



The year was 1990. I'd been on staff here at CPC for three years and I was teaching that morning in San Jose for a ministry called Cityteam. In the middle of my class a staff member walked in and interrupted me and said I had an urgent phone call. I walked into an office, picked up the phone, and a woman said she was a nurse at Stanford Hospital. I can't recall her exact words but it went kind of like this: "Sir, it's your mom. Her heart failed. She passed away this morning." It was a shock. My mother was only 63. There'd never been any kind of talk of a heart problem, but in the end it was her heart that did her in. Her heart failed her.

The person we're going to look at this morning was a lot like that, only his heart failed him in a different way. He was a man who had enormous potential. He had everything going for him. He had all the assets and talents to be a great leader, but his heart did him in. The man I'm talking about the first king of Israel, Saul. He was impressive to look at and from a prominent family, but deep within his heart was a fatal flaw. I'm sure most of you are aware of the television show, *CSI*. I've learned you never want to eat during an episode of *CSI*, but that show makes me wonder what it would be like to do a forensic investigation on a person's heart; not the physical organ we call the heart but what it represents. In the Bible the heart is the control center of your life. It includes your mind, emotions and will. It's what makes you tick. It's your soul. What if we could be assigned to the *CSI* team investigating the disaster of Saul's life, what would we find if we zoomed in his heart?

The fact that my mom died of heart disease at 63 was a wake-up call for me. There's a history of heart disease in my family and for me to stay healthy I should pay attention to that. On a spiritual level, Saul's life can be a wake-up call for us, causing us to take a hard look at the condition of our own heart. The Bible says, **"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it"** (Prov. 4:23). Guard your inner life. Guard who you are beneath the surface where no one sees but you and God. Why? Because ultimately that determines everything.

Kingship in Israel

Saul was born during a time in Israel called the period of the Judges. It was a time of moral, spiritual and political collapse in Israel. Apart from a few local judges who God raised up in times of oppression to deliver the nation, there was no central leadership. The book of Judges says several times, **"In those days there was no king; everyone did as they saw fit"** (Judges 21:25). That was the problem. There was no king, no leadership, so it was a time of violence, corruption, and anarchy.

It might surprise you to know God had always planned for Israel to be ruled by a king. God told Abraham, **"kings will come from you"** (Gn 17:6). Later, when Jacob blessed his son Judah he said, **"the scepter (symbolic of kingship) will not depart from Judah"** (Gn 29:10). God even gave Moses laws to regulate the future institution of kingship in Dt 17:14-20. The king wasn't to use his power to gain personal privilege; to multiply horses, wives, silver and gold. He wasn't even to consider himself better than his fellow Israelites. Like others, he was under the authority of God's law. He was to be a true servant-leader.

But sometimes we can want the right thing for the wrong reasons. And that's what happened in Israel when they were being led by their last Judge, Samuel. He was a good leader but he was getting old. So in 1 Samuel 8 the people approached Samuel and said, **"You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have"** (8:5). Samuel wasn't happy about this. He took it personally, but he did what we should always do when we're hurt and offended, he **"prayed to the Lord"** (8:6). And the Lord told him, **"Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king"** (8:7). God says, "Don't take it personally, Samuel, it's not about you, it's about me."

Samuel warned them that having a king on their own terms would mean their sons would be drafted into the army and there'd be a central bureaucracy with high taxes. But the people refused to listen: **"No!" they said. "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles"** (8:19-20). You can see how you can want the right thing for the wrong reasons. They didn't want to trust God to lead them in fighting their battles; they wanted a king to do it like the nations around them. God's people are never supposed to conform to the world. We're called to shine a light, to be different. But do you know what the interesting thing is? Sometimes God gives us what we shouldn't have. Be careful what you ask for because you may get it.

In the rest of this book, Samuel anoints two kings: Saul and David. It's almost like through them God wanted to put on record the difference between a good king and a bad one. Most of us know David was the good one, but have you ever wondered why? As we'll see, Saul broke a few of God's instructions about worship and warfare. But David's crimes seem weightier. He committed adultery and murder. He let his eldest son get a way with raping his daughter and his second son with killing the first. Why would God reject Saul in favor of David? The reason is God looks deeper than outward action; God looks at the heart. So let's go ahead

and perform a CSI investigation on Saul's heart and see what we can learn about why things went so wrong.

Saul is Chosen as King and Begins Well

Saul started out well. God gave him every opportunity to succeed, and at times it appeared he responded well. In chapter 9 he's introduced as the son of a prominent and wealthy man named Kish from the tribe of Benjamin. He's *"as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else"* (9:2). Saul is the whole package and God shows Samuel this young man is to be the new king. Samuel says to Saul, *"And to whom is all the desire of Israel turned, if not to you and your whole family line?"* (9:20). Saul seems to understand what this meant because he responds, *"But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why do you say such a thing to me?"* (9:20b-21).

Despite his apparent humility, Samuel moves ahead and in a private ceremony anoints his head with oil and says, *"Has not the Lord anointed you ruler over his inheritance?"* (10:1). Then he tells him of several things that will happen to confirm his calling, and they all happen, just as Samuel said. The Spirit of God even came on Saul and empowered him to prophesy. He's then chosen as king in a public ceremony, but he's so reluctant to lead that they find him hiding in the baggage room. Nevertheless, they bring him out and all the people shout, *"Long live the king!"* (10:24). He went on to lead the Israelites in a resounding victory over the Philistines.

There were so many good things to start out about Saul: He seems humble, he worships God and not idols (14:35; 15:31), he leads Israel in victory. The high point came in chapter 11 after he rescued the city of Jabesh. There were some people who'd been critical of Saul's leadership and after his victory his supporters wanted them executed. But Saul said, *"No one will be put to death today, for this day the Lord has rescued Israel"* (11:13). And then there was a great celebration where all Israel reaffirmed their loyalty to Saul in the presence of the Lord.

So everything seems solid. Saul is off to a great start. At this point, it's hard to detect any real symptoms of a heart problem, but sometimes it takes awhile for them to show up. Not long ago, if you were to explore the forests of Colorado, you'd have found a huge tree that stood for over 400 years. It was just a sapling when Columbus first landed. What's remarkable is the trials and changes this tree endured over 400 years and yet it grew ever stronger. It was struck by lightning 14 times, braved tremendous wind storms, and even defied an earthquake. So, what mighty force finally destroyed this towering giant? Tiny beetles! What war and the unbridled forces of nature couldn't accomplish, a small colony of beetles quietly did. Rather than attack from the outside, they bored their way under the bark and into the heart of this mighty tree. Nibble by nibble, bite by bite; none of great significance by themselves, they chewed away at the heart of this giant. Finally, one day, it just crumbled to pieces! In the same way, seemingly harmless things often make the most substantial

inroads into our hearts. Things that are barely noticeable and easily ignored, if left unchecked, will cause our downfall!

Crime Scene #1—Saul usurps the priestly role to serve his purposes

Again, consider Saul. Consider two different crime scenes. They both take place in Gilgal. In 10:8 Samuel had given him some precise instructions. He'd said, *"Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do."* Some time later Saul finds himself at Gilgal, as Samuel said, and he was in a precarious situation. Listen to 13:5-7. *"The Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Mikmash, east of Beth Aven. When the Israelites saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear."*

The Philistines had the most feared military on earth. They had superior technology along with massive numbers. The Israelites are scared out of their wits, hiding wherever they can to find cover; some are even running away. Eighty percent of Saul's army desert him, and he begins to panic. He seems to have forgotten the Lord doesn't need numbers to win his battles. But Saul needs to stop the bleeding, fast! He thinks it would be expedient to offer a few sacrifices before they fight, but Samuel said to wait because that was his job, not Saul's. He was to wait for Samuel seven days and then Samuel would tell him what to do. Verse 8 says, *"He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter."* This is serious! "Come on, Samuel. Your time is up. We're in some serious hot water here!"

Does anyone here like to wait? Waiting is hard. It's hard because we feel it's such a waste of time. We should be doing something. While we wait, we're losing ground. But there are times when God places us in a situation where he says wait and it doesn't make any sense at all. In those times we have to decide if we're going to trust our human instincts and reasoning or trust and obey God. That's the choice Saul had to make. Look what he does in 13:9-12: *"So he said, 'Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings.' And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him. 'What have you done?' asked Samuel. Saul replied, 'When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Mikmash, 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.'"*

As Saul washes the blood of the animals from his hands, he sees Samuel approaching. He seems clueless that he did anything wrong because he goes out to welcome him, but Samuel isn't

happy. "What have you done?" Saul explains, "Hey, you weren't here. I had to do something. You gotta do what you gotta do. We can't go into battle without a sacrifice. What would my men think? I had no choice."

Sounds good, but Samuel isn't buying it. He looks Saul straight in the eyes and says, *"You have done a foolish thing," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the Lord's command"* (13:13–14).

As we look for clues to the fatal flaws in Saul's heart, we see a man who, although there was a veneer of religious activity, didn't obey the Lord's command, which Samuel points out twice. No doubt part of the reason for that is he really didn't trust God to take care of him in that situation. He panicked. Sometimes we try to cover up our faithless and disobedient hearts with religious activity. We go to church, tithe, attend a Bible Study; those are all good things to do but they can also mask a heart that isn't trusting God. And so, when things get out of control, we really believe we know better than God. This issue doesn't surface until we're really tested, as Saul was. It comes in situations where we feel something has to be done. Waiting on God makes no sense. If I have to compromise or just twist God's word a little bit it's okay because I'm in a situation where if I don't do that I'll lose out. Saul probably even thought, "Hey, I'm the king here. I'm in charge. If I want to get the ball rolling and sacrifice a few sheep I can." But in God's kingdom, the king isn't above God's law.

And there were consequences for Saul's actions. God says he'll replace Saul with a man after his own heart. Unlike Saul, he'll listen to God's heart and want what God wants. Saul heard this, but his own heart is hard. Look at his response. Verse 15 just says Samuel left and then Saul counted his men, preparing for battle. He didn't skip a beat! No repentance. Samuel's words didn't register.

Crime Scene #2—Saul fails to destroy the Ammonites

Let's move on to the next crime scene in chapter 15. Samuel comes to Saul and says: *"Samuel said to Saul, 'I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty says: "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys"'"* (15:1–3).

That's pretty clear, right? The Amalekites had been a thorn in Israel's side since the time they left Egypt. He'd given them 400 years to repent. They continued to be a marauding band of nomads who'd swoop down, rape and plunder a town, and then leave. God decides it's time for judgment and he orders Saul to enact what was called *herem*, which meant everything was under the ban; everyone and everything was to be destroyed.

So Saul summons 1,200 soldiers and attacks the Amalekites. Look at what happened. *"Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, near the eastern border of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed"* (15:7–9).

We're not told why, but he spares their king. Maybe it was a professional courtesy. If nothing else, Agag was quite a trophy to parade around. Keeping the best of their sheep and cattle makes more sense. They could be useful. This is a classic example of partial or selective obedience. We think partial obedience is better than disobedience, but it's not. Partial obedience is disobedience.

Here's what God thinks about partial obedience. *"Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.' Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the Lord all that night"* (15:10–11). God calls it what it is: He's "turned away from me and not carried out my instructions." He uses a word that means, you've not listened. That same word is used repeatedly. God says he regrets making Saul king. The last time God said that was in the days of Noah when he said he regretted making human beings because our hearts were so evil.

By the way, did you see how Samuel responds? He's angry. It doesn't say who he's angry at. Is he angry at God or Saul or himself? Perhaps he doesn't know and he's just angry at the whole situation. But what does he do with his anger? He cries out to God all night long. He's does what Paul says in Ephesians, *"Be angry but sin not and don't let the sun go down on your anger."* That's what Samuel did. He worked his anger through in the presence of God. I think he prayed for Saul and for Israel. He prayed about what to do.

And God gave him direction. The next morning he woke up early and went to meet Saul. But someone told him, *"Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone down to Gilgal"* (15:12b). Well, that's telling. Saul is now celebrating his victories by making monuments to himself! The humble man who hid in the baggage room is now drunk with success. He's making Saul bobble-heads and selling them all over Israel. Then it says, *"When Samuel reached him, Saul said, 'The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions'"* (15:13). This guy could be on *The 700 Club*! Everything is "amen" and "praise the Lord." He's thinking Samuel must be so impressed with his God-talk. *"But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?'"* (15:14). In other words, "Are you deaf, Saul?" Baaaa. "Where did those animals come from?" Moooo.

It's always telling what a person does when caught red-handed. Saul and Samuel proceed to go back and forth, and Saul tries to justify his actions. He says in 15:15, *"The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to your God, but we totally destroyed the rest."* Notice

the subtle shift in pronoun: “the Lord YOUR God.” And there he goes again—partial obedience with a religious coating. “We wanted to use those fine animals to sacrifice to God.”

How many people have I talked to, and how often I’ve seen in myself the same thing. I’ve known people who are known for an uncontrolled temper in the workplace but justify it because they’re faithful to their wives and they serve in the church. I’ve talked to men who are being unfaithful to their wives but say, “Listen, the only reason I’m staying in this marriage is because I know God hates divorce.” Partial obedience is disobedience. Samuel will have nothing of it. Let me paraphrase what he says in 15:17-19: “Listen! You were once nothing and you knew it, but the Lord graciously made you king. He sent you to destroy the Amalekites, but now you’re such a big shot you think you can make up your own rules. Fact is, you pounced on the plunder because you’re just plain old greedy.”

Saul still doesn’t get it. He thinks he knows better. He says, **“But I did obey the Lord... I went on the mission the Lord assigned me”** (15:20). Again he explains how they brought home the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to God. Then Samuel responds with some of the most unforgettable words in the Bible. **“But Samuel replied: ‘Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king’”** (15:22–23).

You see, you can be a very religious person; you can go through all the motions but still be the one who’s calling the shots in your life. It’s like Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: **“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift”** (Mt 5:24-25). What does God want? Does he want religion? Does he want you bringing gifts at the altar while you ignore the way you’ve offended a brother or sister in Christ? Jesus says leave your religion and be reconciled to your brother.

It appears finally Saul repents in 15:24. **“Then Saul said to Samuel, ‘I have sinned. I violated the Lord’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them.’”** It sounds good, doesn’t it? But look closer at what’s really driving this. He asks Samuel to go back with him, but in 15:26 Samuel refuses. He says, **“I won’t go back with you because the Lord has rejected you as king.”** Then look what Saul says in 15:30. **“Saul replied, ‘I have sinned. But please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God.’”** There’s the motive of his heart. He wants Samuel to go back with him because he needs people to

see the great Samuel supports him. For Saul, it’s all about how the people view him.

A close look at Saul’s heart reveals he really didn’t care about pleasing the Lord; he wanted to please people. There’s remorse but no real repentance here. He just wants to stay in Samuel’s good graces so the people won’t think he’s a loser. It’s all about appearances to Saul. It’s all about what the people think of him. That always goes along great with an outward show of religion. John said the same things of the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day, **“they loved human praise more than praise from God”** (Jn 12:43). It reminds me of something I once read: “I’d like to buy about three dollars worth of God, please. Not too much—just enough to make me happy, but not so much I get addicted. I don’t want so much God I learn to really hate covetousness and lust. I certainly don’t want so much I start to love my enemies. I want ecstasy, not repentance; I want transcendence, not transformation. I’d like to be cherished by some nice, forgiving, broad-minded people, but I myself don’t want to love those different from me, especially if they smell. I’d like enough of God to make my family secure and my children well behaved, but not so much that I find my ambitions redirected or my giving too greatly enlarged. I’d like three dollars worth of God, please.”

Reflecting on the life of Saul is a wake-up call for each of us to take a closer look beneath the surface of our religion to what really drives us at a heart level. How’s your heart? We’ve seen that sick heart in one that tries to survive on cheap substitutes. It substitutes internal submission for external devotion. It substitutes human applause for divine approval. And it substitutes partial obedience for genuine listening.

Studying this, I’ve seen how much my own heart reflects Saul’s. Saul reminds me I need a new heart. That’s what King Jesus came to give. He was the only one who ever had a perfect heart. The prophet Ezekiel looked forward to a time when this would happen. Through him God said, **“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws”** (Ez 36:25-26).

Imagine that! When we put our faith in King Jesus, we get a heart transplant. We get a soft heart, a pliable heart, a heart that longs to follow God’s decrees. As followers of King Jesus, we have that heart. It’s like we’ve been given a heart that God can work with. It’s not a sinless heart but it’s a submissive, pliable and broken heart. Next week as we study the life of King David we’ll see that.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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