

United Kingdom - David & Saul

Saul's Latter Reign - David's Early Years



By Isaac Humphrey

Summary

The rejection of Saul from the kingship opens a new and tragic chapter in the history of Saul's life. From this point on, he becomes gloomy, paranoid, bitter, and mentally imbalanced. He began to have episodes of madness and became gloomy and tyrannical. Despite his divine rejection, Saul was still in power. He knew that there would be a rival, and this made him jealous and paranoid. At first, he did not suspect that the next king was the young shepherd who acted as his court musician.

He did begin to be suspicious, however, when this young shepherd turned out to be an excellent warrior. Little did he know that his suspicions were justified. This young shepherd, named David, had been anointed by Samuel as the next king of Israel.

David and Goliath

The occasion when David first gained popularity for his military exploits was a great battle with the Philistines. Saul and Israel had faced the Philistines for days. Saul was weak and Israel full of fear and apprehension. The Philistines were confident. One of their great warriors stepped forward; he offered to decide the issue by single combat - if there were any worthy opponents on Israel's side. David happened to be present on minor business and heard the taunts of the great Philistine warrior Goliath. David had the same attitude and the same faith that Jonathan had shown at the previous battle. If God was on his side, what had he to fear? He boldly faced the giant, and to the surprise of Israel and consternation of the Philistines, his slingshot and his practiced aim sent a stone into Goliath's unprotected forehead. This deed encouraged Israel and upset the Philistines - leading to an Israelite victory.

David on the Run

Like Jonathan on the previous occasion, David gained the respect of all Israel. Jonathan befriended him, and Saul made him his armor-bearer. He continually distinguished himself in battle with the Philistines and became a popular hero. His name was mentioned along with Saul, even above it. The songs of victory sung by the Israelite woman after the fall of Goliath pictured Saul "slaying his thousands" while David had "ten-thousands" credited to his record. It did not take long for the suspicious and paranoid Saul to look at David with an evil eye. At first, Saul attacked David during one of his fits of insanity. But even in his lucid moments, Saul was plotting against David. Saul thought he had a flash of genius when he hatched a plot to kill David. He offered his daughter to David, and for a dowry required 100 dead Philistines. Saul imagined that the Philistines would succeed in killing David. ¹

A rather foolish plot against a man who had an incredible track record of killing Philistines, and who had the LORD on his side.

When David came back with 200 dead Philistines and married Saul's daughter, the king saw that he would have to try more direct methods of getting rid of David.

Saul sensed that David was in an excellent position for the throne; ² he knew that David had God's blessing. He knew that God's design would come to pass, but he fought against it like a madman. David's loyalty to him was beyond question; and whenever it was shown Saul would snap out of his delirious anger and apologize to David. But Saul's repentance did not last long, and soon he was scheming to kill David again. As could be imagined, this was a most awkward position for a military official like David, so David kept himself out of Saul's way as best he could.

Jonathan was grieved that his father wanted to kill his best friend. Twice he reasoned with Saul to try to dissuade him from his murderous mania. The first time, he was successful, but on the second occasion, Saul was in such a rage that he threw a javelin at the mediator. After this, and a narrow escape from being arrested by Saul's agents, David realized that he must fly.

David was now in a strange predicament. Here he was, a great warrior, a popular hero, son-in-law to the current king, and anointed by Samuel to be the next king - but now forced to become an outlaw on the run. David spent most of his time in the deserts of his native tribe, the wilderness of Judah. But even in Judah, he was not always safe, so twice he had to go beyond the borders of Israel for safety. In both cases, he ended up in Philistia. His first reception was what could be expected. The Philistines looked with understandable suspicion on the man that had been so recently their great adversary, and they remembered the Israelite victory song about David's "ten-thousands." David realized that he was no safer in Philistia than in Israel and so went back. He avoided capture by pretending he was a maniac and getting the Philistines to drive him away. The real maniac was Saul, who abandoned the defense of Israel and chased David around the wilderness of Judah. David naturally attracted others who were on the run for some reason or another, and his band of followers must have been a motley crew.³ A warrior outlaw usually survives by raiding his neighbors and making himself a menace to law and order; he has to in order to survive. But David was in a situation where he had to live like an outlaw without preying on his neighbors. We have few details about how David was able to keep himself and his band alive, but it must have been harrowing. They were constantly on the move to keep themselves from Saul. There seemed always to be spies who were ready to betray David's whereabouts to gain Saul's favor - his 'blessed are you of the LORD for you have had compassion on me' (1 Samuel 23:21).

David's band was a warrior band, and these kinds of men usually find it a sore trial to refrain from their occupation of fighting, raiding, and plundering. David was loyal to his country, and he used his warrior band against the enemies of Israel. This defense work gave them a chance to collect spoil as in the case of Keilah (1 Samuel 23:5). During times of peace, they seemed to have offered their services as a security force, and when they were not so employed, they relied on the favors of friends (see 1 Samuel

25:6-8, 30:26). We do know that Jonathan's friendship for David was unshaken and that he even visited him in hiding (1 Samuel 23:16). It is possible that he found a way to keep his friend from starving if he reached that extremity. ⁴

At last, Israel became too dangerous for David, and he sought refuge with the Philistines once more. He was incredibly successful. He not only gained over the complete trust of a Philistine king but was given a city for him and his band. Ziklag became David's base of operations for continued raids against Israel's enemies such as the Amalekites (with the natural exception of the Philistines). He made sure to raid the enemies of his own tribe, Judah. He played the dangerous game of raiding them and claiming that it was his own tribe that he was attacking. The Philistine king was completely taken in and never doubted that he had won Israel's former hero to his side. But David was loyal to the core. He was not only loyal to his nation, but also loyal to his sovereign. Though he had a claim to the crown, his respect for the 'LORD's Anointed' was immense. To kill Saul was not an option. Better to live a dangerous life among the Philistines than slay the one whom God had once chosen (footnote interesting questions). This trial in the wilderness was leadership training for David, his wilderness education. The experience strengthened his faith in God. Several Psalms were written during this period, or were written later to express David's emotions at the time. ⁵

Saul and his 'David Hunts'

When David went on the run, Saul had a new occupation. When he was not fighting Philistines, he was ransacking the kingdom in a perpetual quest to catch David. He brooded under his favorite tree in his hometown of Gibeah, feeling very sorry for himself. He bitterly reproached his servants as lazy traitors: "For all of you have conspired against me!" He croaked "No one informs me when my own son makes an agreement with this son of Jesse! Not one of you feels sorry for me or informs me that my own son has commissioned my own servant to hide in ambush against me, as is the case today!" (1 Samuel 22:8 NET) He did, however, profusely bless those who "took compassion on him" and brought him news of David's latest hiding places, or the identity of his confederates. It is clear that Saul viewed David as a threat not only to his throne but also to his personal safety. ⁶

It was during one of Saul's "tree lectures" that one of his servants (a foreigner named Doeg) piped up. He told Saul about when David first fled, and how he had stopped by a colony of priests and had received aid from them. This event occurred when David had first gone on the run; when Israel still imagined him as Saul's right-hand man. The priest asked no more questions when David led him to believe that he was on a secret mission. He was completely shocked when Saul and Doeg came thundering up and accused him of treason. This honest priest protested his complete ignorance and innocence, but in vain. Saul was mad, he was under the influence of a David hating mania; he was unable to be reasonable or just. The priests had helped David, and therefore they must die. His soldiers balked at the idea of sacrilegious murder, so the execution was left to the unscrupulous Doeg.

After this, Saul went on another “David hunt” and chased David over the wilderness of Judah; it was during one of these chases that Saul unwittingly fell into the danger he feared.

Saul had expressed his belief that David was ambushing him and was a threat to his personal safety. While in the wilderness near Engedi, Saul went alone into a cave deep in the Judean wilderness. By doing so, he came within arms reach of David and his men (who unbeknownst to him were hiding in that very cave).

We have already seen that David was loyal to Saul, but how loyal would he be when chance placed Saul in his power? Was not Saul responsible for the death of the priests? David could kill Saul, and no one would be the wiser. But David felt that to do so was wrong - he instead saw in the opportunity a chance for reconciliation. He took an enormous risk for himself and his men when he followed Saul out of the cave and plead his innocence.⁷ Saul, struck by David’s actions, had a lucid moment. He had undeniable proof of David’s loyalty and, struck by his own failings and his injustice towards David, repented of his designs against David. He recognized that David was destined to inherit the crown. Despite this reconciliation, David still did not trust himself near Saul and continued to stay in Judah, begging food from friends and those to whom he had rendered service.

It was wise of David to stay clear of Saul, because (as David knew well), Saul was mentally imbalanced and could not be trusted. He had promised to Jonathan once before that he would not hurt David, he again said just as much outside the cave at En-Gedi. All it took were some tell-tales, who wanted to gain the king’s favor, coming to Saul and telling him that David was “hiding at such and such a place,” and his old hunting mania took hold.⁸

Again he chased David, and again David had him in his power. Again he showed Saul the facts and reasoned with him, again Saul repented and promised to do him no harm. David knew he could not trust Saul and did not feel safe in Israel. It was then that he went for the second time to Philistia, won the trust of Achish (king of Gath), and the city of Ziklag.

Saul’s Death

One day, while David was in Ziklag, he heard the news that the Philistines were planning a large attack on Israel. They were going to invade Israel’s central Jezreel valley. David and his men left and mustered themselves with the other Philistines. Achish was delighted at David’s presence, but the other Philistines were disturbed. They remembered David all too well. They remembered that it was not so very long ago that he was Israel’s chief “Philistine Killer.” They saw all too well what fantastic reconciliation opportunity it would be for David to switch sides in the upcoming battle. Achish did not believe this, but the Philistine Lords were insistent and David was sent back to Ziklag. There David and his men found a surprise - in their absence, the Amalakites had raided the place and carried off their families and belongings. This unexpected tragedy diverted the attention and energies of David and his men into rescuing their families and recovering their possessions (in which they were successful).

Meanwhile, Saul, with a heavy and apprehensive heart, was preparing to face the Philistine Invasion. This raid was going to be a large invasion - similar to the invasion he had to deal with earlier in his reign. By this time, Israel had learned not to run away at the mere sight of their opponents, but to Saul, the upcoming battle still filled him with anxiety. He became desperate to know the outcome.

He inquired of God but received no answer; he waited - still nothing. He was becoming a desperate man. If God would not answer him, someone else would. Earlier in his reign, he had followed the Law of Moses by ridding the land of witches. His enforcement had worked, and many who had practiced dark arts quit. But now Saul had been rejected by God and turned to the other side. Servants know everything, and so he asked if they knew of a witch nearby. They did - one that had been previously missed, or spared, or had quit before being caught. So in the dark of night, Saul snuck out of his camp with a few retainers in disguise. He crept like a fugitive of a spy through the darkness, past the Philistine camp to Endor.

Saul was looking for Samuel. Samuel was the one he had respected and turned to for guidance and support. Samuel was the one who knew the future. But Samuel was dead. The witch, remembering Saul's old zeal, was reluctant to practice her arts; but was at last persuaded. Samuel was disquieted and came up to deliver one last grim prophetic message. Saul had been rejected and was doomed. The coming battle with the Philistines would be his last (1 Samuel 28:15-19).

With these heavy tidings, Saul fought his last battle. He fought with the knowledge he was a doomed man; he fought a losing battle. There, on the slopes of Mount Gilboa, the first king of Israel, the young farmer who had started his so humbly, the half-crazed maniacal tyrant who had hunted down his own son-in-law, the tragic figure of a rejected, bitter man, ended it all on his sword. ⁹ His son Jonathan, as well as a few other sons, died fighting the Philistine foe.

With the death of Saul, an era had passed: now there would be a new king, a new dynasty, and the emergence of a new era.

Footnotes

1. Most commentators do not seem to deal with how effective this may or many not have been. It seems to me that Saul had ample proof of David's superiority over the Philistines, and that it was a crazed mind that thought David would be completely defeated.
2. See Coffman on 1 Samuel 18:1-12. David was popular, militarily successful, friends with Saul's heir, and wise. Saul was taking all this into account. 1 Samuel 18:1-12, 22:8
3. See Cambridge, Coffman Commentaries on 1 Samuel 22:2.
4. See Coffman on 1 Samuel 25:39 where he discusses the possibility that David inherited Nabal's property on his marriage to Abigail. If this was the case, then that would have kept David supplied during his last period of persecution from Saul.
5. See Psalm 18, 34, 52, 54, 56, 57, 63, 142. Crossway ESV Study Bible (2008) pg. 936 - Introduction to the Psalms.
6. See 1 Samuel 22:13
7. He is revealing himself to Saul after trying so hard to keep away from him.

8. We have already noted Saul's unbalanced mental state. David knows better than to trust him. 1 Samuel 24:22, 27:1
9. See Clarke on 1 Samuel 31:13. His summary of Saul's reign is well-written.

References

James Burton Coffman, "Coffman Commentaries on the Old and New Testament". Abilene Christian University Press, Abilene, Texas, USA. 1983-1999

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