

FASCINATING STORIES OF FORGOTTEN LIVES

STUDY SEVEN

Saul: The King Who Refused to Bow

1 Samuel 13–15

To assume that you will end strong because you have begun strong is foolish. These five words would fit the tombstone of Saul: “I have played the fool.”

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll



To deepen your study, scan to listen.

PERHAPS you’ve enjoyed the pomp and circumstance. Flowing, color-trimmed gowns, mortarboards angled with precision, tassels itching to be flipped, smiling faces, waves to family and friends.

Commencement.

Graduating from school is a rite of passage and a time to dream big. The possibilities are limitless! Representing the graduating class is the valedictorian, who is also the student council president and the debate-team captain. He or she strides to the podium with confidence to deliver a rousing speech. This person embodies the school’s ideals and the other students’ aspirations—the one they voted “most likely to succeed.”

People like this seem to have a head start on the road to success. Multitalented, shining with self-assurance and with unmatched potential, they launch into life on an upward trajectory. But will reality match their expectations as the years go by?

When these same graduates gather for their twenty-year reunion, what will they discover? Sometimes, to everyone’s surprise, the “most-likely” classmates peak and plummet, and the “least-likely” achieve their dreams. How does this happen?



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More than talent and appearance, our character, hard work, and wise habits inevitably shape our lives. If not guided by biblical principles, even the most gifted can sink under the weight of his or her own vices.

Starting out with great natural abilities and even God’s approval, King Saul climbed high with remarkable speed and grace. Then, while balancing so gingerly on the pinnacle of success, the man most likely to succeed toppled . . . and down he fell. What happened to Saul? Let’s discover his flaws and learn how to avoid them in this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful,” wrote Paul (2 Timothy 4:7). As you study Saul’s life, keep Paul’s example in mind as a guide. In the space below, invite the Holy Spirit to empower you to cultivate a lifetime of Paul-like faithfulness to God.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

To appreciate the account of King Saul, including his rapid ascendancy and tragic fall, let’s first consider Israel’s historical setting and cultural context.

Unlike the surrounding nations, the nation of Israel was a theocracy—God was king. He ruled through prophets, priests, and judges who taught His ways. Samuel was the last judge. Now that Samuel was aging and his scandalously corrupt sons were unfit to lead, the people shouted to Samuel, “Give us a king to judge us like all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:5).

What did the Lord say to the people’s request, according to *1 Samuel 8:6–9*?

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What warnings did Samuel give in *1 Samuel 8:10–20*? How many times do you read a variation of the phrase, “he [the king] will take”? What does that tell you about the character of the king they demanded? What attitude did the people’s response reveal?

The people wanted a king, so God assented and gave them Saul.



Observation: A Rising Star . . . A Falling Star

In observation, read the passage once to overview it and then again as you answer the questions below. Pay special attention to words that repeat for emphasis and phrases that stand out.¹

A Modest Man Anointed King—1 Samuel 9–10

Read *1 Samuel 9:1–2, 16, 21; 10:1, 6–7, 17–24*. According to 9:1–2, why might the nation have been impressed with Saul? How are Saul’s personal qualities reflected in today’s cultural values?

While Saul appeared modest, even reluctant, he accepted God’s calling on his life. How did Samuel’s prophetic words in 10:1, 6–7 indicate that Saul was God’s chosen man?

In 10:17–19, what reminder and rebuke did the Lord give the people through Samuel? What impression about Saul do you get from his actions and appearance in 10:20–24?

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A Flawed Man on the Throne—1 Samuel 13–15

Saul appeared strong and capable, but his reactions to tight situations soon revealed the cracks in his character.

Impatient Offering

Read *1 Samuel 13:1–4, 7–14*. Anticipating a Philistine attack at Gilgal and with the army of Israel beginning to scatter in fear, what had Samuel instructed Saul to do in 13:8?

What did Saul do in 13:9? Why was that an act of disobedience? After Samuel's arrival and confrontation of Saul, what was Saul's rationale for his behavior, according to 13:10–12?

Samuel harshly rebuked Saul and then pronounced the Lord's judgment on him in 13:13–14. What were the consequences of Saul's sin? Whom was the Lord preparing to replace Saul?

Rash Vow

Read *1 Samuel 14:24–30, 43–45*. According to 14:24–26, under what oath had Saul placed his army? Do you believe Saul's oath was wise? Why, or why not?

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Unaware of his father's oath, Jonathan ate honey and was refreshed. Confronted by a soldier, what was Jonathan's response in 1 Samuel 14:29–30? Contrast Jonathan's character with his father's.

Saul intended to kill his son for violating his command! What does his unwillingness to admit his mistake reveal about him? In 14:45, the people spared Jonathan's life. What was their two-fold argument before Saul?

Disobedient Act

Read *1 Samuel 15:2–3, 7–13, 15–23*. Compare 15:2–3 with 15:7–9. What was the Lord's clear command to Saul? In which two ways did Saul directly disobey the Lord's command?

Trace the dialogue between Saul and Samuel in 15:12–22. What do you observe about Saul's rationalizations and Samuel's repeated appeal to the Lord's command? Record your observations.

Compare 15:10–11 with 15:23. What was Samuel's pronouncement of God's verdict?

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Saul took the people seriously, but he didn't take God seriously. He took himself seriously, but he didn't take God seriously. He took his circumstances seriously, but he never took God seriously. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: King Saul—God's Choice or the People's Choice?

Into his role as king, Saul brought many qualities—physical stature and attractiveness, wealth, humility, and military acumen. The question remains, however, as to whether Saul was God's choice for king or the people's choice for king. Review *1 Samuel 9:16; 10:1, 6–7, 20–21, 24*. What do these texts suggest?

Next, consider *9:1–2; 10:18–19; 13:13–14; 15:10–11, 23*. What do these texts propose?

To resolve the apparent paradox between whether Saul's kingship was God's choice or the people's choice, read the notes on 10:17–27 in the *Expository Notes of Dr. Thomas Constable* at bibleportal.com, focusing your attention on the last three paragraphs. Summarize and record your findings below.

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When rationalizing his disobedience, twice Saul contended that the animals he took from Agag would be sacrificed “to the Lord *your* God” (1 Samuel 15:15, 21, emphasis added). What does that tell you about Saul’s concern for ritual over relationship? What stands out about the phrase, “*your* God”?

There isn’t a person on this earth who is irreplaceable. There isn’t a person so powerful that he or she can’t be removed in a split second and another individual step in. No one is permanently in a role of responsibility.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Foolishness of Disobedience

Shortly after Samuel confronted King Saul for his disobedience and rationalization, Saul confessed. According to *1 Samuel 15:24*, what reason did Saul offer for his sin?

Later in 1 Samuel, after David spared Saul’s life, Saul uttered words sadly fitting for an epitaph. What word or phrase stands out to you in *26:21*?

The New Testament addresses what Saul painfully displayed in his refusal to yield to God’s direction. What principle does *James 4:17* express?

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First John 2:4 echoes a similar theme. What does this verse teach?

When you've peaked and you're threatened with what people think about you and you're caught up in your image and your self-willed ways, you diminish the importance of obeying God, and you do whatever you can to keep yourself intact in the eyes of others. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Knowing and Obeying the Truth

Saul's tragic life flashes four warnings for us who long to follow our Lord like Paul, who finished well and remained faithful to the end.

1. *To assume that you will end strong because you have begun strong is foolish.* Keep short accounts with God and with others. Remain faithful today.
2. *To presume into inappropriate areas because circumstances are uncomfortable is dangerous.* Trust God's promises. We must watch and pray.
3. *To jeopardize the well-being of another because you're unwilling to alter an unwise decision is unfair.* Humbly admit wrong decisions and change course.
4. *To rationalize your disobedience because you wanted your way is rebellion.* Making excuses for stubbornness and disobedience is a sin.

From our study, which one of Saul's poor decisions most impacted you? Why? Where and how might you apply that lesson to your current season of life?

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Which one of our application principles most characterizes a recent situation in which you've found yourself? Describe your circumstance. With the Lord's enablement, how did you or how will you resolve it?

As you close your study, hear Samuel speaking to Saul as if he were speaking to you. Bring his exhortation to mind whenever you're tempted to compromise.

*“What is more pleasing to the LORD:
your burnt offerings and sacrifices
or your obedience to his voice?
Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice,
and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.” (1 Samuel 15:22)*



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for speaking to me, through the very things that I've learned from Saul's life. May it never be said of me that I have “played the fool.” Rivet these things to my heart, Father, as I stand on the verge of a future that is both great and God-honoring. May I humbly walk with You through it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, [“How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?”](#)

For the 2026 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 1990, 2026 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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