

INTRODUCTION

Living in the modern world can be very stressful I doubt if any of us go through a week without being stressed about something, perhaps something that makes us uptight or concerned and causes our blood pressure to rise and the adrenalin to flow. But of course it is not just the modern world that faces stressful situations for the chapter that we are looking at tonight demonstrates a situation that Saul faced that must have caused him to be very stressed. However it is the way that Saul responds to the situation that matters and so it is in our lives as well. Social, personal and economic tensions can cause great disruption in our lives and cause our stress levels to rise. However the way that we respond to these periods of stress is very important.

There are some who adopt a pragmatic approach to stress, whatever is causing it they simply adapt to the changes they go with the flow even if the flow goes against what they believe for they prefer to refrain from rocking the boat than standing by their convictions. In the long run however these people sacrifice their convictions for social acceptability. The result is that when the waves of some crisis rocks their boats then they have no inner convictions or strength of character to give them the stability they need in the midst of the storm. Let us learn from Saul's failures so that we will handle any crisis in the right way that is God's way.

But before we do that we need to say something about the structure of chapters 13-14, which really go together but for the sake of time we will look at each chapter separately but their oneness, must always be remembered and we will say more about this when we look at the next chapter. But for now let us content ourselves by saying that 13:1 begins with a summary statement which was quite common in Hebrew literature it serves as a caption for what is to follow.

Chapter 14:47-52 concludes this section with a summary of Saul's life and achievements. Our writer is drawing together the contribution made by Saul before going on to introduce us to the next King who is David. Sorry about the long introduction but I have to comment on 13:1 before moving into the rest of the chapter. The opening words of this summary bring to us certain problems.

The main one being the numbers used. It appears that the numbers 30 and 40 have been omitted from the copies passed down to us and therefore different translations offer varying views of Saul's age and length of reign. According to Acts 13:21 Saul reigned 40 years which is probably a round number so the NIV translation of a 42 year reign is probably right. Now let us look at the rest of the text.

1. THE RESULT OF DISOBEYING THE WILL OF GOD (vs. 2-15)

While Saul and the men of Israel were still at Gilgal he chose three thousand of them to form the basis of his army. Two thousand he retained under his command in Micmash and in the hill country around Bethel and he placed 1000 under his son Jonathan's control in Gibeah, which was Saul's hometown.

What we have to realise is that it seems a considerably time has elapsed since the events of the reconfirmation of Saul as King and the people's commitment to God. It seems that as time has passed so has Saul's popularity. As the Philistines have penetrated some Israelite towns Saul's popularity fell for he is quick to take credit for Jonathan's victory (v 4).

Saul's attitude to his own people had deteriorated to the point that he calls them "Hebrews" (v 3) which was an expression of contempt, and was used by Israel's enemies. It seems also that Saul's

trust in God had given way to an unhealthy reliance on his own resourcefulness and an externalism in religion.

In fact Saul had so far departed from his earlier commitment to God that the Lord declared He could no longer use him and would raise up someone else in his place (v 14). Obviously such a decline in leadership and relationships could not have come about quickly such declines often take years but sadly they have personal and sometimes national consequences as it did for Israel.

a) The Deliverance Of The People (vs. 2-4) – The penetration of the Philistines into Geba was a serious threat to Israel's well being (v 3). Jonathan sensed this threat for he knew that the land belonged to the Lord and any invasion of it was contrary to God's purposes so without consulting his Father, Jonathan takes prompt action.

However in reality Saul should have been the one to begin the offensive but it seems a change has now come over him, Saul now lacks the decisiveness that he once had and he has become passive rather than active. Jonathan however was active he attacked the Philistines and wins the battle. However in doing so the gauntlet had been thrown down and Jonathan and Saul could expect reprisals, so Saul summons the men of Israel to assemble at Gilgal (v 4).

On hearing about Jonathan's victory Saul was concerned about how his enemy would react, Jonathan's actions were going to make things worst (v 4). This is sometimes what happens in the providence of God. When active believers gain some victories in spiritual warfare our enemy, the devil seeks revenge and often this can mean that things for God's people in general can become harder and more difficult.

God uses such occasions to waken his people from their apathy and that is the intention in this passage, Instead of rejoicing over the victory the people were worrying about what their enemy would do now (v 4).

We must not allow the increased activity of our enemy to hinder God's work from moving forward this is what can so often happen in the church. A church may be evangelistic and through its evangelism see God convert some sinners. However this angers Satan and so he directs his attacks against the church.

He may cause some believers to be discouraged and as a result the temptation is to stop the work of evangelism at least on a temporary basis while the church recovers from these attacks. But that is exactly what Satan wants us to do he wants us to worry more about him than be concerned about the lost.

Israel saw only the immediate results of Jonathan's victory (become a stench) they did not realise that the cause of truth was advanced by Jonathan's confrontation. As a church we must beware of our enemy and we must confront him and we must not allow him to paralyse us with fear but we must press on and push forward seeking to gain ground for the gospel.

You see what is happening here is what happens when one takes their eyes off the Lord who is Almighty. The Israelites are fearful of the Philistines but have they forgotten how God gave them the victory over the Ammonites? They should have trusted God and He would have used them to gain the victory over the Philistines but their spiritual state is such that the people have lost sight of their God only Jonathan is seeing things clearly that is why he acted.

Let us pray that the attacks of our enemy will not cause us to lose sight of our God but let us press forward with his help in order to gain ground in the battlefield of the gospel.

b) The Reaction Of The Enemy (vs. 5-7) - The Israelites did not have to wait long for the invasion to take place. The Philistines fielded a formidable force (v 5) and so terrified were the Israelites that they hid in caves and rocks etc (v 6). Some even forsook their lands and livestock and crossed the Jordan to the land seeking refuge in Gilead and Gad (v 7).

But have these fearful fighters not committed the same sin as their forefathers when they came out of Egypt? Do you remember that the Lord had promised to give them the land of Canaan but when they came to the border of Canaan they sent out spies? Ten of the spies brought back a fearful report they described all the difficulties of taking Canaan and this had the effect of terrifying the people. The Israelites gave in to their fears and decided that they could never conquer such a land especially as there were giants living in the land (Numbers 13:25-33).

But because the Israelites of the exodus did not submit themselves in obedience to the Lord who promised them the land He judged them for their unbelief and the spies who brought the fearful report died that same day (Numbers 14:36-37) and the people who believed they could not conquer such a land were told that they would not be able to enter the Promised Land (Numbers 14:22-35).

As we consider the situation facing Saul and the people it is clear that they had not learnt from their history. It should not surprise us therefore that many of the Israelites hid or fled from the Philistines. They were crippled with fear and such fear is always in opposition to true faith. What Saul and the people should have done was to turn to God and depend on Him. They should have exercised faith not fear, was their God unable to deal with the Philistines?

Of course not even though the numbers against them was formidable God is all-powerful and has demonstrated his power in so many ways through Israel's history. However we have to ask is the church any better today? The forces opposed to the church today in our country are increasing all the time. We have a Government that make laws that opposes the church.

We have the vast majority of people opposed to the church by their indifference to it, if not their open opposition. It is so easy to look at the forces mounted against God's people today and look at the smallness of the church and do what the Israelites did. We can be fearful, hide ourselves away in our own little church buildings hoping that God will bring some unbelievers into our building but not worried if that does not happen.

We can keep our heads down at home and hope that things will eventually get better or we can flee completely to a more promising situation. But men and women of faith must face opposition head on trusting in God and depending totally on him to help us as we continue to go out into our world in order to preach and share the gospel with all people.

We must exercise faith in evangelism in these days and trust in his promise that He will build the church and go forth in order to confront our enemies with the glorious and gracious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith should be what marks us out as God's people not fear.

c) The Test Of Priorities (vs. 8-14) – As we consider Saul's priorities it seems apparent that Saul has been conditioned to think in terms of externals over recent years. This is not how he thought at the beginning of his reign but his attitude is now one of a man who thinks purely in worldly terms rather than spiritual. Saul had been instructed by Samuel to wait 7 days at Gilgal until Samuel arrives to offer the sacrifices (10:8) but Saul's obedience was tested daily as he saw the ranks of his army getting thinner through desertion. It was a severe trial and on the seventh day it became too much for him.

He was convinced that Samuel was not going to come and he could not delay any longer otherwise the enemy might capture him. So on the seventh day, possibly at the time of the

morning sacrifice, Saul yielded to the external pressure and offered the sacrifice himself (v 9). His sin was not that he took upon himself the function of Priest, but that he disobeyed the word of the Lord through the prophet Samuel.

We may have some sympathy for Saul, his army was getting smaller his enemy was getting closer and he did wait until the seventh day but in truth he failed to obey God's word, he did not wait on Samuel for just as he finished with the sacrifice Samuel arrived as promised (v 12).

We all face temptations like the one faced by Saul. God's word tells us not to lie yet external circumstances and outward pressures may make telling a lie attractive as it will take the pressure of us and directs the attention elsewhere. Likewise as a church the temptation to listen to the voices of men rather than the voice of God is a real temptation.

As the church of Jesus Christ gets smaller and as some professing believers jump ship and as opposition to the gospel increases it is easy to give in to the temptation, to do something that will make the message more attractive.

Some churches have given in to such temptations and provide all sorts of entertainment within their services but sadly they have departed from the word of God. Even well meaning Christian people can apply the pressures externally to shorten the sermon or to water down the message in order to make it more attractive.

Of course I am not saying the church should never change nor as you know am I against modern songs or other musical instruments but there are some things that can never change because God commands us to preach his word and therefore the preaching of his word must be central to all we do as a church. But the temptation that churches face is real and we need to have faith and courage to believe God's word and to stick to what it says.

But what is it that makes churches and believers give in to such outward pressures. It is the fact that their view of the word of God changes and their faith becomes merely external. Saul offered sacrifices not because he wanted to worship God but because he wanted God on his side and thought that a mere sacrifice would influence him. So it is with churches that give in to this pressure.

When our services become a religious routine or ritual instead of a meaningful act of worship then we are on a slippery slope. When God's word is something to be read, as a way of getting God on our side rather than a book that must be wholeheartedly obeyed, then it will not hard to give into the external pressures that face the church.

The result of Saul's disobedience was disastrous for him and his reign (vs. 13-14); for he will lose his kingdom to a man who has God's desires and goals and all this because of his disobedience. As I finish we must not think that a little disobedience occasionally in order to get us out of a situation will not really affect our Christian walk. You are wrong to think like that for God takes our disobedience seriously because it tells him something about our hearts for if we are prepared to disobey God in what we might consider a small matter then it tells God that He does not matter compared to the thing or the person that we are prepared to disobey him for. Our Christian life will be affected by disobedience, sometimes disastrously affected therefore let us be people and a church that obeys God's word explicitly and let us act in faith rather than fear as we seek to withstand the pressures that come upon us both from outside the church and from inside it.

May God give us the grace to stand firm and remain true to his word?

Amen