

1 Samuel 14:24-52
The People Ransomed Jonathan

Introduction:

There is a strange partnership—often unnoticed but devastating in effect—that creeps into leadership, religion, and the human heart: the union of legalism and narcissism. At first, they may appear to be opposites. Legalism obsesses over rules and outward obedience; narcissism demands attention and admiration. But dig deeper and you'll find they spring from the same poisoned root: self-centeredness. One seeks to control others by rules; the other by image. Both are enemies of grace.

In today's passage, we see King Saul trapped in this double delusion. He issues a rash vow—a rule God never commanded—which leads to confusion, fear, and near disaster for his people. That's legalism: adding burdens God never required, trusting in human strictness instead of divine wisdom.

But at the same time, Saul plays the religious role, using the trappings of the priesthood—ark, altar, vows—not to seek God sincerely, but to appear righteous before others. That's narcissism: using religion to glorify oneself instead of God.

In Saul, we see what happens when a leader loses the fear of God and replaces it with the fear of man, when a heart

once small in its own eyes (1 Sam. 15:17) becomes consumed with appearing mighty. It's a warning, not just for kings, but for anyone who leads, teaches, or walks the path of faith.

So today, we ask: what does this passage show us about the danger of rule-making without mercy, of public holiness without private humility? And more importantly: how does it point us beyond Saul, to a better King—one who bore the burden of the law and the scorn of men, not to exalt Himself, but to save His people?

Context

Many Christians begin with sincere faith, but over time, humility can give way to pride. Instead of pursuing godliness, some become fixated on appearing godly—controlling others to maintain religious appearances. This is what happened to Saul.

He began well—chosen by God, gifted, humble, even filled with the Spirit. But soon the foundation of his character began to show cracks. After a military victory, he disobeyed God by offering an unlawful sacrifice, then blamed others rather than repent (1 Sam. 13). Jonathan, not Saul, struck the decisive blow against the Philistines, but Saul's pride left the victory unfinished.

In chapter 14, Saul again shows empty religion. He surrounds himself with religious symbols but doesn't truly seek the Lord. Jonathan steps out in bold faith, trusting God to save "by many or by few." Meanwhile, Saul numbers his troops—trusting in man, not God.

Trying to cloak his unbelief, Saul calls for the priest, only to cut him off when the battle turns. He wants the appearance of faith, not its reality. Though God saves Israel, Saul still manages to taint the victory with his pride and folly, by distressing the people with a foolish oath.

Saul Troubles the Land

²⁴ And the men of Israel were distressed that day, for Saul had placed the people under oath, saying, "Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies." So none of the people tasted food.

Instead of delivering His men from the Philistines, Saul oppressed them, like when Pharaoh forced Israel to bake bricks without straw. He demanded the people make the same amount of bricks but without the proper resources to do so. Similarly, Saul demanded the people fight against the Philistines and chase them all over the land without giving them the proper resources to do so, namely food.

Saul is unnecessarily burdening his own people, oppressing his own men, when he should be oppressing the enemy. The whole purpose of the oath to not eat on the day of battle, was so that Saul may take vengeance on his enemies.

He is caught up so much in the glory of his own name, that he looks to those closest to him as a hindrance to victory, when it is his own foolish actions which prevent him from winning.

Kings are to be like fathers to their people, and fathers are not to exasperate their children, but they are to bring them up in the fear of the Lord. But Saul is like the man who beats his children and says, “the beatings will continue until morale improves.”

Now God is so kind as to give Israel a land that flowed with milk and honey. The bees’ nests in the trees are so abundant that honey is literally dripping from the trees to the ground. All the men look longingly at the honey but refuse to eat of it. But Jonathan did not hear Saul’s oath, so he dipped the tip of his staff into the honey on the ground and ate some of it, and his eyes lit up. Jonathan got a sugar rush from the honey.

²⁸ Then one of the people said, “Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, ‘Cursed is the man who eats food this day.’ ” And the people were faint.

²⁹ But Jonathan said, “My father has troubled the land. Look now, how my countenance has brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. ³⁰ How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now would there not have been a much greater slaughter among the Philistines?”

He says, “My father has troubled the land.” This is the kind of trouble that Achan brought upon Israel in Joshua 7 when they were defeated at the battle of Ai. Remember, Achan took the Babylonian garment, and silver and gold, instead of fully devoting it to the Lord. Achan’s sin of greed revealed his heart was not wholly dedicated to the LORD, but was concerned chiefly with himself. And as a result of this sin Israel lost the battle that day.

Jonathan recognizes this, saying, “³⁰ How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now would there not have been a much greater slaughter among the Philistines?”

Similarly this trouble is connected to Jephthah’s foolish vow he made in Judges 11. Consumed with desires for his

own dynasty, his rash vow resulted in him giving up his own daughter, putting an end to his dynastic aspirations. We have already been told that Saul's kingdom would not continue, but in order to keep his foolish vow he is ready kill his own son. Saul is a great troubler of Israel, and his sins are going to burden and oppress the people, preventing them from accomplishing real victory.

Dealing Treacherously

³¹ Now they had driven back the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. So the people were very faint. ³² And the people rushed on the spoil, and took sheep, oxen, and calves, and slaughtered them on the ground; and the people ate them with the blood. ³³ Then they told Saul, saying, "Look, the people are sinning against the Lord by eating with the blood!"

So he said, "You have dealt treacherously; roll a large stone to me this day." ³⁴ Then Saul said, "Disperse yourselves among the people, and say to them, 'Bring me here every man's ox and every man's sheep, slaughter them here, and eat; and do not sin against the Lord by eating with the blood.' " So every one of the people brought his ox with him that night, and slaughtered it there. ³⁵ Then Saul built an altar to the Lord. This was the first altar that he built to the Lord.

The enforcement of Saul's man-made restriction pushed the people to break God's restriction.

Which is what happens when the doctrines of men replace the commandments of God. When our man-made rules are overly harsh and oppressive, it does not lead to more righteousness, it leads to greater rebellion.

Parents need to remember this. We have to use wisdom when making rules for our homes. And many times foolish parents will make harsh rules, or give harsh punishments for petty infractions. They do this is because they think it is their responsibility to produce proper outcomes in their children's lives. And so they become oppressive and burdensome. But as the children naturally begin to resist this foolish way of parenting, and often times they do so by swinging much further in the other direction into greater sin.

It is foolish parents who burden and exasperate their children by replacing the weightier matters of the law with their silly peccadillos. And then when the children rebel, the parents, unable to accept that their foolish rules were to blame for why their children rebel, end up doubling down harder on their children, blaming them, saying, "You are conspiring against me to make me look bad."

This is exactly what Saul does: Instead of taking responsibility for his foolish oath, he accuses the people of **treachery**, as though they have conspired against him—sabotaged his success. But it was his own foolish oath that created the problem in the first place.

It's like the meme of the man who jams a stick into his own bicycle spokes, falls over, and blames someone else. “Why would they do this to me!?” That's Saul. He makes a rash vow, provokes the people to sin, then accuses them of undermining his leadership. There are parents like that.

So Saul rolls a large stone over and commands the people to slaughter the animals properly. The stone was so the animals could be elevated off the ground and the blood could properly drain.

Then he builds an altar to the LORD, presumably so the meat could be cooked. This is the first altar he ever built, and it's not for repentance, or for worship. It's damage control. It's for public image. He's not owning his sin; he's covering it up with religious theater.

Saul is the kind of guy that creates the problem, blames others for his problem, offers a solution to fix it, but only so he can still look good, without ever taking responsibility for the problem. Saul builds an altar so he can manage the

consequences of sin for his benefit, not so he can repent for it.

Silence from the LORD

Now that his men have eaten, Saul says, “*Let us go down after the Philistines by night, and plunder them until the morning light; and let us not leave a man of them.*”

And the people, respond, saying: “*Do whatever seems good to you.*” At this point Saul has lost the men’s heart, and they are like the kids who say, “Whatever” to what their Dad says.

But Ahijah the Priest has to play the role of mother here, and says, “*Let us draw near to God here.*” “Let’s pray about it.”

So Saul says, fine. Saul is impulsive for glory, but he also wants to be well esteemed in the eyes of the people.

Drawing near to God will help with that. Having the priest with the Ephod with him, and by building an altar, and calling on the LORD before making a decision to go into battle will create a good Public Relations image, especially after burdening the people with that foolish oath. It will show the men that he is a king who seeks the LORD.

But while Saul draws near to God with his lips, his heart is far from him. And because Saul's heart is far from God, God's lips are far from Saul.

³⁷ So Saul asked counsel of God, “Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will You deliver them into the hand of Israel?” But He did not answer him that day.

With all that hypocrisy, is it any wonder that God was silent?

Let this be a sobering warning to us all. You cannot live like Saul and expect God to speak to You. You cannot neglect the Word of God, blatantly break His commandments, refuse to repent and take responsibility for your sins, burden others with extra biblical man-made foolish laws, then blame others for the problems who created, all while still trying to put on a fake religious front, and actually expect God to speak to you when you finally decide you want something.

I've met men who insisted they were always in the right, they did what was honorable in the sight of God, cared so much about godliness, tried to instruct their children, but their children are miserable, the wife is a complete mess, in total depression. And when you talk to the kids, they all universally say, "Its Dad." And when confronted, Dad has

excuses and piles up the reasons why everything he does good and right. All the while the kids are running away from home, doing drugs, going to jail. And every single one of them says, “My dad is oppressive.” This is Saul.

The People Ransom Jonathan

Saul, being the narcissist he is, figures that God isn’t answering him because of someone else’s sin. So once he finds out who it is then God will give him his answer of whether or not he can go fight the Philistines and get his glory.

So lots are drawn and it was determined that Jonathan was the one who sinned against Saul’s made-up law. And Jonathan stands ready to die, and Saul stands ready to kill his own son.

⁴³ Then Saul said to Jonathan, “Tell me what you have done.”

And Jonathan told him, and said, “I only tasted a little honey with the end of the rod that was in my hand. So now I must die!”

⁴⁴ Saul answered, “God do so and more also; for you shall surely die, Jonathan.”

In other words, “May God kill me, and more also if I do not put you to death today, Jonathan.”

Notice what is going on here. Saul is extremely zealous to bind heavy burdens on the people. He wants to uphold the harshest consequence for the violation of a man-made law about not eating food on the day of battle, but he doesn't see the great injustice that he is about to perpetuate as he stands ready to murder his own son. And he does this to preserve his image and maintain his glory and honor before the people.

Does this sound familiar? This is exactly how the Pharisees treated Jesus. They bind heavy burdens on the people, they strain out gnats and swallow camels, and they obsess about their appearance, and focus on small things that do not matter while completely rejecting the weightier matters of the law. And because Jesus pointed all these things out, they sought to kill him.

And Jonathan, like Jesus, stands ready to die. He doesn't make excuses, he accepts responsibility, unlike his father, and shows himself to be a better man than his father.

⁴⁵But the people said to Saul, “Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great deliverance in Israel? Certainly not! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.” So the people rescued Jonathan, and he did not die.

This is a clear example of the doctrine of the lesser magistrate, which teaches that when a higher authority issues an unlawful or tyrannical command, a lower authority—or even the people collectively—have not only the right but the duty to resist, in order to uphold God's law and protect the innocent.

Jonathan had broken no divine command. Saul's oath was man-made, unjust, oppressive, brought trouble on the land, and was contrary to God's righteousness, preventing the people from fulfilling God's victory. The people saw this stood between Jonathan and Saul's sword. That is interposition.

This moment reminds us that human authority is not absolute. All authority is delegated by God and must submit to His law. When rulers, kings, governors, presidents, fathers, violate that law, it is the duty of lower magistrates, or mothers, or the people—to uphold justice, even by resisting unjust commands.

This truth is especially vital today, in an age of centralized power and moral confusion. Christianity does not teach blind submission to tyranny—it teaches obedience to God above man (Acts 5:29) and the defense of the innocent and the oppressor. As John Knox put it, “Resistance to tyrants is

obedience to God.” And that’s exactly what the people did for Jonathan.

Saul, consumed with preserving his own glory, and not God’s glory, abandoned the pursuit of the Philistines, allowing the enemy to escape. God’s victory was once again cut short—sabotaged by the foolishness, pride, and misplaced priorities of a man who feared dishonor more than disobedience.

The End of Saul’s Reign, at the Beginning

Then the chapter concludes with a recount of Saul’s life, Saul waged continual warfare against Israel’s enemies—Moab, Ammon, Edom, Zobah, the Philistines, and the Amalekites—delivering Israel from plunderers. The text also provides a brief account of Saul’s family and key officials, including his sons (notably Jonathan), daughters, wife, and his military commander Abner.

Despite his early military success, Saul’s reign was marked by ongoing conflict, but never complete deliverance, especially with the Philistines. Saul also conscripted strong and valiant men into his service, as Samuel had warned he would do, showing that, while Saul started off good, his desire for glory brought him to be everything Samuel warned about.

It's interesting that this passage is placed here at this part in Saul's story. Usually sections like this are reserved for the end of a king's reign. But by placing this information here, the author is effectively saying, "it's over for Saul."

What we can learn from this final section is this – Saul was relatively successful. He was a mighty man. He fought well, securing many victories for Israel. And he had an important and prominent family in the government of the nation.

But despite all his victories, and despite the prominent family, despite all the natural talent in the world, Saul lacked one thing – He lacked the true worship of the Lord, because Saul was a man who was full of himself and infatuated with his own glory, and this is what led to his downfall.

Let that be a warning to us all as well. We can have all kinds of natural abilities, money, family, business, success, but at the end of the day, if your heart is far God, because your heart is way too full of yourself, your life is effectively over.

The only purpose of your existence is to make room for someone better than you to come onto the stage. You exist

only as a negative example of what not to do. Don't let that be you.

Summary

Saul's life is a warning. Driven by pride, insecurity, and the need for approval, he made spiritual decisions to serve himself, burdened others without mercy, and saw even his own son as a threat to his glory. You could say Saul was a spiritual narcissist.

Don't follow in his footsteps. Don't burden your family with rash rules, harsh discipline, or false accusations. Don't let your pride turn minor faults into major battles. Instead, show mercy. Let love cover a multitude of sins.

Only Christ, the true King, can save us from the Saul within.

Where Saul demanded honor, Christ emptied Himself of glory.

Where Saul shifted blame, Christ bore our blame.

Where Saul used religion for ego, Christ fulfilled the law in humility.

Where Saul led others into sin, Christ leads us in righteousness.

Where Saul burdened his men, Christ lifts our burdens.

Where Saul starved his soldiers, Christ feeds His people with His body and blood.

Like Jonathan, Jesus stood ready to die for sins He did not commit.

Jonathan was spared by the people; Jesus was not. He died to spare us.

He bore the full weight of sin to free us from shame, pride, and self-glory.

In the end, Saul's legacy is one of pride and ruin. But Christ offers a better way—a path of humility, selflessness, and true obedience.

Let us follow Him, not seeking to appear godly, but to be godly—living for His glory, not our own.