

Who was King Saul in the Bible?

Saul started out very well only to see his subsequent disobedient actions derail what could have been a stellar, God-honoring rule over the nation of Israel. How could someone so close to God at the start spiral out of control and out of favor with God? To understand how things in Saul's life got so mixed up, we need to know something about the man himself. Who was King Saul, and what can we learn from his life?

The name "Saul," from the Hebrew word pronounced shaw-ool, means "asked." Saul was the son of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul came from a wealthy family (1 Samuel 9:1) and was tall, dark and handsome in appearance. Scripture states that "there was not a man among the sons of Israel more handsome than he, being taller than any of the people from his shoulder and upward" (1 Samuel 9:2). He was God's chosen one to lead the scattered nation of Israel, a collection of tribes that did not have a central leader other than God and no formal government. In times of trouble, leaders would arise but never consolidated the power of the twelve tribes into one nation. Years before Saul's rule, Samuel the prophet was Israel's religious leader but not a king. In fact, Israel was loosely ruled by judges who presided over domestic squabbles (1 Samuel 8). They were not, however, equipped to rule in times of war. It is no exaggeration to say that Samuel and Saul lived in turbulent times. The Philistines were Israel's sworn enemies, and war broke out between the two on a fairly regular basis (1 Samuel 4). Because of the constant threat of war and a desire to be like the surrounding nations, the people pressed Samuel to appoint a king to rule over them (1 Samuel 8:5).

Though the people's request for a king was displeasing to Samuel, God allowed it. The people had rejected God as king, forsaken Him, and served other gods (1 Samuel 8:6-8). God told Samuel to anoint a king as the people had asked, but also to "warn them and

show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:9). Thus, it became Samuel's task to anoint a king from among the people. Saul was secretly anointed the first king of all the tribes of Israel (1 Samuel 10:1) before being publicly selected by lot (1 Samuel 10:17-24).

Saul's reign over Israel started peacefully around 1050 BC, but the peace did not last. One of the most famous events in Saul's life was the stand-off with the Philistines in the Valley of Elah. Here Goliath taunted the Israelites for 40 days until a shepherd boy named David slew him (1 Samuel 17). Aside from that incident of fear and uncertainty, Saul was a competent military leader. He was good enough that his rule was solidified by his victory at Jabesh-Gilead. As part of the triumph, he was again proclaimed king at Gilgal (1 Samuel 11:1-15). He went on to lead the nation through several more military victories as his popularity reached its zenith. However, a series of very serious blunders, beginning with an unauthorized sacrificial offering (1 Samuel 13:9-14), started Saul's downfall from his kingship. Saul's downward spiral continued as he failed to eliminate all of the Amalekites and their livestock as commanded by God (1 Samuel 15:3). Disregarding a direct order from God, he decided to spare the life of King Agag along with some of the choice livestock. He tried to cover up his transgression by lying to Samuel and, in essence, lying to God (1 Samuel 15). This disobedience was the last straw, as God would withdraw His Spirit from Saul (1 Samuel 16:14). The break between God and Saul is arguably one of the saddest occurrences in Scripture.

While Saul would be allowed to serve out the rest of his life as king, he was plagued by an evil spirit that tormented him and brought about waves of madness (1 Samuel 16:14-23). Saul's final years were profoundly tragic as he endured periods of deep manic depression. However, it was a young man brought into the king's court named David who

became the soothing influence on the troubled king by playing music that temporarily restored the king's sanity. The king embraced David as one of his own, but all of this changed as David became a fine military leader in his own right. In fact, a popular song of the day was "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Samuel 18:7). When Saul realized that God was with David, the king sought to kill David at every opportunity. David succeeded in evading the countless attempts on his life with the help of the king's son, Jonathan, and the king's daughter, Michal.

The final years of King Saul's life brought a general decline in his service to the nation and in his personal fortunes. He spent much time, energy, and expense trying to kill David rather than consolidating the gains of his earlier victories, and because of this the Philistines sensed an opening for a major victory over Israel. After Samuel's death, the Philistine army gathered against Israel. Saul was terrified and tried to inquire of the Lord, but received no answer through the Urim or the prophets. Though he had banished mediums and spiritists from the land, Saul disguised himself and inquired of a medium in Endor. He asked her to contact Samuel. It seems that God intervened and had Samuel appear to Saul. Samuel reminded Saul of his prior prophecy that the kingdom would be taken from him. He further told Saul that the Philistines would conquer Israel and Saul and his sons would be killed (1 Samuel 28). The Philistines did, indeed, route Israel and kill Saul's sons, including Jonathan. Saul was critically wounded and asked his armor-bearer to kill him so that the Philistines would not torture him. In fear, Saul's armor-bearer refused, so Saul fell on his own sword, followed by his armor-bearer who did the same.

There are three lessons we can learn from the life of King Saul. First, obey the Lord and seek to do His will. From the very start of his reign, Saul had the perfect

opportunity to be the benchmark by which all future kings could be measured. All he had to do was to seek the Lord wholeheartedly, obey God's commandments, and align his will with that of God's, and his rule would have been a God-honoring one. However, like so many others, Saul chose a different path and strayed away from God. We find a perfect example of his disobedience in the incident where God commanded him to kill all the Amalekites, but Saul kept the king and some of the spoils of war. Haman the Agagite, who would later seek to kill the Jews (see the book of Esther), was a descendant of the king whose life Saul spared. Saul compounded his troubles by lying to Samuel over the incident. He claimed that the soldiers had saved the best of the animals in order to sacrifice them to God (1 Samuel 15). This act, plus many others over the course of his rule, emphasized the fact that he could not be trusted to be an instrument of God's will.

The second lesson we learn is not to misuse the power given to us. There is no question that King Saul abused the power God had entrusted to him. Pride often creeps into our hearts when people are serving and honoring us. In time, receiving "star treatment" can make us believe that we really are something special and worthy of praise. When this happens, we forget that God is the one who is really in control and that He alone rules over all. God may have chosen Saul because he was humble, but over time that humility was replaced by a self-serving and destructive pride that destroyed his rule.

Another lesson for us is to lead the way God wants us to lead. First Peter 5:2-10 is the ultimate guide for leading the people that God has placed in our charge: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And

when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." How much different Saul's life would have turned out had he obeyed these principles. King Saul would have had no shortage of wise counsel available to him. By ignoring God and His wise counsel, Saul allowed the spiritual health of his people to deteriorate further, alienating them from God.