

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature,

1 Samuel: Conflict with Saul and David

Session 23, 6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, today we're jumping into one of the most incredible leadership stories ever told. It's really a tale of two kings, one who had it all and lost it, and another who came from nowhere and changed everything. And that really is the question at the heart of this whole story, isn't it? We kick things off with Israel's very first king, a man named Saul.

Now, on paper, this guy was perfect, chosen by God, tall, impressive. He looked the part. But his grip on the throne was way more fragile than anyone realized, and his story is just this incredible look at how a leader can totally unravel.

Okay, so let's get into it. Saul's reign, you know, it starts off with a lot of promise. But it's really defined by a series of massive failures that show you who he really is deep down.

And it's not like he just made one bad call. Nope, this was a pattern. So let's set the scene.

Saul's first big screw-up happens at a place called Gilgal. The Philistine army is closing in, and he is, to put it mildly, panicking. The prophet Samuel told him, "Hey, wait seven days; I'll come do the holy sacrifice.

But Samuel's running late. Saul's watching his army, his own men, start to freak out and desert. So what's he going to do? And this right here? This is basically Saul's playbook for failure.

It always starts with fear. Instead of trusting God, he gets scared and decides he has to take control. He abuses his power as king and performs a sacrifice himself, something only a priest was allowed to do.

Then when he gets called out on it, he tries to wrap it all up in a religious bow, saying, oh, I just felt compelled to seek God's favor. But Samuel sees right through it and calls him out for blatant disobedience. And believe me, this wasn't a one-time thing.

It becomes his M.O. A little later, God gives him a crystal-clear command. Completely destroy the Amalekites. So Saul wins the battle, but he keeps their king alive and all the best livestock.

His excuse? Oh, we were going to sacrifice them to God. But Samuel just drops this absolutely devastating verdict on him. It was never about the sacrifice.

It was about obedience. And with that single act of disobedience, Saul's reign is, for all intents and purposes, over. And if you really want to understand what's wrong with Saul, this is it.

In another story, he makes this rash, foolish vow that none of his soldiers can eat until they win. His own son, Jonathan, who's the hero of the battle, by the way, doesn't hear the order and has some honey. And Saul is ready to have him executed for it.

Now, just think about that for a second. He's willing to kill his own son for breaking his word, but he completely ignores God's direct command when it's inconvenient. It all boils down to this.

His ego, his own authority, had become bigger than God's. So, with Saul basically fired by God, the prophet Samuel is sent on a new mission. But he's not sent to a palace or a military academy.

He's sent to a sheep pasture to find a shepherd boy named David, a kid who is, in pretty much every way, Saul's total opposite. And this right here is the guiding principle of this whole transition. See, when Samuel gets to the house and sees David's older brothers, who are all tall and impressive, he thinks, okay, it's got to be one of these guys.

But God corrects him with this line. Remember, Saul was picked because he looked like a king. He was tall.

He was handsome. David gets picked for what's on the inside, for his heart. And we see this heart, this character, on full display in David's very first big moment on the world stage.

He's facing down the giant Goliath, and the difference between them is just staggering. Goliath is all trash talk and brute force, trusting in his armor and his weapons. But David, man, he just flips the script entirely.

He says, "This isn't about me versus you. This is about my God versus your idols. And we all know how this ends, right? David wins.

He's an instant superstar, a national hero. But this incredible victory, which should have been a good thing for King Saul, ends up being the worst thing possible. Because when the people start singing this song, it's like a match thrown on the gasoline of Saul's insecurity.

He just can't handle someone else getting more attention. His fear curdles into this toxic, all-consuming jealousy. And this is where things get really dark.

I mean, really dark. Saul, the sitting king, dedicates the entire state apparatus, the whole army, to one single-minded goal. Hunting down and killing David, the very man who saved the country.

The kingdom literally becomes a hunting ground for its own king. So David is on the run for his life. He goes to Nob, gets some help from the priests.

And what does Saul do? He has all 85 of them slaughtered. Just like that. David then has to flee to Gath, Goliath's hometown of all places, and pretend to be insane just to stay alive.

Later, he saves an entire city, Keilah, only to find out from God that its people are about to hand him over to Saul. It's just one betrayal and one narrow escape after another. But this is what's so incredible about David.

This is what sets him apart. Twice, he gets Saul dead to rights. He finds him totally vulnerable in a cave, and then later, fast asleep in the middle of his camp.

Both times, David's men are whispering in his ear, Do it. This is your chance from God. And both times, David refuses.

He will not raise a hand against the Lord's anointed. He respects the office of king, even if he doesn't respect the man in it. He's going to trust God to sort this out in his own time.

And speaking of making the right call, remember that story back in Keilah? It's such a fascinating moment. David asks God two questions. Will Saul come down here? And will the people of Keilah betray me? And God says, yep, to both.

So what does David do? He leaves. And that future, the one God said would happen, never comes to pass. It shows you the huge difference between these two leaders.

Saul acts on his own fears, but David gets actual intel from God and then acts decisively, changing the future. It's wild, right? All right, let's fast forward. Years have gone by, and now we're at the final, truly tragic chapter of Saul's life.

He's an old man now. On the eve of one last, massive battle with the Philistines. And he is terrified.

And he is completely alone. Saul is desperate for a sign, for any kind of guidance. But because he has spent years rejecting God's word, now, when he needs him most, God is silent.

The text says God wouldn't answer him. Not in dreams, not through priests, not by any method at all. Can you imagine that kind of terror? A king, facing his final battle, totally cut off from heaven.

So in total desperation, he does the one thing he knows he absolutely shouldn't do. He banned mediums from the land, but now he disguises himself and goes to find one. And he asks her to do the unthinkable.

Bring up the spirit of the prophet Samuel from the dead. But then something happens that freaks out even the medium. This wasn't some parlor trick.

Samuel is actually there. And she is horrified. And Saul gets his message, all right? But it's a message of pure doom.

The spirit of Samuel just confirms everything Saul already feared. The kingdom is gone. It's been given to David.

And then comes the final soul-crushing sentence: tomorrow, you and your sons will be with me. With Samuel, in the realm of the dead. Saul walks into his last battle knowing, for a fact, that he is going to die.

And that leaves us with this really haunting final thought. Samuel, from beyond the grave, knew exactly what was happening on earth. He was still watching the consequences of Saul's choices play out.

It's a powerful idea, isn't it? It's a reminder that leadership isn't just about the crown you wear or the power you have while you're alive. It's about the choices you make and the long shadow they cast on the future.