

## **“The Broken King”**

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)  
Continuing a series *A King for God’s People*

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 15 (selections)

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I don’t know what to do with Saul. Or, what God was doing with him.

This whole “kingship” idea was new. A king was something everyone else had. Now Israel had one too. God had been cold to the idea from the beginning. God’s prophet and priest, Samuel, spoke strongly against it. In the end, though, and somewhat surprisingly, God let them have a king.

And God picked their king for them. Saul! God brought Saul to Samuel so Samuel could anoint him. God gave signs to confirm Saul. God’s Spirit filled Saul. God gave a new heart to Saul. Before the nation, God’s servant Samuel proclaimed Saul their new king.<sup>1</sup>

Saul built a strong team.<sup>2</sup> He defeated brutal enemies.<sup>3</sup> He was merciful to his critics.<sup>4</sup>

Above all, he looked the king part: tall and very handsome.

So what broke Saul?

It started with the Philistines. They were strong and superior.<sup>5</sup> Saul’s soldiers were nervous. Seven days of waiting made it worse. They were waiting for Samuel to come, because this was an army needing blessing. But no Samuel. Eventually, reluctantly, Saul took the initiative and led the worship himself. Of course, that’s right when Samuel finally showed. He was steamed. Saul was king and commander, but he was no priest! Looks like he was grabbing more power. Or, was he just doing his best in a tough situation? (And where had Samuel been, anyway?)<sup>6</sup> Taking Saul aside, Samuel declared his days were numbered. God would be finding a new king.

Still, Saul soldiered on. He fought the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edmonites, the Zobahites and the Philistines.<sup>7</sup> That’s what the king was supposed to do.

Was he supposed to break too?

### II

Saul’s story continues. The big threat against Israel was from the Philistines in the west. But God turned their attention south. They had unfinished business, the Amalekites. It was

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<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 10:1-25.

<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 10:26.

<sup>3</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 11:1-11.

<sup>4</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 11:12-13 (see 10:27).

<sup>5</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 13:19-22.

<sup>6</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 13:1-14.

<sup>7</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 14:47.

a bitterness birthed back when Israel was escaping Egypt after the Exodus. The Amalekites attacked, unprovoked. The runaway slaves barely escaped. Generations after, their anger simmered. God's did too.<sup>8</sup>

Samuel said to Saul, *"I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel. Listen obedieintly 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.'"*

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 15.1-3

New International Version (alt)

The Bible smacks us hard. Yes, that's how wars were done (still are). Yes, those Amalekites would have done the same to Israel, given the chance. But, aren't God's People supposed to be different? Isn't God supposed to call us to live different? We are murderous. We don't need God's blessing on it! Or, did they get God wrong? I've preached on this sort of thing before, and I still don't know what to do with it.<sup>9</sup>

Anyhow, Saul's army attacks the Amalekites, crushing them. But, instead of killing them all, they capture the Amalakite king. And instead of destroying it all, they keep the best of the Amalakite livestock. Samuel confronts Saul.

Samuel said [to Saul], *"Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out.' Why did you not listen obedieintly to the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?"*

*"But I did listen obedieintly to the Lord,"* Saul said. *"I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal."*

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 15.17-21

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<sup>8</sup> See Exodus 17:8-16 and Deuteronomy 25:17-19. In subsequent Jewish thinking, the Amalekites became rhetorically representative of enemies of the Jewish people (and sometimes fellow Jews!). See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amalek#Judaic\\_views\\_of\\_the\\_Amalekites](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amalek#Judaic_views_of_the_Amalekites)

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, my sermon "Snapshots of Jericho" (November 4, 2012) and my January-February 2013 series on Christian approaches to violence and discipleship.

So, Saul did not keep the Amalakite king alive out of mercy. Nor did they keep the best livestock alive because of greed. They were just saving them for later, a glorious sacrifice to God!

But Samuel replied:

*“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices  
as much as in listening obediently to the Lord?  
To listen obediently is better than sacrifice,  
and to hear is better than the fat of rams.  
For rebellion is like the sin of the occult,  
and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.  
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,  
he has rejected you as king.”*

1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 15.22-23

Rebellion. Sin. Arrogance. Idolatry. Saul rejected God (but did he mean to?).

God rejects Saul.<sup>10</sup>

### III

What do we do with Saul?

He is tragic.<sup>11</sup> Apart from height and good looks, what did he have going for him? <sup>12</sup>(I bet he had nice hair too.) Saul got a job he wasn't looking for.<sup>13</sup> Called in front of the crowds, he preferred to hide.<sup>14</sup> He fancied farming over fighting.<sup>15</sup> He carried immense responsibilities under huge pressure. Did he try his best?

No, he should not have taken Samuel's place when the priest was late; the danger of a king taking all power to himself was too great. (By the way, if I'm late, please jump in!) Yes, he should have followed God's instructions to the letter and destroyed all the Amalakites. (Though I hope I would not have killed any.)

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<sup>10</sup> I've adapted this from the NIV. I used "listen obediently" to translate *shēma*, and "hear" to translated *qâshab*. Also, in v. 23 I translated *qesem*, usually rendered "divination" as "occult", following Eugene Peterson's word choice in *The Message*.

<sup>11</sup> "Saul has often been described as the nearest thing to a tragic figure in the Bible." John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology volume I: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 582.

<sup>12</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 10:23-24.

<sup>13</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 9:3-10:1. Samuel first found Saul when the young man was out looking, not for a royal crown, but a missing donkey . . . though maybe the two aren't that different.

<sup>14</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 10:22.

<sup>15</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 11:5.

Mistakes. But compared with what the next king, David, would end up doing. . . .<sup>16</sup>

Saul got the sack. More like a postdated pink-slip; he remained king for a long time, and crumbled as a person.

What was God doing with him?

I have to think Saul is a set-up for the next king, David. Saul will be the obstacle David needs to overcome, the opponent David must defeat (while staying on his side), the enemy David must usurp (while always loving and honouring him). God will build David up, by tearing Saul down. David will rise, and Saul will break. That's how the story works.

What did Saul think of this role he was cast in? Did God ask him? Did it matter?<sup>17</sup>

#### IV

I asked this on Google: *What is God's purpose for my life?* Got 34 million answers. How many do you think would fit the trajectory of Saul's life? No, we can aim high, be all we can be, achieve anything we want to. Our lives get weighed on the scales of individual achievement and fulfillment.<sup>18</sup>

So . . . what if I do not achieve . . . I am not the hero . . . my dreams do not come true? What about when disappointment is my diagnosis . . . and I finish fourth, just out of the medals? What then?

What if that is God's purpose for my life? Would I be okay with that?

What if in the school play, I'm the kid cast as a rock? Or, cast as Saul?

We don't get to write the script. Will we trust the Writer?

The Apostle Paul wrestled with this. He was struggling with how what he was experiencing

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<sup>16</sup> "Saul's acts involve going against God's word or Samuel's or his own, but doing so in circumstances that put him under huge pressures and in contexts where his mistakes might seem excusable. The story has a hard time demonstrating that Saul is at fault and an even harder time demonstrating that the magnitude of the wrongdoing justifies the magnitude of the price he pays. This question seems all the more pressing when we reconsider his story after reading David's, for Saul never commits acts as grotesquely wrong as David's sin against Bathsheba and Uriah, with its horrendous consequences for his family and his people." Goldingay, 583.

<sup>17</sup> "Saul's story raises questions about Yhwh's deals with Saul, which have some parallels with the story of Job, but it no more answers them than Yhwh answer's Job's questions. This does not mean that there are no answers. It means that the answers are between Saul and Yhwh, and we have no alternative but to leave them there." Goldingay, 587.

<sup>18</sup> "Postmodern readers are inclined to reckon that paramount importance attaches to the individual's rights and destiny, but in the First Testament the individual is part of a people and part of humanity as a whole, and human beings are part of a larger picture comprising reality as a whole." Goldingay, 585.

had anything to do with the promises of God. Listen to his realization (it's a paraphrase).

*Do you for one moment suppose any of us knows enough to call God into question? Clay doesn't talk back to the fingers that mold it, saying, "Why did you shape me like this?" Isn't it obvious that a potter has a perfect right to shape one lump of clay into a vase for holding flowers and another into a pot for cooking beans?<sup>19</sup>*

Many of us hold beans.

*"He's got the whole world in His hands!"* Do I trust those Hands? Trust them knowing that in God's unfolding, glorious, wise and gracious salvation drama, for the sake of the whole world, for the sake of my neighbours, for my sake . . . my part will most likely be small and unspectacular, barely noticed, even disreputable and disappointing.

Will I trust myself to Jesus . . . who in a garden of tears, cried out: *"Abba, Father . . . take this suffering away from me . . . but not what I want, what you want."*<sup>20</sup>

Jesus, perfectly righteous and gloriously obedient, surpassingly humble and confidently self-possessed, gave himself to humiliation and agony, shame and defeat. He was broken. He trusted, all the way to his cross. That was his part.

He holds you in his nail-scared, resurrected hands. Can his victory be your only victory? His atonement, your only assurance? His wisdom, your greatest delight? His faithfulness, your faith?

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<sup>19</sup> Romans 9:20-21 from *The Message*. I expect Paul had in his mind Jeremiah 18:1-10.

<sup>20</sup> My paraphrase of Mark 14:36.