

King Saul: Awesome Beginning—Tragic End

I thought, “Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord’s favor.” So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering. 1 Sam. 13:12 (*Scriptures in the NIV, unless otherwise noted.*)

One of the most tragic stories in the Bible is of the man God chose to be Israel’s first king—Saul. The anointing by God of this humble and highly qualified man is more dramatic than that of David. But Saul failed and eventually lost everything because of his inability to obey. And, strangely, this failure was rooted in a seemingly minor problem—his failure to wait. . . long enough.

Had King Saul known that the end of his reign would be a repeat of the same pressure he’d experienced at the beginning of it, he might have taken Samuel’s order to “wait seven days” more seriously (1 Sam 10:8).

But how could anyone have predicted that the simple command to wait would take place as Saul’s three thousand poorly armed men faced a Philistine army of “three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore” (13:5)?

What Saul failed to realize is that he’d been anointed to rule and war with *spiritual* weapons, not physical. And that waiting God’s timing would be one of the keys to it.

For Saul’s replacement, David, long before he’d take the throne, would single-handedly face with a shepherd’s sling another army of Philistines headed by Goliath—and send the entire army fleeing for their lives! All because David understood the purpose and value of waiting for and on, of intertwining with, his God. (Ps. 25:3,5,21; 59:9; 62:5; 69:3,6; 27:14; 37:7-9,3-4; 40:1; 106:13; 123:2; 130:5)

The relationship between waiting and obedience gives us a picture of the men and women God used in the Bible. We wait, and God waits, “that He may be gracious.” If *grace* is the key to obedience, then *learning to wait for that grace* must certainly be one of the most vital aspects of our walk with God. (Is 30:18 NKJV, Rom. 6:14)

It is tempting to blame God or ourselves in periods of darkness when He seems to hide Himself, as though He’s ignoring us or we’ve done something

wrong. True, sin will block access to God. But when we’ve confessed every sin and every relationship is made right, God still has the right to remain silent, especially when He “longs to be gracious to you.” (Is 59:2; 30:18)

You see, darkness is as essential to growth as light is. The effect of alternate periods of light and darkness on plants is called photoperiodism. Germination of seeds, plant and root growth, dormancy, reproduction and spring rejuvenation are all influenced in complex ways by *photoperiodism*.

God compares saints to plants, and like plants, saints respond “in complex ways” to periods of light and darkness. This is why learning to habitually trust God is so vital to our spiritual growth, for God is the perfect gardener. (Ps 1:3, Is. 61:3, etc, Jn. 15:1f) [f = following]

The root of obedience

All spiritual development basically involves two ideas—reducing “confidence in the flesh” and strengthening faith in God, the source of our love. Christianity is supposed to be spontaneous and natural—doing what we love to do. Paul makes a stunning declaration in Romans 6:18 that we have been “set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.” (Phil. 3:3, Gal. 5:6, Heb. 11:6)

It should be just as easy to be righteous as it used to be to sin.. The *heart* is the motivation center, not the mind. The temptation is to “compel” ourselves to do the right things regardless of what’s in our hearts (1 Sam. 13:12).

While this may be necessary as a temporary measure to protect ourselves or others from harm (the law is for the lawless, it can be a religious coverup masking our unchanged heart; we’re phony. (1 Tim. 1:9, Rom. 3:19-20)

One day the full impact of Romans 6:14 hit me, that since we are not under law but grace, sin no longer masters us! If it does, we need to examine whether we really comprehend grace and allow it to operate.

This was Saul’s problem. Like Adam, he short-circuited grace. The victory of the last Adam (Jesus) consisted not in His *own* exploits but in His *perfect refusal to act apart from God*. “Men of God” are precisely that: men whose ability is not “of themselves” but “of God.” “The Son can do nothing of himself,” and apart from Him, neither can we (Jn 5:19 NAS; 15:5).

For years I never understood why Jesus rebuked the “rich young ruler” for calling Him good, stating that only God

was good. Isn’t Jesus Christ our righteousness, our everything?

Then one day it hit me: Jesus was so dependent on His Father, that even His goodness came from Him. In that moment I began to grasp the *absolute need to let God do whatever it takes to empty me of self and fill me with Him*.

My weakness—His strength.

Saul didn’t realize how essential this little test was, that he was heir to a long line of mighty men proven by divine “brinkmanship.” On the brink (edge, verge) of assassination by his angry brother, Jacob stood, finally broken, empty, and desperate before God. In one pre-dawn wrestling match, God gave him a new broken and a new name. (Gen. 32, Ps. 51:17, Hos. 12:3-6, Heb. 10:16)

On the brink of complete destruction by the mightiest army in the world, trapped between the Red Sea and a sea of angry Israelites, Moses lifted his rod in obedience to God and watched the forces of nature respond. (Ex. 14)

At the brink of the Jordan the priests stepped in and witnessed a similar miracle. It was the first among many as God led Joshua to the brink of one disaster after another, always followed by the “Himpossible” until the whole land was conquered. (Josh. 3f)

These examples illustrate how men became men of God. *They let God be God, even under severe pressure.*

Saul’s son did what he should have done, for while Saul worried, Jonathan’s simple faith led to a miracle—the defeat of that same Philistine army as he confronted them with only his armor bearer and God (1 Sam. ch. 14).

He allowed faith to apprehend [lay hold of] the Light in the middle of darkness. Like the photographic film inside a [non-digital] camera, in perfect darkness a split-second flash of a focused light-image imprints the lighted scene on it. It illustrates how God’s reveals His view from His Kingdom of Light to our realm of darkness. (2 Cor. 4:6, 1 Jn. 1:5)

Saul had a good start, winning a great victory over the Ammonites. But too much “fight” is unhealthy; it destroys the photographic film. God attempted to balance him with enough darkness to keep him focused on *His* strength.

Perhaps the most difficult thing to understand about God, who is Light, is that for our sake He dwells “in a dark cloud,” speaks out of a “dense cloud” and “thick darkness, and comes to our defense “enshrouded. . . with darkness, veiling his approach with dense clouds

dark as murky waters” (1 Ki. 8:12, Ex. 19:9; 20:21, Ps 18:11 Living Bible.).

The difference between men of God and men of the world is that the former, like good cameras, understand this phenomenon enough to wait out that darkness until God finally speaks, imprinting His Word, His testimony, on their *hearts*. (Ps. 37:7; 40:1)

All the “fathers of faith” learned this secret, often or usually the hard way: Abraham didn’t wait long enough and had Ishmael, who became an example of those who walk “according to the flesh” and persecute those “born according to the Spirit,” who “eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith” (Gen. 16, Gal. 4:21-5:6).

Through Rebekah’s impatience, Jacob deceived Isaac to steal Esau’s inheritance, reaping a lifetime of deception by his father-in-law and his own sons (Gen. 27-44).

Moses, after a lifetime of waiting for the Promise Land, lost patience over Israel’s *last* rebellion in the wilderness, and God disqualified him from entering it. But because he humbly accepted this severe penalty, God gave him a higher reward—that which the Promise Land represented. (Num. 20, Ps. 106:32, Dt. 3:23-28, Lu. 9:29-31, Jude 1:9)

Elijah, after bringing the whole nation of Israel back to God through his awesome display of God’s “consuming fire” on Mt. Carmel, ended up running from wicked Jezebel, depressed and wanting to die (1 Ki. 17-19).

This interesting story provides the major clue to why “periods of darkness” are so essential to our growth. *Too much success at once will bring down the mightiest!*

Pride ruined Lucifer, “the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.” Comparing 1 Kings 10 with Ezekiel 28 shows that Solomon’s fall is a parallel to Lucifer’s. God’s attempt to chasten Solomon had no effect, though Ecclesiastes reflects a change in his old age, when “strong men bow down” one’s “windows [eyes] grow dim” (Ez. 28:12, 1 Ki. 11:14f, Ecc. 12:3).

Jesus said John the Baptist was the greatest of men born of women up to His time. Yet while Jesus said this, John felt deserted in Herod’s prison, offended and struggling with doubt over whether Jesus really was the Messiah after all. (Gen. 16, Mt. 11:2-11)

Yet Jesus concluded His statement of John’s greatness with this astonishing word: “but he who is *least* in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

The kingdom of heaven is a *spiritual* kingdom which *thrives* on adversity, tribulation, and persecution, because they *wean* us from *depending* on the natural, material comforts of the flesh. (Mt. 5:10-12, 1 Cor. 4:9f, 2 Cor. 11:23f; 12:9-10; 13:4)

Men of God in the Old Testament understood this to some extent, but King Saul missed it entirely, substituting a “form of godliness but denying its power” (2 Tim. 3:5).

Legalism—enemy of obedience.

Regardless of whom we’re trying to please, God or people, our works are supposed to be the natural fruit of a heart connected to Christ, the Vine. Fruit doesn’t “try” to grow; it just enjoys being itself in the Son and even the darkness. The problem is that we don’t always appreciate the *darkness God uses to focus us*.

God used His “servant” Nebuchadnezzar to carry the Jews to Babylon, away from the endless distractions of their “holy city.” Those who submitted to this chastening were called “very good figs,” and those who refused were “so bad they could not be eaten” (Jer. 24:2; 25:9, 11, etc.).

Those who stubbornly resisted Jeremiah’s warning did so on *religious* grounds, feeling God would not abandon his holy city and temple, and they had the full support of the rest of the prophets, who opposed Jeremiah (chs. 14, 20, 23, 29).

Not that it was good in itself to “serve the king of Babylon seventy years,” but that it would take this period of darkness to strip off the layers of religious hypocrisy which had *substituted for heart obedience*. (25:11)

Saul should have seen the seven-day wait as a blessing, relieving him of having to do the impossible. God was trying to prepare his heart for the burnt offering, a *substitute* for his *inability* to be the perfect, yielded, sacrificial servant-leader.

Those sacrificial animals were tutorial [teaching] tools to illustrate our dying, that is, the dying of the “I” in the flesh, that we may “live according to God in the spirit” (1 Pet. 4:6 NKJV).

I learned first hand how valuable these offerings were in Old Testament times. For many years I suffered suicidal depression in my attempt to live up to the high and holy standards of the New Testament, trying to be the perfect pastor, prayer-warrior, soul-winner, husband, and father. Then in 1972 I stumbled into

Andrew Bonar’s, *An Exposition of Leviticus*.

Every page was medicine. I didn’t need anti-depressants or tranquilizers; Leviticus became my wonder-drug! I’d weep, groan, and purr like a kitten over these offerings, seeing the animal’s blood as it became the blood of my Redeemer to substitute for my failure.

This “shadow of the good things” in Christ held me together—sometimes barely—until God led me to a deeper understanding in Romans and Galatians. (Heb. 10:1, Rom. 3-8, Gal. 2-5)

We live in an age when *grace* seems to mean only freedom from the law, and wonder why the “saints” are often no different than sinners. We remove the law before it’s had a chance “tutor” us to Christ! (Gal 3:24 NAS)

Or we legalistically keep enough of it to ease our conscience without feeling the full impact of its demands. If we really understood the seriousness of what God expects of us, we’d cry with Paul, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Out of this “death to self” faith is nurtured and birthed. (Rom. 7:24, Col. 3:1)

So Saul stopped the *gestation* (incubation) process; he aborted the embryo with dead works—a *forced* sacrifice in place of “the righteousness that is by *faith*” (Rom. 10:6).

“So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering,” he said defensively. “But by faith we eagerly *wait* through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope” (1 Sam. 13:12 NAS, Gal. 5:5)

Why can’t some of us “let go” as easily as others? Leviticus one pictures it clearly: the wealthy brought bigger animals for a burnt offering— young, frisky bulls that demanded a lengthier process of stripping, literally, for these were *skinned* before they were cut into pieces!

Job is a perfect example, and sure enough, like a bull ready for the sacrifice, he cried out, “Even after my skin is flayed, yet without my flesh I shall see God” (19:26 NAS).

Other “bulls” in the Bible who needed the lengthier stripping of their *self-confidence* to make them God-dependent were Abraham (24 years), Jacob (20 years), Joseph (13 years), Moses (40 years), David (13? years), and Paul (14 years). And that was only the beginning; it took the *rest* of their lives to *keep* dependent on Him. (Gen. 12:4; 17:1; 31:38; 37:2; 41:46, Acts 7:23,30; 2 Sam. 5:4, Gal. 2:1, 2 Cor. 12:7-10)

Incidentally, Paul’s name was changed from Saul, giving us a picture of what King Saul could have been had he learned to wait. For Paul, when he was Saul before his conversion, was no different than King Saul, killing the Christians in his *religious* zeal. (Acts 9, 1 Tim. 1:15)

Patience is better than pride (Ecc. 7:8).

Saul’s impatience led to the occasion for the oft-quoted phrase, *obedience is better than sacrifice*. He had frustrated Jonathan’s victory over the Philistines by *compelling* the warriors to *sacrificially* fast until they won the battle. And no wonder, for legalistic, forced sacrifice was the only kind Saul knew. (1 Sam. 15:22)

Next God commanded Saul to destroy all the Amalekites, including their animals. Saul did it, but spared the “good” animals “to *sacrifice* to the Lord.” In addition he spared their king, Agag. (1 Sam. 15:8-15)

To Saul it looked like full obedience; to God it was the *heart* of *disobedience*, having the outward appearance of obedience, but within, all the roots of *rebellion* and *arrogance*, like “the monument” he built “in his own honor” (15:12, 23).

In a short time this monster-embryo in Saul would develop into an insane jealousy through which he would destroy the entire priesthood (85 priests; one escaped), with their wives, children and animals: the “good” ones too! And that because their leader, the high priest, had aided Saul’s God-anointed son-in-law, David. (1 Sam. 22)

Five centuries later this attitude would emerge in Haman the *Agagite*, who demanded the annihilation of all the Jews. And three millennia later, in Hitler, who attempted the same thing. (Est. 3-9)

It is the “Amalek” in the religious leaders who shouted, “Crucify Him,” like many of *us* content with enough religion to inoculate ourselves from the real *presence* of God—and criticize those who love it. (Mt. 15:13-14)

It is *slavery* to religious activity (forcing myself to be “spiritual”) without a change of *heart*. And because it leaves us unfulfilled and insecure, it becomes the breeding ground for *envy*, the ripened form of pride. “Get rid of the slave woman and her son,” Paul warned, “for the slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman’s son” (Gal. 4:30).

So God turned from Saul and chose David. Everything Saul was not, David

was. His entire life is the story of waiting patiently while God worked—in darkness. (Ps. 40:1; 62:1,5; 69:6)

From the lonely years in the hills of Judea watching sheep to the nightmare years of hiding from the rage of Saul to the heart-breaking years of suffering under the rebellion in his own sons because of his own disobedience, David knew the heart of God. And he waited for it, whatever the cost, even if it meant the kingdom or his own life. (1 Sam. 18ff; 2 Sam. 11ff)

And in David God at last found “a man after my own heart who will do all my will.” The truth of this statement is evident during the *Son of David’s* darkest hour, His crucifixion. David’s Psalm 22 provided the background for this event and even the words Jesus uttered in the darkest of this darkness. (Acts 13:22)

For when God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us,” His Father could not look on this defiled “sin offering,” contaminated with our sin. That’s when our Sin bearer cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Lev. 4:16, Mt. 27:46, 2 Cor. 5:21 NKJV)

How did David develop such intimacy with God that the Son of God would identify with him in His horror as He suffered for all mankind?

By waiting in darkness till the light of God’s glory and grace broke through. “I waited patiently for the Lord; and He . . . heard my cry. . . . Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; my ears You have opened. . . . I delight to do Your will. . . . Your law is within my heart. . . . The sacrifices of God are. . . a broken and a contrite heart.” (40:1,6-8; 51:17a, NKJV)

He (David) allowed God to deal with the root, showing us that *total dependence* on the Father the last Adam regained for us. “The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing. . . .” In the darkness He listened to His Father and “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Jn. 5:19b, Heb. 5:8).

How we learn compassion

The *obedience* Jesus *learned* was the *compassion* to *feel* our *weaknesses* to be equipped as our faithful High Priest. “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since He Himself is subject to weakness.” (Heb. 4:15; 5:2)

Waiting for Him meant refusing to use His own power to deliver Himself and do only what His Father told Him. Isaiah details this process of humiliation in chapters 50 and 53. Isaiah 53 is well known, but Isaiah 50 brings out a key point: how He learned to *hear* in the sense of feeling our pain.

“The sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back.” (50:4-5)

The next four verses touch on what He endured that would make Him “familiar with suffering.” And the last two verses (10-11) apply it to *our* preparation for the same priestly ministry (Is. 53:3, Ex. 19:6, Pet. 2:5,9, Rev. 1:6)

Verse 10 is a clear word to one who “fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant”: when in darkness, *trust in* and *rely on* God!

Verse 11 is a warning to those who can't wait and instead “walk in the light of [the] fires” they light to provide light ahead of God's timing. “This is what you shall receive from my hand: you will lie down in torment.”

[my experience in G'boro]

It's exactly what happened to Saul, who never learned to wait, to rely on God as David did. At the end of his reign he again faced the same enemy.

“When Saul saw the Philistine army, he was afraid; terror filled his heart. He inquired of the Lord, but the Lord did not answer him. . . .” He ended up going to a witch for guidance and died the next day in battle. (1 Sam. 28:5-7, ch. 31).

What a tragic ending for a man so gifted, whom God could have used so mightily for His glory. But he never learned the simple secret of waiting patiently until in the stillness of his soul he would have picked up the “gentle whisper” of God and run the race in *His* strength. (1 Ki. 19:12, Is. 40:27-31, Ps. 46:10)

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