

The Fool

1 Samuel 13:1-23

By [Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas](#)

Now turn with me once again to 1 Samuel. Tonight, in chapter 13, you may have forgotten the entire story of Samuel and Saul by now, but let me just say a couple of things here about Saul. Saul, you remember, had been on a mission looking for his father's donkeys when he encountered Samuel the prophet. You remember there was a private anointing by Samuel that he was to be the king, the king Israel had asked for, in order that they might be just like the nations. God had filled Saul with His Spirit, endowed him with certain spiritual gifts, he had been publically confirmed as king in a selection by lot in a place called Mizpah. Then there had been, you remember, Saul's coup in attacking the Ammonites. He had called upon the help of the men of Jabesh-Gilead. But Saul is still untried and relatively untested as a king, and tonight in chapter 13, we're going to see that first test of Saul's kingship, a test which he catastrophically fails.

Now as you glance down at verse 13, the translators of the ESV have not helped us in actually reading that first verse. You'll look as there are two gaps in the text missing words, missing numbers, to be precise. Saul was --- years old and reigned for "something" and two years over Israel. Now PhD dissertations are being written trying to explain what's going on here. Let me just suggest the ESV is quite accurate. The Hebrew text as we know it does not in fact contain these numbers. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Old Testament that would have been familiar to say the Apostle Paul, who probably read his Old Testament in Greek rather than in Hebrew, the numbers were actually inserted. You remember perhaps in Acts chapter 13 that we read Paul sighting that Saul reigned for forty years — forty being perhaps a round number, therefore the number forty is inserted into the second gap. He reigned forty and two years over Israel, which would be about right in terms of the chronology of the life of Saul.

Well, all that being said, I have no idea why, in God's providence, these two numbers are missing. Perhaps it's one of those things we'll ask when we get to heaven, but for now, let's read the text as indeed God, in His providence, has given it to us.

This is God's Word. Before we read it, let's pray together.

Father, we thank You again for the Scriptures. We do want to acknowledge again that this is Your Word, and every jot and tittle of it, given by the inspiration, the

outpouring of Your Spirit upon the hearts and lives of individuals. And we thank you that we may have a Bible in our own hands that is able to make us wise unto salvation. Grant Your blessing upon the reading of it. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Saul was (and if you're reading the NASB I think it says '2')...years old when he began to reign, (that is, he had been ruling, he was in the second year of his reign)... and he reigned (and again the NASB inserts the term 'forty')...and two years over Israel.

Saul chose three thousand men of Israel. Two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin. The rest of the people he sent home, every man to his tent. Jonathan defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was at Geba, and the Philistines heard of it. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, 'Let the Hebrews hear.' And all Israel heard it said that Saul had defeated the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become a stench to the Philistines. And the people were called out to join Saul at Gilgal.

And the Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude. They came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Bethaven. When the men of Israel saw that they were in trouble (for the people were hard pressed), the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns, and some Hebrews crossed the fords of the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead, Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.

He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him. So Saul said, "Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings." And he offered the burnt offering. As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came. And Saul went out to meet him and greet him. Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favor of the Lord.' So I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering." And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the Lord your God, with which He commanded you. For then the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after His own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you." And Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal. The rest of

the people went up after Saul to meet the army; they went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin.

And Saul numbered the people who were present with him, about six hundred men. And Saul and Jonathan his son and the people who were present with them stayed in Geba of Benjamin, but the Philistines encamped in Michmash. And raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies. One company turned toward Ophrah, to the land of Shual; another company turned toward Beth-horon; and another company turned toward the border that looks down on the valley of Zeboim toward the wilderness.

Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel, for the Philistines said, 'Lest the Hebrews make themselves swords or spears.' But every one of the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen his plowshare, his mattock, his axe, or his sickle, and the charge was two-thirds of a shekel for the plowshares and for the mattocks, and a third of a shekel for sharpening the axes and for setting the goads. So on the day of the battle there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people with Saul and Jonathan, but Saul and Jonathan his son had them. And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the pass of Michmash.

Thus far God's holy and inerrant Word.

Now let me remind you of the extraordinary words of Samuel to Saul at the end of chapter 12 in verses 24 and 25. You remember what Samuel had said to him? "Only fear the Lord and serve Him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things He has done for you. But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king." You're expecting, perhaps, great things to happen. You're expecting, perhaps, Saul to be *the* great king of Israel. And immediately there is this challenge — this challenge of the Philistines. The chapter begins with Saul mustering an army, an army of three thousand men - a standing army under his command and under the command of his son, Jonathan. They are placed at Michmash and Gibeah. These are strategic locations, central in Israel - west of the river Jordan. There is also a citizen militia. He sends them home but they are to be ready to be called up in the case of battle. And then in verse 2, Jonathan launches out in an attack at the Philistines at Geba, or possibly Gibeah, possibly it's the same place, and here we need to go back to chapter 10 and verses 7 and 8. These are Saul's words — these are Samuel's words to Saul at the time of his anointing. "When these signs" — remember he was to see a series of three signs which would confirm that he was the anointed king of Israel — "When these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you." - chapter 10 and verse 7. And most interpreters confer that what that meant was, Saul was immediately to deal with this garrison of Philistines that were encamped in Gibeah, something which Saul did not do.

Now, and several years, perhaps one or two or possibly more years, since the anointing of Saul, and now Jonathan launches out on an attack of what seems to be a successful attack of these Philistines. The interpreters are all over the map about what has happened here. Now is this Jonathan acting as a young buck, going off at half-cock against the Philistines without consulting Saul? Sure. Saul takes all the glory, you read there in verse 4, that all the Israel heard it and said, "Saul has defeated the garrison." You understand that the news reports are probably coming from Saul himself since it was a victory. Saul perhaps took the credit for it. Perhaps even here you see something of a tension between Jonathan the son and Saul the father. Some interpret this as Saul's initiative in the first place. My good friend, Ligon's good friend, Rick Phillips, of Greenville in South Carolina, he's been preaching through 1 Samuel. I glanced out of curiosity at what a military mind would make of this and sure enough, as I could almost predict, Rick Phillips viewed this as Saul's greatest, finest hour. Going out and defeating these Philistines using his son Jonathan of course in the process.

Well, others have interpreted this in almost entire, entirely opposite way. Gordon Keddie, Reformed Presbyterian minister and professor and lecturer on much of the Old Testament, likened this to the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor bringing America into the Second World War. That this was a foolish act on Jonathan's part because the consequences of this attack of the Philistines in Gibeah was that when the Philistines heard of it, they came in their huge numbers against Saul and against Israel. Well, what's all this about? It's about difficulty and it's about trial and it's about the people of God finding themselves in terrible, terrible circumstances.

Now the second section of this chapter beginning in verse 5 and going down to verse 15, and it's the heart of this chapter, speaks of Saul's massive failure. Saul is in Gilgal. We don't know whether or not Saul had deliberately gone to Gilgal in fulfillment of Samuel's word that he should wait there, but since he finds himself perhaps in Gilgal, he remembers now that Samuel had said, perhaps several years ago, to go to Gilgal and there to wait for seven days. Samuel is supposed to come. He is the prophet. He is God's mouth piece. Saul cannot enter into an act of war without the blessing of God. And for that blessing to be given, sacrifices have to be offered. All of that has to be done by God's constituted prophet, Samuel. Seven days he is waiting, but Samuel does not appear. It's a test. Perhaps to be accurate, in verse 8, he waited seven days. That is, he is in the seventh day. As Hebrews record day, perhaps the seventh day hasn't quite ended and Samuel actually did come at the very end of the seventh day, but Saul is panicking. The people of God are, in verse 6, "hiding themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns and some are crossing the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead." They are abandoning ship. The situation is wholly desperate. And Saul takes matters into his own hands. He offers the sacrifice. He breaks God's commandment to be sure, but what else could Saul do?

Kings often act in pride. In the time of James VI in Scotland, he was listening to Robert Bruce, one of the great preachers, and while Robert Bruce was preaching, King James VI was talking to an entourage around him and Robert Bruce stopped. And several seconds later the King stopped talking. Robert Bruce began to preach again, but once again the King began to talk. On the third occasion, Robert Bruce said, "When lions roar, the beasts are silent, and the Lion of the tribe of Judah now roars in the Gospel and it becomes petty kings to be silent." Wow — can you imagine that? I wonder tonight, I wonder if you can be honest with yourself. What do you think about Saul's response here? It's trivial, isn't it? Lives are at stake. The lives of the people of Israel are at stake. He needs to do something. The Philistines are attacking; his men are deserting; Samuel hasn't appeared. You know when Samuel actually appears? Look at what he says in verse 13 — "You have done foolishly." He had broken God's commandment. I wonder what you make of it. Lots of commentators side here with Saul. I wonder tonight what you make of it. Is it such a bad thing to break one of God's commandments? You know, we live in the year 2009. We've had a generation and more of ethics that says the situation commands the action and the principle; that what is right is expedient to the context that you find yourself in. This is a desperate context. Be careful how you answer this question.

Oh yes, this is one of those examples again about worship. Like Uzzah in 2 Samuel chapter 6, who, you remember, puts out his hand to stabilize the ark on the back of that cart when it began to wobble and God struck him down dead. I wonder what your reaction is to what Saul does here. What does he do? He offers, he offers a sacrifice. There's no priest there; there's no prophet there, so what do you do? You do what is expedient. You do what you think is wise. And there's the rub. There it is, isn't it? You know you have something here of the anatomy of sin. Saul acted pragmatically. And you notice what he does? Notice his response. When Samuel comes, he says in verse 12, "The Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal. I have not sought the favor of the Lord, so I forced myself..." — I didn't want to do this! — "I forced myself and offered the burnt offering. Samuel, it's your fault!" That's what he was saying. Isn't that what Ligon was saying this morning — at least in the second version of the sermon at 11 o'clock? So extraordinarily powerful this morning - the failure that is endemic to the human heart of accepting our own responsibility for sin. What is Saul doing? He's saying, "It's your fault, Samuel. You made me do this. You forced me to break God's commandment."

I wonder what you make of what Saul did here and I wonder what you make of God's reaction. This isn't just Samuel's reaction here, this is God's reaction. Because of the result of what Saul did, in breaking God's commandment, God pronounces the end of Saul's kingdom. As far as Saul is concerned, he is finished. He may trundle on for several decades to come, but God has already decided that another will take his place to whom His favor will be given. Now, do you think that's over the top? I mean, be honest. Is that over the top for one sin

here? He broke the commandment of God concerning worship, and behold men and women — behold the severity of God. We saw the marvelous grace of our Lord Jesus this morning in a way that took my breath away, but here, behold the severity of God.

You know, John Wesley wrote little notes in his Bible, and on this passage, he wrote a note. He asked a question — “Is there such a thing as a little sin?” That's a good question, isn't it? Is there such a thing as a little sin? Do you know what his answer was? He wrote it in his Bible — “Only if there is such a thing as a little God.” There is no such thing as a little sin. For one little sin, Jesus must die and shed His blood in atonement. Yes, this is a massive failure on Saul's part, and perhaps one of the bleakest statements in Samuel is verse 15 — “The rest of the people went up after Saul to meet the army; they went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people who were present with him, about six hundred men.” It's almost an act of defiance, or is it an act of desperation? Thirty thousand plus six thousand Philistines, and six hundred of the Israelites. And God has said, “I am no longer with you, Saul.” Saul is cornered. He is marooned in a garrison, and Israelites are fleeing.

And then at the end of this chapter, this bleak, bleak picture, the Philistines took away all of their blacksmiths. There was no one in Israel to sharpen their swords or their axes or their sickles or their plowshares. They had to go to the Philistines and pay in order to sharpen their agricultural implements. This is Israel's lowest point. Now, you know your Bibles well enough and you remember those words of William Carey that “Man's extremity is God's opportunity.” Isn't it so often true that in the history of redemption that God brings us to nothing in order to display the sovereignty of His power and His grace? Israel deserves nothing. They deserve nothing. And until you come to the opposite of Saul saying, “You made me do this.” — until you come to acknowledge sin for what it is — a breaking of God's holy commandments — you will never, ever appreciate what grace really means.

There's a wonderful verse in this chapter and it's there in verse 14 — “The kingdom shall not continue — at least not with Saul — the Lord has sought a man after His own heart.” Yes, it's David of course, a man after God's own heart, but no, it's not truly David either. There is only one good enough to pay the price of sin. He only can unlock the gates of heaven and let us in. Yes, it is Jesus, who is the Man after God's own heart. God is I think looking tonight and asking us — will we be men and women after His own heart? Will we be the men and women who put God first, who find our all in all in Jesus Christ?

You know Spurgeon, he was converted on January 6 in 1850, and then three weeks later he wrote, “I yield myself to You as Your own reasonable sacrifice. I return to You Your own. I would be forever Yours. While on earth, I would have You and You alone, and may I enjoy You and praise You forever. Amen.” Will we be those men and women after His own heart?

Let's pray together.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).