

NOTES AND QUESTIONS ON THE BOOK OF I SAMUEL FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY
- PART THREE - CHAPTERS 13-18

Saul is established as king and Samuel has dropped into the background at least for the present. Saul has shown some fine qualities and a preparedness to trust God. All for the moment seems well. Samuel has taught him and the people what will bring God's continuing blessing on their lives and, on the other hand, the consequences of depending upon themselves. We too begin our Christian lives with great expectations of blessing and victory, and much good will and enthusiasm. But sadly for Saul, as for us, early promise is soon replaced by failure and disillusionment. Let us explore why.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN describes Saul, obviously confident of his position as king, and of his ability as a military leader, based on past success. He cuts his army down to a small elite force with which he challenges the Philistines who respond with a vastly superior army both in numbers and weapons. Looking at the problem rather than the Lord, his army soon begin to lose courage and to go into hiding. There had been an arrangement with Samuel to begin the battle with sacrifice to God, a reminder of the cross, always the best place to begin any new enterprise. When Samuel has not turned up on the appointed day, Saul panics and offers the sacrifice himself. Just as he is finishing, Samuel turns up and rebukes him. As the priest and a Levite, only Samuel could make sacrifice. For Saul, God's way of sacrifice is not important as long as it is done when and how it suits him. It is his first major mistake. When we too take the cross of Christ lightly and see it just as a formality to be got out of the way as soon as possible, we have taken the first step towards defeat. Samuel spells out the consequence of this to Saul.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN explains the battle about to begin with heavy odds against the Israelites. The first clash of the campaign occurs when Jonathan, Saul's son, and his armour bearer, challenge a Philistine garrison perched on top of a crag, and then take them by surprise and rout them. This sets off panic among the rest of the Philistine army who run for their lives followed by Saul and his army. At this point Saul makes his second major mistake. He makes a bargain with God, asking for victory in return for the Israelites abstaining from food for the day. Everyone does as Saul says except Jonathan who was not around when the vow was made. In ignorance Jonathan eats honey in the forest. Later Saul, unable to get an answer from God as to what to do next, casts lots to discover who has broken the vow. Everything points to Jonathan who cheerfully acknowledges that as far as he is concerned finding honey when he was hungry was a blessing from God. Saul decides his son must die - but the people refuse to let him kill his son, their hero of the battle. His second mistake was that like Jacob in Gen.28, or Jephthah in Judg.11, he supposes that God gives nothing for nothing and that God's blessing must be earned. He takes the grace of God lightly.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN is the sequel to another conflict, this time with the Amalekites who had opposed Israel at the end of the previous chapter, and been defeated. They had continued in the attitude of their ancestors in Exod.17 who tried to prevent Israel entering the promised land. God has decided to judge the Amalekites as He did Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen.19, and Israel are to be His instruments in doing so. He gives Saul orders through Samuel to wipe them out completely. Saul carries out instructions only as far as it suits him. He keeps the best of their flocks and herds for his own use, and King Agag as a way of showing off his military success to others. Samuel confronts him with his third major mistake, thinking that he can choose which of God's orders he obeys. He has taken the word of God lightly and is no longer fit to lead God's people. We make the same three mistakes today. When we undervalue the cross, God's grace and His word, we are not capable of leading God's people.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN sees Samuel brought back once again from retirement to identify and appoint the new king with whom God will replace Saul. He is sent to Bethlehem, later to be the birthplace of the Lord Jesus, descended from the family of Jesse. God teaches Samuel a lesson he had not altogether learned with Saul. God is not impressed by size. He looks at the heart. After checking out the physically impressive older brothers, he is finally introduced to David. God confirms that this is His choice and David is anointed king. The anointing oil pictures the Holy Spirit with whom David is now equipped for his work.(Acts 10:38) The same Spirit is withdrawn from Saul who had consistently refused to be God's kind of leader. Conviction that he is missing out on God's best leaves him in a miserable mood, the 'evil spirit' from God, just as Christians today who are missing out on God's best will be the most miserable people on earth. Clearly God does not

send demons. David's music cheers him up temporarily just as Christian songs today can lift our spirits without necessarily changing our hearts.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN sets out in picture form the key to David's life and ministry. Sent by his father to check on his brothers who are serving in Saul's army, David finds the whole of Israel demoralised by a giant Philistine, Goliath - 3 metres tall! Despite a big reward offered by Saul, the one man almost big enough to take him on, no-one seems keen so David offers. David explains to Saul the secret of his confidence. Though Goliath is bigger than David, God is much bigger than Goliath. He has proved God as a shepherd facing wild animals. Just as Jesus does not need our help to defeat our enemy the Devil, so David rejects Saul's armour as unsuited to him. He faces Goliath with a stick, a picture of the cross.(Jn.3:14; Num.21:9) His victory is won with a stone, a picture of the living, risen Christ.(I Pet.2:4-8) The stone is propelled by a sling, a symbol of God's power to defeat His enemies and deliver His people.(I Sam.25:29; Jer.10:18) Goliath is only stunned and would soon have risen up looking for revenge. The sword taken out of Goliath's senseless hand becomes the means of turning a moment of victory into a life-long habit of victory. In the same way the word of God, settled in our hearts, becomes the means of a habit of victory over Satan and his temptations.(Eph.6:17; Heb.4:12)

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN describes the root of the long conflict between Saul and David before the latter finally becomes the acknowledged king of Israel, summed up in one simple word, jealousy. Saul first rewards David and then feels threatened by his popularity. In a fit of rage Saul tries to kill David, and fails. David never hits back despite enormous provocation. Saul's next plan is more subtle, to bring him into the family by marriage. He demands a price for his daughter which Saul calculates will kill David. Again the plan fails but in accepting marriage to a woman who loves him but does not seem to share his love for God, David is storing up trouble for himself in the future.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR FURTHER STUDY

1. Discuss whether Saul taking Samuel's instructions about sacrifice lightly is similar to us taking forgiveness through the cross casually. How do we do this and what effect does it have on our lives?(chap.13)
2. Who else in the Bible thought blessing from God only came through a bargain with God? Does this mean that we under value the grace of God? Give examples and consider their effect upon our lives.(chap.14)
3. Why was it so important that Saul carried out God's instructions fully? How do we do the same when we pick and choose which of God's plans we will follow? Why is taking the word of God lightly so damaging?(chap.15)
4. How was the selection of David as the new king so different from the choosing of Saul? What does it teach us about appointing Christian leaders today?(chap.16)
5. Put the steps David takes to defeat Goliath into your own words. What giants do we face today? How then should we deal with them?(chap.17)
6. What can we learn from David's relationship with Saul, Jonathan and Michal?(chap.18)