet representing God. He spoke in the form of a prophetic judgment speech. The judgment saying included two components: the announcement or an indictment of sin that had been committed, and the punishment that God would bring because of that sin.

Saul's sin was the sin of rebellion or disobedience against God. He failed to follow the command or instructions of God. The never-before mentioned concept of verse 13 is that God intended to establish Saul as the founder of a line of kings or dynasty. That possibility had now evaporated.

The punishment Saul received involved that possibility of a dynasty (13:14). Saul did not forfeit his individual position as the king of God's people, but he did lose the privilege of his family becoming a ruling, dynastic family in Israel. Jonathan, introduced previously in this story, would not succeed his father as king.

The judgment of God upon Saul seems exceptionally harsh. The reader discovers the logic of the severity of the punishment through an awareness of a Hebrew root found four times in two verses. The New International Version renders this term with "command" and "gave" (13:13) and with "appointed" and "command" (13:14). Samuel had commanded Saul to wait for him, but Saul failed to keep that appointment. Yahweh had appointed Saul to be the king to rule under the command of God, and Saul failed also to keep that appointment or command.

Because of Saul's failure to keep God's command, God will command (appoint) another to succeed Saul. This is the first reference to David in this book. The traditional understanding of the phrase "a man after his own heart" (13:14) is that David's character was patterned or built upon the character or nature of Yahweh. Elsewhere this phrase describes the freedom of a person to do whatever he chooses to do (1 Sam. 14:7). In this context Samuel may have reminded Saul that God freely chose him to be king, and he has the sovereignty and freedom to choose someone else to be king as well.

Conclusion

We can read the book by social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliott Aronson entitled *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*⁴ if we want to understand why we make rash decisions. We actually know why we make them. We sense that in a particular situation we have no other option than to do something we know we should not do. We do not trust God to take care of us.

We make our best decisions when we reflect upon and determine what the positive or negative outcomes will be before we decide to act.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles

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¹ Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman. “9 Habits That Lead to Terrible Decisions,” *Harvard Business Review*, September 1, 2014.

² We especially find this use of farewell speeches in this way in the part of the Hebrew Bible called the “Former Prophets” (the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). They demonstrate an ending and a beginning through a farewell address or speech given by the dominant character of the period that is ending. When the story moved from the conquest and possession of the land into the period of the judges, Joshua addressed the people (Josh. 24). In this transition from judgeship to kingship, Samuel addressed the people.

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-wide-wide-world-psychology/201506/why-are-teen-brains-designed-risk-taking> (Accessed 2/17/18).

⁴ Carol Tavris and Elliott Aronson, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2007).