

“Regal Wreckage”

1 Samuel 8:1-9 (1 Samuel 8-31) ¹

My father was a wealthy and an influential man. He was the son of Abiel and grandson of Zeror, from the family of Becorath, the clan of Aphiah, and the tribe of Benjamin. Now I know genealogy is of little interest to most of you, but in our part of the world—what you know as the Middle East—the importance of lineage can hardly be overstated.

I am my father’s only son—his only child, in fact—and he loved me with a fierce and manly love. In your day, I might have been a championship basketball player, because I was nearly a foot taller than anyone else we knew; and the ladies thought I was extremely handsome; but despite all that, father still expected me to learn how to make a living doing manly things.

Dad was in the business of free-range livestock, having done very well at it, and he expected me to learn the business. So one day when our donkeys strayed away, father sent me out with a servant to find them. After searching all over our tribal lands for several weeks, there was still no sign of the donkeys. I was about to give up, when my servant said, *“I’ve just thought of something! There is a man of God who lives here in this town. He is held in high honor by all the people because everything he says comes true. Let’s go find him. Perhaps he can tell us which way to go”* (1 Samuel 9:6). This prophet’s name was Samuel. He’s quite well known in the history of our people. Perhaps you’ve heard of him.

Well, we found the prophet, and he was indeed able to give us news of the donkeys, but that was inconsequential news when we heard what the man of God said next. *“I am here to tell you,”* Samuel said to me, *“that you and your family are the focus of all Israel’s hopes”* (9:20).² “Son of Kish,” the prophet said, “God has chosen you to become the leader of his people, Israel.” And by now some of you have realized that I am Saul. I became king of Israel when I was thirty years old, and I reigned for forty-two years (13:1).

Although the idea of becoming king frightened me a great deal (Samuel had to nearly chase me down to get me to my coronation!), I warmed to the idea quickly. Only a month after taking office, I led the armies of Israel to a great victory over the Ammonites at Jabesh-gilead, and the nations around us began to be afraid of me. I began to be known for my fierce and impulsive anger, a quality that served me well in battle, but that pretty much destroyed the rest of my life (11:7). Most of our character qualities have a shiny side and a shadow side, don’t they? I’ll bet you’ve experienced that, too.

My wife was Ahinoam, daughter of Ahimaaz, and we had six children. Jonathan was my firstborn, and the one I intended to succeed me on the throne. We had two other sons, Malkishua and Abinadab, and then we had two daughters, Merab and Michal, and finally another son, Ishbosheth. Jonathan became a mighty and a daring warrior in his own right, and the people greatly admired him.

For all of my blessings, though, my impulsive and headstrong nature got me into trouble with the Lord early in my reign, and, though I tried mightily to “right the ship,” “shipwreck” was all I really had to look forward to for most of my long reign. As you listen to how I wrecked both my life and the opportunities God gave me, I hope you’ll learn from my bad example.

When Jonathan was nearly twenty years old, he took part of the army and attacked the Philistine garrison at Geba. The Philistines responded with such force that my army lost its nerve completely, most of them trying to hide in caves, holes, rocks, tombs, and cisterns (13:6).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 18, 2019.

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical references are from 1 Samuel.

While the Philistines stormed, Samuel told me to wait for him at Gilgal, and I waited for a whole week, but while Samuel tarried, my army continued to melt away, and finally I decided that I'd better rally the troops by offering sacrifices to God myself. Samuel, of course, showed up just as I finished the offering, asking, "*What is this that you have done?*"

I answered, "*I saw my men scattering from me, and you didn't arrive when you said you would, and the Philistines are at Micmash ready for battle. So I said, 'The Philistines are ready to march against us, and I haven't even asked for the LORD's help!' So I felt obliged to offer the burnt offering myself before you came*" (13:11-12).

"*How foolish!*" Samuel exclaimed. "*You have disobeyed the command of the LORD your God. Had you obeyed, the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now, your dynasty must end, for the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart. The LORD has already chosen him to be king over his people, for you have not obeyed the LORD's command*" (13:13-14). This, of course, was bad news. It was very bad news.

Well, one must go on—it would be almost forty years before my successor would take the throne—and we had enemies all around who had to be dealt with: I've mentioned the Philistines, but there were also the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites, the Amalekites, and the kings of Zobah. We won some battles and we lost some, but on the whole my military record was pretty good.

One day Samuel came to me and said, "*I anointed you king of Israel because the LORD told me to. Now listen to this message from the LORD! This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I have decided to settle accounts with the nation of Amalek for opposing Israel when they came from Egypt. Now go and completely destroy the entire Amalekite nation—men, women, children, babies, cattle, sheep, camels, and donkeys'*" (15:1-3).

I gathered an army of more than 200,000 men and set off to follow these instructions. We had a great victory over the Amalekites, but I decided not to kill the best of their animals. I intended to offer some of them as sacrifices to the LORD, and to keep the rest. Samuel really let me have it over that: "*What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Obedience is far better than sacrifice. . . . So because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you from being king*" (15:22-23). And after that confrontation, Samuel never spoke to me again.

It soon became apparent that the Lord had withdrawn His Spirit from me, replacing it with a spirit of fear and depression instead (16:14; cp. 10:6). I experienced such torment that my servants suggested that I find a harpist to ease my suffering with music. A talent search turned up a young man named David, the youngest son of Jesse of Bethlehem, a shepherd who was also an excellent harpist. I liked David very much, and his music did help me a lot. David was about the same age as my Jonathan, and they became the very best of friends (18:1).

Well, when word got to the Philistines that I was having emotional struggles and was discouraged, they decided to challenge me once again. They mustered their army for battle and set up camp on the northern side of the Valley of Elah. Our army set up camp on the southern slope.

Day after day, the Philistines sent one of their champions, Goliath of Gath, into the valley to challenge one of our soldiers to single combat. This was a custom that could sometimes avoid a huge number of deaths in pitched battle. That all sounds pretty good, until you learn that Goliath was an honest-to-goodness giant who stood over nine feet tall. His coat of mail weighed 125 pounds, and the shaft of his spear, thick as a weaver's beam, had an iron spearhead that weighed 15 pounds. It was small wonder that none of my men were lining up to fight him, even

though I offered either of my daughters in marriage to any soldier who killed Goliath, plus I promised to exempt his entire family from paying taxes forever.

Well, one afternoon David was in camp and heard about all this. He came to me and offered to take Goliath on, saying *“I have killed both lions and bears with a club, and I’ll do it to this pagan Philistine, too, for he has defied the armies of the living God!”* (17:37). Now because I liked David and Jonathan loved him, I was reluctant to let him go, but he would not be refused. You’ve probably heard how that turned out. David killed Goliath with just one God-guided stone, and our army achieved a stunning victory over the Philistines.

As our army returned home, though, there was a problem. The women in the towns along the way were singing a song that galled me. It went like this: *“Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands”* (18:7). I became extremely jealous and angry about this, and the very next day, when David was playing the harp to drive away the tormenting spirit, I tried to kill him with my spear—not once, but twice (18:10-12). In the months that followed, David continued to succeed in everything he did, and it seemed abundantly clear that the Lord was with him. Samuel had not told me so, but I began to suspect that it was David, not Jonathan, whom the Lord intended to succeed me—as would, in fact, be the case.

To make this drama more complicated, my younger daughter, Michal, fell in love with David. I tried to use this as a means to do away with him, requiring a bride price of one hundred Philistine foreskins—surely trying to do that would get him killed! But no, David came back with two hundred! When I realized how much the Lord was with David, and how much Jonathan and Michal loved him, I became even more afraid of him, and I remained his bitter enemy to the end of my days (18:28-29).

I sent my soldiers to kill David while he was asleep at home, but Michal helped him escape (19:11-17). I hurled my spear at him a third time (19:10). I even tried to spear Jonathan when he interceded for David’s loyalty and safety (20:33). Finally, David ran away to the wilderness to hide from my fury, and before long he had gathered a rabble about him of about 400 hundred men (22:1-2). Sounds disgustingly like your Robin Hood, doesn’t it?

And, as was the case with Robin Hood, the common people loved him and hated me. As time passed, I became more and more ruthless in my pursuit of David, once killing eighty-five of the Lord’s priests at Nob because they returned Goliath’s sword to David and fed him as he ran from me. When I heard that David was staying in the wilderness strongholds in the hill country of Ziph, I used all the resources of my throne to hunt him day and night, but God didn’t let me find him.

Then I got word that David was in the wilderness of En-gedi, and I took 3,000 troops to search for him. While in this pursuit, I stepped into a cave near the Rocks of the Wild Goats to use it as a privy—a cave in which David himself happened to be hiding. While my back was turned, David crept up and cut off a piece of my robe. When I returned to camp, David called out from the mouth of the cave, showing me that he could easily have killed me, but did not.

I teared up and called out to David, *“You are a better man than I am, for you have repaid me good for evil. Yes, you have been wonderfully kind to me today, for when the LORD put me in a place where you could have killed me, you didn’t do it. Who else would let his enemy get away when he had him in his power? May the LORD reward you well for the kindness you have shown me today. And now I realize that you are surely going to be king, and Israel will flourish under your rule. Now, swear to me by the LORD that when that happens you will not kill my family and destroy my line of descendants!”* (24:17-21).

David promised, and I took my men and went home . . . for a while. Samuel died about this time, and all Israel mourned for him.

After a time, I learned that David was hiding on the hill of Hakilah, which overlooks Jeshimon. Promise or no promise, I took 3,000 troops and once again tried to find and kill David, hoping to salvage my throne for Jonathan. This time, David crept with insane courage right into our camp in the night, stealing my spear and water bottle from beside my cot. It was the same drill as before. David awoke the camp with the announcement that he could once again have killed me, but didn't, and I confessed to him, *"I have sinned. Come back home, my son, and I will no longer try to harm you, for you valued my life today. I have been a fool and very, very wrong"* (26:21). David didn't believe me, of course, and disappeared into the wilderness.

Not long after that, the Philistines mustered their army for yet another war against Israel. When I saw the vast Philistine army ranged against us, I became frantic with fear. I asked the Lord what I should do, but the Lord refused to answer me. Although I had banned all mediums and psychics from the land according to God's command (Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:9-14), I told my advisers, *"Find a woman who is a medium, so I can go and ask her what to do"* (28:7). My advisors came back with the report, *"There is a medium at Endor."*

I disguised myself and went to this woman's home at night, accompanied by two bodyguards. When the woman came to the door, I told her, *"I have to talk to a man who has died. Will you call up his spirit for me?"*

"Are you trying to get me killed?" the woman demanded. "You know that Saul has expelled all the mediums and psychics from the land. Why are you setting a trap for me?"

After I took an oath in the name of the Lord, guaranteeing her safety, the woman said, *"Well, whose spirit do you want me to call up?"*

"Call up Samuel."

When the woman saw Samuel, she screamed, "You've deceived me! You are Saul!"

"Why have you disturbed me by calling me back?" Samuel asked.

"Because I am in deep trouble," I replied. "The Philistines are at war with us, and God has left me and won't reply by prophets or dreams. So I have called for you to tell me what to do."

And Samuel answered, "The LORD has done just as he said he would. He has taken the kingdom from you and given it to your rival, David. The LORD has done this because you did not obey his instructions concerning the Amalekites. What's more, the LORD will hand you and the army of Israel over to the Philistines tomorrow, and you and your sons will be here with me" (28:12-19). This was very, very bad news, and I collapsed in shock.

On the next day, just as Samuel foretold, the Philistines killed three of my sons—Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malkishua, and their archers wounded me very badly. In order to avoid dying at my enemies' hands, I fell on my own sword to end my life.

Well, this hasn't been a pretty story, has it? By now you've understood why I've called this account "Regal Wreckage." God offered me so much, and I lost it all through an insincere and incomplete obedience to God's commands. God offered me a dynasty, but instead I lived a pitiful and painful life filled with recriminations and revenge, ending in a shameful death.

I suspect that most of you here this morning believe that God exists, but I also suspect that not so many of you take seriously the study of and obedience to His commands. It should be no surprise that God gives little guidance to those who make little effort to obey Him. The prayers of such folk should begin with prayers of repentance if they hope for any response from God.

Further, I warn you to beware those occult connections that promise insight and guidance. The Darkness promises many things, but what it offers now is no different from what was really offered in Eden: damaged relationships, despair, desperation, and death.

Finally, remember this promise from the prophet Jeremiah: *“I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days, when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me in earnest, you will find me when you seek me. I will be found by you,” says the LORD*” (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

I hope you will claim these promises and that you won’t wreck your lives as I did. Stand on those promises. Obey God’s instruction. Don’t run ahead of God. And if you want to have a good example for your life, I’m sorry to say that you should look at David, whom I hated, rather than at me.