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A Prince After His Own Heart: An Analysis of God's Rejection of King Saul

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Many have wrestled with the tragic story of King Saul in the book of Samuel, particularly why God's justice and goodness seem inconsistent with His relationship to and treatment of King Saul in contrast to that of King David. Though God chose each to fulfill a kingly role, His reason for elevating David and rejecting Saul can be unclear. Rather than ignoring this apparent inconsistency, a deeper look at the structure and expectations of Israelite kingship uncovers the truth that God's faithfulness is consistent throughout and foundational to the stories of these two kings.

As Israel shifted from the less centralized rule in the period of the Judges to a monarchy in 1 Samuel, God established the terms for how this new kingly role would function. In 1 Samuel 8:5 and 6, Israel asked God to give them a king (*melek*) because they longed to be like other nations. Although God knew their request was a masked rejection of His own leadership, He responded to their cry and told Samuel to anoint Saul as Israel's prince (*nagid*) (9:16).¹ The Hebrew words *nagid* and *melek* are similar in meaning, but tradition has maintained distinguishing nuances between them. *Melek* was often used to describe a leader in a political sense, while *nagid* was often used to describe a leader in a religious sense as one who was particularly chosen and legitimized by God.² The use of *nagid* implies that Israel's kings would be called to fulfill a role of leadership by living surrendered to God and faithfully carrying out God's will; they would lead by guiding the people into obedience and righteousness, and ultimately into deeper relationship with God. Referring to a king as *nagid* was a reminder that God remained Israel's true king.³

¹ All verses referenced in this paper are from Robert Alter's translation in Robert Alter, *The David Story: A translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1999).

² Jeong Bong Kim and D. J. Human, "Nagid: A Re-examination in the Light of the Royal Ideology in the Ancient Near East," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 64 (2008): 1493.

³ Kim and Human, "Nagid: A Re-examination," 1489.

As a divinely sanctioned leader, Saul was chosen to work alongside God in guiding Israel in faithfulness and he was therefore equipped by God and expected to honor God's word by being obedient to it. When looking at Saul's selection, his disobedience, and the evil spirit he receives from God through this lens of Israelite kingship, it can be suggested that Saul desired to be king on his own terms rather than the *nagid* God chose and equipped him to be. Ultimately, this is what influenced God's rejection of Saul and the tragic end of his kingship.

Selection

An examination of Saul's reign and downfall causes many to wonder whether Saul was selected only to encounter failure. David Gunn states that Saul's fate was decided for him from the beginning as God intentionally stacked the odds against him.⁴ This idea finds some support in the fact that Saul did not have a choice in becoming the king of Israel. At his own anointing, he was found hiding behind the gear which does not present him as a promising candidate.⁵ Saul's initial timidity and inadequacy compared to David's initial success can warrant the assumption that God selected Saul for failure while choosing David for success.

In 1 Samuel 9:16-17, God tells Samuel that He chose Saul to be king because God heard the cry of His people and He sought someone who could deliver them from the Philistines. God did not choose Saul out of spite. Rather, He was raising up a military king who could perform His will and deliver His people.⁶ Furthermore, God fully equipped Saul to conduct His purpose. He gave Saul a new heart and God's Spirit came upon Saul. Saul's reception of and transformation by the Spirit indicates that God affirmed Saul's kingship and that Saul was prepared by God Himself for any challenge he would encounter.⁷ After receiving the Spirit, Samuel said to Saul,

⁴ David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, JSOTSup 14 (Sheffield, ENG: JSOT Press, 1980), 29 and 115.

⁵ Everett Fox, *Give Us a King!: Samuel, Saul, and David*, (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1999), 34.

⁶ Alter, *The David Story*, 50.

⁷ Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, WBC 10 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983), 94.

“do what your hand finds to do” (10:7) meaning that, because he had received the Spirit, his actions should be evidence of the Spirit’s abiding in him.⁸

The beginning of Saul’s reign portrays him as an ideal *nagid* in the instance of the Ammonites’ attack against Jabesh Gilead as he listened to God, rallied the people to be obedient to God, and was a vessel who ushered in the Lord’s victory for the people. Saul took ownership of his leadership by fueling the Israelites’ courage and turning their fear into enthusiasm. Furthermore, Saul attributed their deliverance to the Lord’s strength (see 1 Samuel 11:9, 13). This is the picture of what an Israelite prince subject to God’s authority was intended to look like.

It is evident that Saul’s reign was not meant to be simply the prelude to David’s story; rather, he had the capacity and potential to remain the chosen king. Truly, Saul had the Spirit of God and was fully equipped to conduct God’s will. However, Saul initiated his own downfall by attempting to be king on his own terms rather than partnering with God in obedience as he was called.

Disobedience

Disobedience was the primary vehicle by which Saul separated his authority from God’s authority. Saul’s first act of disobedience occurs in 1 Samuel 13 as Israel was preparing for battle. Because his troops began to fall away and lose their enthusiasm, Saul became afraid and disregarded the command he was given in 10:8 to wait for Samuel to come and offer a sacrifice. Instead, Saul offered the sacrifice to God himself. Saul used religion as a political tool for his own means by usurping Samuel’s role, not trusting in God’s providence, and taking the situation into his own hands.⁹ Saul offered the sacrifice to God in haste and out of fear when, in fact, his

⁸ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 92.

⁹ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 128.

calling within the kingly partnership was to sacrifice his own will by acting in obedience to God.¹⁰

When Samuel arrived, he announced that though Saul's kingdom could have been made great, God had already chosen Saul's replacement who was "after His own heart" (13:14). Some have argued that this phrase means "a man after God's own choosing."¹¹ However, the contrast between Saul and the future king in verses 13 and 14 indicates that this phrase would be referring to the disposition of Saul's replacement. When we compare this text to other similar texts (such as 1 Samuel 14:7) and consider the framework and context of the overall narrative, a more consistent interpretation appears to be "like someone's heart."¹² Therefore, it can be inferred that describing David as a man after God's own heart does not mean that he was God's true choice, but rather that his heart was like God's heart, his will aligned with God's will.

In chapter 15, Saul again "fear[s] the troops and listen[s] to their voice" (15:24) instead of obeying God and completely destroying the Amalekites and their possessions. After sparing the Amalekite king Agag and the best of the livestock, Saul rationalized his disobedience to Samuel and did not repent until after Samuel stated that his kingship had been taken away.¹³ Because God responded with grace to David's repentance after his sin with Bathsheba and responded with judgment to Saul's repentance, a case can be made for God's injustice. However, the circumstances of Saul's rationalization and insecurities suggest that his repentance was an act of self-preservation for the purpose of keeping a clenched fist on his kingship. Yet, Israelite kingship was meant to be marked by open hands of surrender and worship. Saul's seemingly

¹⁰ Davis, *Looking on the Heart*, 16.

¹¹ Benjamin J.M. Johnson, "The Heart of YHWH's Chosen One in 1 Samuel," *JBL* 131 (2012): 458.

¹² Johnson, "The Heart of YHWH's Chosen One," 458.

¹³ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 153; Tony W. Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, SHBC 7 (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2001), 196.

flippant repentance reveals that he did not understand the gravity of disobeying the Lord or that the purpose of repentance is restoration of relationship. In both instances of his disobedience, Saul was given the gift of the word of the Lord, but he did not honor it with his obedience. Instead, Saul listened to the people and, overwhelmed by his insecurities and fears, he rejected God's kingship. Thus, God rejected Saul. By asserting his own will above God's, Saul forfeited the throne.¹⁴ Therefore, God's judgment of taking the kingdom from Saul is justified. Naturally, another prince would be anointed who would rule in submission and obedience to the True King.¹⁵

David, too, was selected by God, yet he also encountered the gravity of his own fallen nature. Perhaps David's most blatant sin is in 2 Samuel 11 when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah killed in battle, attempting to conceal this sin. Like Saul, once his position was secure and prosperous, David became sidetracked by his own will.¹⁶ Nathan the prophet announced God's judgment on David: destruction and calamity would come upon his family, his wives would be taken, and his child with Bathsheba would die (see 12:10-14). Although his dynasty was not taken from him, David's punishment was an ongoing reality and the root of much pain and grief throughout the rest of his life. Nathan strongly rebuked David's horrific acts towards Uriah and his wife, yet he emphasized that David ultimately did not listen to God's word.¹⁷

Unlike Saul, David confessed to Nathan without rationalization, "I have offended against the Lord" (12:13). David recognized that God is relational and responsive to His people, and he

¹⁴ Davis, *Looking on the Heart*, 11.

¹⁵ Alter, *The David Story*, 53; Davis, *Looking on the Heart*, 27.

¹⁶ Cartledge, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 496 and 511.

¹⁷ Mary Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, NIBC 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 2000), 186.

reacted to his sin with utter disgust and desired to be forgiven.¹⁸ Later, he had another son (Solomon) with Bathsheba, and Nathan called him Jedediah meaning “loved by God” signaling that God’s forgiveness was complete despite sin’s lasting consequences.¹⁹

Sins are not merely accidents or mistakes, but intentional violations of God’s will and word. The root of Saul’s and David’s sins are similar: they used their positions of authority apart from God’s will rather than submitting to and heeding the True King’s word. God did not take David’s sin lightly while punishing Saul excessively. Both received judgment, but the way each responded to their sin distinguishes them. David deeply understood that his sin marred his relationship with God and he repented that he might receive grace and restored nearness to God. He desired to be aligned with God’s will and be cleansed from his wickedness. In contrast, Saul was blind to the damage done and did not seek restoration through his impulsive repentance. Thus, God’s judgment on Saul and David was just in proportion to their sin and their responses to their sin. Saul made it clear that he did not want to be prince, so God relieved him of that position and chose someone else who would respect and value the holy partnership between humanity and Himself.

Evil Spirit

Part of God’s judgement on Saul was retracting God’s spirit and sending an evil spirit to torment him. For the rest of the story, Saul is depicted as a tragic character who was consumed by anxiety and went mad as he attempted to murder David and his own son Jonathon and had eighty-five priests from Nob murdered.²⁰ However, one might begin to wonder if Saul should be blamed for these events since it was God who sent him an evil spirit. Some attempt to rationalize

¹⁸ Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 186 and 189.

¹⁹ Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 186.

²⁰ Bruce C. Birch, “Saul.” EDB: 1171.

how a loving God could send an evil spirit to inflict pain on His once-chosen prince by stating that Saul's mental illness was simply due to the absence of God's spirit. Yet, the text is clear when it says that an evil spirit followed God's departure and filled the vacancy (see 2 Samuel 16:14-15).²¹ The unsettling elements of this event should drive us to seek the truth of this text rather than interpret it in a more comfortable and less accurate light.

All evil and unclean spirits are under God's authority because God is sovereign. This is why, at this time in history, both good and bad were attributed to the Lord.²² The Hebrew translation for "evil" in this context is "harmful", "injurious", "bad", or "unpleasant."²³ Therefore, calling the spirit an "evil spirit" is not meant to explain the spirit itself as much as the purpose for which the spirit was sent, which was to terrify Saul as a means of punishment for his sins.²⁴ The evil spirit was not morally wicked (like a demon), but rather it simply caused Saul harm. God used evil spirits to act within His will as they conducted His punishment.²⁵ However, the text never states that this spirit gave Saul an excuse for his decisions and actions.²⁶ It did not take away his moral responsibility as he was still capable of choosing to act rightly. In this story (and in the story of Abimelech in Judges 9:1-9), God used an evil spirit to communicate his discontentment with the way in which the monarchy was operating.²⁷

God used evil that had already taken root because of Saul's will and He allowed it to increase; therefore, the evil spirit nudged Saul to confirm the path he had already chosen and to reap the consequences of that path.²⁸ Despite the ways in which God equipped him for good,

²¹ Robin Routledge, "An Evil Spirit from the Lord: Demonic Influence or Divine Instrument?," *EvG* 70 (1998): 4; David M. Howard, "The Transfer of Power from Saul to David," *JETS* 32 (1989): 476.

²² Klein, *1 Samuel*, 165.

²³ Routledge, "An Evil Spirit from the Lord," 4-5.

²⁴ Routledge, "An Evil Spirit from the Lord," 4-5; Howard, "The Transfer of Power," 476 and 482.

²⁵ Barry D. Smith, "Spirit, Evil/Unclean," EDB: 1248.

²⁶ Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 81.

²⁷ Routledge, "An Evil Spirit from the Lord," 4; Howard, "The Transfer of Power," 482.

²⁸ Routledge, "An Evil Spirit from the Lord," 6-7.

Saul still chose to put his faith in himself in disobedience, proving himself ill-suited for the role of God's *nagid*. God is not like the mythological gods who torment and punish for the purpose of toying with humans. God is relational and His sending of an evil spirit was in direct response to Saul's sin.²⁹

Conclusion

In response to Israel's request, God chose Saul as her *nagid* and He designed Israelite kingship to function under His divine Kingship and in rhythm with His divine will. God's goodness and faithfulness in His dealings with Saul can be lost in the tragedy of Saul's story, but when we more carefully examine Saul's selection, his disobedience, and the evil spirit he received from God, a clearer picture emerges. Being fully equipped by God, Saul had the capacity to be the prince he was selected to be. However, rather than leading with open hands of surrender and worship, Saul was driven by his own insecurities and fears and he rebelled against God. Saul did not desire to be the prince who would work in rhythm with God's will. Thus, God punished Saul by sending the evil spirit to terrify him. Despite the tragedy of Saul's rejection and downfall, God's goodness and faithfulness remain evident as He chose a new leader and partner who would lead the Israelites in the way of obedience and righteousness.

Similar to Saul and David, the Church is God's chosen people and royal priesthood (see 1 Peter 2:9), called and equipped to work in rhythm with God's will. In this light, the Church is faced with the same question these two kings faced. The life of David illustrates the proper response to partnership with God. Despite his sins, he kept returning to God in a posture of worship and repentance. The Church has the privilege of working alongside God as His instruments and partners while spreading His love throughout the earth as we continue Jesus'

²⁹ Howard, "The Transfer of Power," 482.

ministry. Through the blood of His Son's sacrifice, God places an invitation of partnership into the hands of the Church. The question is, will we hold this gift with open hands in surrender to God or will we take it with clenched fists?

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