

1 Samuel 13

Spotting the similarity

Friends, I want you to know that I'm not a great fan of quizzes.

I'm particularly not a great fan of quizzes that rely too much on speed such as the quiz we had at the recent Launch camp.

You see, I'm not a particularly quick thinker.

I need time to mull things over; time to think quietly by myself; time away from hectic competition.

Having said this, I'm going to offer my own quiz today.

What's more, I'm going to offer a prize to the winner.

[Get out block of chocolate and place it on lectern/table.]

So, let me tell you the rules.

I'm going to start this talk by telling you two stories – one from the Old Testament and one from the New.

We are then going to take a look at 1 Samuel 13.

And toward the end of the talk, I'm going to ask you to identify two similarities that are common to each of the three stories.

The first person to get the two similarities gets the prize.

The first story comes from the book of Joshua.

In Joshua 6 the people of God engage in their first great battle in conquering the promised land.

They are spectacularly successful in conquering the city of Jericho.

Buoyed on by their success, they march against the city of Ai.

But they are defeated.

And Israel is demoralised.

They take the issue to God and the Lord tells them that it is because someone has broken the stipulations of holy war.

Someone in Israel took some booty from Jericho that should have been devoted to the ban.

And so Joshua begins to search for the culprit.

And eventually the guilty person is found – Achan, the son of Carmi, of the tribe of Judah.

He acknowledges his sin.

And Joshua and all Israel take Achan and the booty and his sons and his daughters and all his property.

They bring them to the valley of Achor.

They stone them to death, burn them with fire, and raise over them a great heap of stones as a continual reminder.

This is the first story.

The second story is from Acts 5.

One of the things that was practised by members of the early church was common ownership of property.

In one particular case, Barnabas sold a field that belonged to him and publicly brought the proceeds to the apostles.

In chapter 5, Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sell a piece of property and Anania publicly bring the proceeds to the apostles.

However, they secretly hold some of the money back.

Peter spots what is going on and confronts Ananias.

He accuses him of lying to God.

And Ananias down and dies.

Three hours later, Sapphira comes before the apostles.

She is questioned by Peter.

She is accused of having put God to the test.

She too falls down dead.

And great fear seizes the whole church.

So, there are the first two stories.

Now let's take a look at 1 Samuel 13.

The context of 1 Samuel 13

The first thing I want to do is to set the context for 1 Samuel 13.

In my view, there are at least three passages that stand as background to this chapter.

Chapter 2

The first passage is 1 Samuel 2.

Please look it up in your Bibles.

1 Samuel 2 contains the song of Hannah.

And in her song, Hannah rejoices in God's answer to her prayer.

He has looked at her lowly position and acted with great and surprising grace.

He is a God who turns the tables.

He exalts the humble and demolishes the proud.

And 1 Samuel 2:9 makes the principle clear – it is not by might that a person will prevail.

1 Samuel 2:10 goes on to apply this principle to kingship.

It is not by might that kings will prevail.

Rather, God will give strength to his king.

He will exalt the power of his anointed.

Chapter 10

The second passage is 1 Samuel 10.

Again, please look it up in your Bibles.

1 Samuel 9 and 10 records the first encounter between Saul and Samuel.

And in the first few verses of 1 Samuel 10, Samuel anoints Saul.

That is, he makes him king.

He makes him the anointed referred to in 1 Samuel 2.

Samuel then goes on to list a number of signs to validate this kingship.

And at the end of this list there is an enigmatic statement about Gilgal.

Take a look at it in verse 8.

Samuel says:

⁸And you shall go down to Gilgal ahead of me; then I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do."

Now we don't know whether Samuel is referring to a specific event or to a general principle.

What we do know is that there is no story of this happening between this verse and chapter 13.

Chapter 12

The third background passage is 1 Samuel 12, which we looked at last week.

A new phase is inaugurated in the life of God's people.

1 Samuel 12 tells us about the formal inclusion of kingship into Israel's relationship with God.

And there are two particular things that we are told about the rules of engagement in that relationship.

First, it is clear that kingship is to be subject to prophecy and not the reverse.

Second, it is clear that kings are to be subject to the same covenant boundaries as the people.

Verse 24 makes this clear.

Both the people and the king are to fear the Lord.

They are to serve him faithfully with all their heart.

They are to avoid wickedness.

And if they do not do these things, they will be swept away.

The events of 1 Samuel 13

1 Samuel 13-14

With these passages in mind as background, let's turn to 1 Samuel 13.

1 Samuel 13 and 14 are part of a single unit.

This unit begins with an announcement of the regnal years of Saul.

It concludes with some genealogical information about Saul at the end of chapter 14.

The Philistines

The story is about war with the Philistines.

And it is the fear of the Philistines that lay at the base of the request for a king.

In one sense, kingship was requested to deal with the Philistine threat.

Now in this chapter we learn quite a bit about the Philistines.

For example, verse 3 tells us that the Philistines had already established a dominant presence within Israelite territory.

They had garrisons or prefects within the land of Israel.

Verses 2, 5 and 6 tell us that they were dominant militarily.

Israel has three thousand warriors.

But the Philistines have thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops like the sand of seashore in multitude.

They are overwhelmingly dominant in terms of their military resources.

And the Israelites are full of fear and distress.

The Philistines were also dominant in terms of technology and equipment.

Take a look at verses 19ff.

It is clear from these verses that Israel was still in the bronze age while the Philistines had entered the iron age.

Like the nations who have atomic weaponry today, the Philistines had the edge.

They not only had the weapons themselves, but they also kept tabs on the technological expertise.

They kept hold of the blacksmiths.

If Israelites wanted any iron implements, they were dependent upon Philistine blacksmiths.

And the Philistine blacksmiths would not produce weapons for the people of Israel.

So at every point the Philistines were an overwhelmingly dominant nation.

Israel had every reason to fear their continued existence.

What happens

So, let's see what happens.

In verses 3 Jonathan has a victory over the Philistines at Geba.

The Philistines hear of it, which probably means that they can be expected to respond to it.

The Israelites hear of it, although it is credited to Saul and not his son.

The Israelites are mustered.

The superior forces of the Philistines are mustered.

And in verses 6 and 7 we are told that Israel melts away in fear.

In verse 8 we are told that Saul waits for Samuel in Gilgal.

It is unclear whether the full seven days had expired or not but Saul acts by offering burn offering and offerings of well-being.

No sooner has he finished than Samuel turns up and quizzes Saul as to his actions.

Saul gives his defense.

But Samuel is not satisfied and announces that God will take away the kingship from him and give it to a person after his own heart, which means a person of his own choice.

In verse 15 Samuel leaves in one direction and Saul and his people go off in another.

Verse 16 tells us that by this stage Saul's forces have been severely depleted.

They are without God's prophet.

They are without the endorsement of God's prophet.

And they are surrounded by superior forces.

This state of affairs must have deeply affected Saul.

As the following chapters will show, he is a man increasingly isolated and unpredictable.

The glowing prospects of chapters 9 to 11 are gone and Saul and Israel are left desolate.

The critical verses

Now it is clear from this brief summary that the critical verses of this chapter are verses 8 to 15.

Let's take a look at them in detail.

What Saul says

First, let's look at what Saul says after he is confronted by Samuel.

Look at his defence in verse 11.

Saul tells us what he saw.

He saw the desertions.

He saw Samuel's absence.

And he saw the approaching Philistine threat at Michmash.

Saul tells us what he said to himself.

He told himself that the Philistines would surely come.

And he told himself that he had not sought God's favour.

Lastly, Saul told us what he did.

He forced himself and offered the burnt offering.¹

It is clear from this speech that Saul has nothing to hide.

It is clear and complete.

He has been a realistic general who has weighed up the situation and then made a decision based on the facts.

What Samuel says

In verse 13 Samuel responds.

He doesn't dispute Saul's assessment of the situation.

He does not counter Saul's argument.

And he doesn't explain his delay.

Samuel then goes on to spell out the ramifications.

He makes it clear that there could have been an alternative.

Without this action, God would have established Saul's kingdom.

But now it would not continue.

Saul would be replaced by a man after God's own heart, a man of God's choice.

What's going on?

So, there is the detail of what is said.

But let's now ask ourselves what is going on here.

And the most important thing to notice is what is actually said.

We may not understand the details...

We may not understand exactly how the seven days work out...

¹ NB – for commentary: is there any significance that there is no mention of the well being offering?

We may not understand the link between this chapter and 1 Samuel 10:8...

Samuel is clear that Saul has not done what the Lord commanded him.

This is the first point I want to make and it is clear in verse 14.

Saul was appointed king.

Chapter 12 clearly indicated that kings were not exempt from the Lord's commandments.

And Saul has not kept the Lord's commandment.

He has not led the people of God in the most foundational way.

He has not been an example of obedience to God's will.

He has not lived under God's law.

We cannot escape what is being said here.

This is Saul's foolishness.

A fool is someone who does not live according to God's will.

The second thing that I want you to notice is that Saul fails to submit his kingship to prophetic advice.

It is clear that Saul wants Samuel's input.

He seeks Samuel's counsel.

But he is not willing to submit to what he hears.

Again, he fails the stipulations spelt out in 1 Samuel 12.

The third thing that I want you to notice is where the weight of Saul's speech lies.

He looks at what he sees.

He reflects on what that means.

And his actions in sacrificing almost seem an afterthought.

You can't help wondering if Saul has things back to front.

You can't help wondering if he thinks that his kingship can prevail on its own or by its own power.

In other words, it may be that Saul has forgotten what Hannah realised – that it is not by might that kings will prevail.

Rather, God will give strength to his king.

He will exalt the power of his anointed.

Lastly, I want to say that I don't think that the issue here is that Saul offers sacrifices.

After all, both David and Solomon after him offer sacrifices and it seems okay.

What's more, Saul himself appears to be commended for offering sacrifices a chapter or two later.

No, I think that the issue here is twofold.

Saul has not led the people in keeping God's commands.

And Saul has not sought to rely primarily on God.

Achan, Ananias/Sapphira, and Saul

So, there we have the story of 1 Samuel 13.

Now what I want to do is to return to the stories of Achan, Ananias and Sapphira, and this story.

I wonder if you have spotted the similarities between the stories.

[Get suggestions from congregation.]

In my own view, the similarities between the three stories are as follows:

- Each of the stories occurs at the beginning of a new stage in the history of God's people.
- Each of the stories recounts a sin that is committed by others afterward.
- Each of the stories recounts a punishment that seems to be more severe than that meted out on similar offences subsequently committed.

It is this last statement that I want you to think about.

You see, my own view is that we look at these incidents and think to ourselves that God is being a bit tough.

We wonder about the severity of his judgment.

And in doing this, we weigh up God's action and implicitly condemn him for his holiness.

We wonder at his aggressive response to human sinfulness.

And yet, I wonder if these incidents are deliberately placed here by God to show us what God is actually like.

You see, each of these events occur at the beginning of a new stage in the history of God's people.

Each of these events show that as God works out his purposes, he works them out with sinful people.

And these sinful people are exactly that – sinful.

And sinful people deserve judgment.

If God is truly holy, then he must punish sin.

So these events are to be salutary reminders to us as God pushes toward his future.

They are to remind us that God is holy.

And as we read on after these stories, we are not to forget them.

For the subsequent history of God's people will show a great contrast to these stories.

They will show that although God is holy, he is the Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, abounding in love and faithfulness.

Can you see what I'm saying?

I'm saying that when we read of these stories we should say to ourselves,

'This is the nature of God.

'Here is a God who is holy.

'Here is a God who hates sin.

'And here are people that are acting just like I would.

'And therefore the punishment that they receive is what I deserve as well.

'However, God has not acted in this way toward me.

'He has not given me as I deserve.

'So, how should I respond?

'I should respond in thanks and joy for his generosity.

'For without the grace and generosity of God toward me, I deserve this.

'There but for the grace of God go I.'

Can you see the difference in approach?

The first approach to such passages is to condemn God for his holiness.

It is to find fault with God for hating sin.

But the second approach is to commend God for his mercy.

It is to realise that left to our own devices we stand under the fierce judgment of God.

This is part of what Paul is saying in Romans 9.

As he reflects on the elective choices of God he refuses to be driven to condemn God for his judgment.

Rather, he wants to be left glorying in the God who has mercy.

Friends, as we read these stories of God's judgment, let's read them rightly.

Let's not stand in moral or spiritual superiority over the Saul's of this world.

For we are made of the same stuff.

But God has had mercy on us.

We have not prevailed because of our own strength or our own obedience.

We cannot boast.

If we are the friends of God then it is because God has made us that.

If we are people of God's own choice then it is because God has made us that.

Let not the wise boast in their wisdom.

Do not let the might boast in their might.

Do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth.

But let those who boast boast in this, that they know the Lord who acts with steadfast love. (adapted from Jeremiah 9:23-24).

