The Background to David Becoming King over Israel
Part 6

The Disintegration of Saul's Kingship (1 Samuel 13-14)

- **The Setting:** The honeymoon phase of Saul's kingship is over. The Philistines invade and terrify the Israelites, which leads Saul to commit a catastrophic error.
- **The Theme:** Crisis doesn't create character; it reveals it. Under pressure, Saul resorts to manipulation and religious formalism, while his son Jonathan demonstrates what true, unshakeable faith looks like.

Chapter 13 begins with a general statement that Saul reigned for 32 years, beginning at the age of 40. The text then introduces his son Jonathan, who defeated a military post of Philistines who were garrisoned in Geba, which was within the boundaries of the tribe of Benjamin. As the narrative continues, it describes an overwhelming response by the Philistines.

Saul's Presumptuous Sacrifice (1 Samuel 13:5-14)

- **Summary:** Surrounded by Philistines and watching his army desert him, Saul grows impatient while waiting for Samuel to come. He takes matters into his own hands and offers a burnt sacrifice—a duty reserved strictly for the prophet/priest. Samuel arrives, rebukes Saul's disobedience, and declares that his kingdom will not endure.

Saul's sacrificial act was rebellious for multiple reasons:

1. Violation of tribal and jurisdictional boundaries

Only descendants of Aaron from the tribe of Levi were divinely authorized to offer sacrifices and to perform sanctuary duties. Saul was a Benjamite, so by stepping up to the altar to offer the burnt offering, he unlawfully usurped the distinct spiritual authority given exclusively to the priesthood.[1]

[1] In the Torah, sacrifices at the Tabernacle or Temple were restricted to the Aaronic priesthood (a subset of Levites). But the prophets Elijah and Elisha both offered sacrifices (1 Kings 18-19), even though they did not have a Levitical heritage. When the land of Canaan was allocated to the tribes of Israel after the end of the conquest, the Levites did not receive a single, continuous territory, but were given 48 scattered "Levitical cities" throughout all the tribes, including within Gilead (Elijah's region) and the Jordan Valley (Elisha's region). Later, after the nation split into two kingdoms, and King Jeroboam took control of the Northern Kingdom, he feared that if his citizens traveled south to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple, they would switch their loyalty to the Southern Kings. Because the Levites remained loyal to the Torah and the Jerusalem Temple, Jeroboam rejected them from serving as priests, and replaced them with non-Levites from the general population. As a result, "The Levites left their pastures and properties and moved to Judah and Jerusalem because Jeroboam and his sons had dismissed them from the priesthood of God" (2 Chronicles 11:13–14).

By the time Elijah and Elisha arrived on the scene generations later, the Northern Kingdom's religious landscape was entirely altered. Because the Levitical infrastructure was gone, God bypassed the traditional, institutional Levitical priesthood entirely in the north. He chose everyday citizens like Elijah (a rugged outsider from Gilead) and Elisha (a wealthy farmer), transformed them into prophets, and directly authorized them to act with priestly authority.

2. Direct disobedience to God's Prophet, Samuel

Samuel had explicitly commanded Saul to go to Gilgal and wait seven days for him to arrive and offer the sacrifices. By offering the sacrifice on the seventh day just before Samuel arrived, Saul chose personal control, fear, and political expediency over absolute obedience to God's direct word.

3. Placing sacrifice over true faith

When Samuel showed up moments later and confronted him, Saul made various excuses, claiming he "force himself" or "felt compelled" to offer the sacrifice to seek God's favor before battle. Samuel's rebuke exposed Saul's heart: he was treating the sacrifice like a pagan good-luck charm or a political tool to manipulate his fleeing troops, rather than an act of genuine faith.

The connection to David

In verse 14, Samuel delivers the famous line: "Adonai has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and Adonai has appointed him as ruler over His people This is the very first mention of David in the Bible, though he is not yet named. This reading defines David's calling by contrasting it with Saul's failure: Saul uses religious rituals to manipulate God, whereas David genuinely desires to seek God's heart.

Jonathan's Bold Act of Faith (1 Samuel 14:1–15)

- **Context:** 1 Samuel 13:19-20 explicitly mentions that "no blacksmith could be found in all the land of Israel" because the Philistines forced them to pay just to sharpen their farming plows. Verse 22 shows that only Saul and his son Jonathan actually possessed an iron sword or spear. The rest of the Israelite army was fighting with slings, arrows, clubs, and stone knives, plus repurposed metal farm tools that included plowshares (the sharp metal cutting tip of a plow), mattocks (a digging, scraping, or grubbing tool similar to a pickaxe), axes, sickles, hoes, pruning hooks, and goads (long wooden poles with metal tips used to guide oxen). This situation left them heavily outmatched by the Philistines' superior iron weaponry, chariots, and organized standing troops

- **Summary:** While Saul sits passively under a pomegranate tree, his son Jonathan steps out in radical faith. Accompanied only by his armor-bearer, Jonathan attacks a Philistine outpost, motivated by his discernment in verse 6 that "Adonai is not restrained to save by many or by few." God rewards his faith by sending a supernatural earthquake that panics the enemy.

The connection to David

Jonathan's bold raid perfectly mirrors David's upcoming battle with Goliath. Both Jonathan and David possess a deep, covenant-rooted confidence in God's power rather than military might. This shared spiritual DNA explains why Jonathan and David eventually form the deepest bond of friendship in the Bible—they are the only two men in Israel who truly understand what it means to fight the Lord's battles.

Saul's Rash Vow and Its Consequences (1 Samuel 14:23–35)

- **Summary:** Trying to look hyper-religious, Saul binds his army to a foolish, legally binding oath: no one can eat food until evening. That leads to widespread physical exhaustion, a near-fatal mistake by his son Jonathan, and a spiritual crisis when the starving soldiers break God's law by eating meat with the blood still in it (Leviticus 17:10–14).

  Saul prioritized legalistic rules and personal vengeance over the actual well-being of his people. He, then, engaged in "damage control" that was deeply flawed:

1. He treated the symptom, not the cause

   Saul blamed the soldiers for sinning, but he was the direct cause of their desperation. By imposing a legalistic, prideful fast on men fighting a brutal, day-long battle, he pushed his army past the breaking point of human endurance. His damage control shifted the blame onto his starving troops rather than taking accountability for his own foolish command.

2. He prioritized his own ego over his men's well-being

   Saul's original oath wasn't about honoring God; it was about personal vengeance. Even during his damage control, there is no record of him actually feeding his exhausted men properly or offering them rest. He simply forced them into a rushed, improvised ritual compliance so they could keep fighting for his glory.

3. Hollow piety and delayed altars

   When Saul built his first altar to the Lord, it highlights the irony that his son Jonathan had just won a miraculous victory through faith in God, yet Saul only engaged in formal worship after his own bad leadership caused a spiritual crisis. His altar-building was about fixing his public image, not a reflection of a heart seeking God.

4. It set up a deadly trap for his own son

   Saul's damage control did nothing to address the unresolved curse. Because he focused entirely on the meat-eating incident, he remained oblivious to the fact that Jonathan had eaten the honey. This superficial fix then leads to the next crisis, where Saul insists on satisfying his reckless oath.

Altogether, Saul's actions exposed his ongoing spiritual blindness, hypocrisy, and total failure as a leader.

<u>The connection to David</u>

This is about the insecure leader vs. the true shepherd. Saul treats his soldiers like tools for his personal glory, driving them to exhaustion. David, on the other hand, models true shepherd leadership. Later in his life, when David's men risk their lives to fetch him water from a well in Bethlehem, David refuses to drink it, pouring it out as an offering to God because he deeply values his men (2 Samuel 23).

A Fractured Family and Kingdom (1 Samuel 14:36–46)

- **Summary:** Saul discovers that Jonathan accidentally broke the fast by eating honey. Blinded by pride and his own rash vow, Saul prepares to execute his own heroic son to save face. The army steps in, rebukes the king, and rescues Jonathan from his father's hands.

  When Adonai did not give Saul an answer about going after the Philistines, he suspects that sin is involved, so he utilized the sacred lots of the Urim and Thummim[2] to isolate the culprit. He places the entire army on one side, and himself and Jonathan on the other. The lot clears the army and points directly to the royal family. When they are cast again between father and son, Jonathan is selected.

  Upon being questioned, Jonathan confessed to tasting a little honey and expressed his willingness to accept the fatal consequence of violating his father's vow. Rather than humbling himself or repenting of his foolish vow, Saul doubles down on his pride, declaring that God should strike him down if Jonathan is not executed.

  This narrative exposes Saul's total lack of self-awareness and demonstrates how God uses the king's own legalistic traps to humiliate him:

  - Saul hunts the wrong sinner: He correctly deduces that God is silent because there is "sin in the camp." However, Saul blindly assumes the sin is a breach of ritual compliance by one of his subordinates. In reality, the true spiritual rot in Israel is Saul's own pride, rash vows, and bad leadership.
  - The "guilty" man is the only one with faith. The lot lands on Jonathan—the single person in the entire narrative who actually acted with pure faith in God. Jonathan and his armor-bearer started the entire victory because they trusted that God can be victorious even with a few people.
  - God validates the army, not the king. When the lot points to Jonathan, Saul thinks that God is vindicating his legalistic curse. But God is actually forcing a public showdown.

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[2] The Urim and Thummim were sacred instruments used by the High Priest of Israel to determine the will of God in critical national or military situations. While the Bible never explicitly describes their physical appearance, Historical and archaeological consensus suggests they were two sacred stones, gems, or plaques kept inside the embroidered breastpiece of judgment worn over the High Priest's heart (Exodus 28:30). The Urim and Thummim acted as a divine, binary lot-casting system to answer direct, yes-or-no questions or to choose between two distinct options.

When the High Priest drew them out of his breastpiece, the outcome provided a clear answer: Drawing one stone indicated Yes / Approved / Guilty. Drawing the other stone indicated No / Disapproved / Innocent.

Crucially, as seen at the beginning of this narrative, there were times when the priest would draw or cast them, and no answer would be given. This supernatural silence was a terrifying sign that God had temporarily withdrawn His favor or counsel from the leader.

We see this exact binary selection process play out step-by-step when Saul isolates the camp. The army vs. the royals: Saul prays to God to give a "perfect lot" (a wordplay on Thummim). The lot is cast, the army is cleared (Thummim/Innocent), and Saul and Jonathan are taken (Urim/Guilty). Then father vs. son: The lot is cast a second time strictly between the two remaining options, and Jonathan is selected.

The Urim and Thummim were heavily used during the eras of Moses, Joshua, and the early Monarchy when Israel lacked a permanent line of writing prophets. By the time King David's reign progressed, God began speaking more directly through dynamic prophets like Nathan and Gad.

By the time the Israelites returned from the Babylonian exile, the Urim and Thummim were completely lost. Ezra and Nehemiah noted that certain genealogical mysteries could not be solved "until a priest should arise with Urim and Thummim" (Ezra 2:63), signaling that the era of the sacred stones had officially drawn to a close.

By exposing Jonathan, God forces the army to choose between Saul's destructive legalism and Jonathan's divinely backed heroism. The army chose Jonathan, effectively judging Saul as unfit to rule.

- The curse backfires. Saul called down a death curse on anyone who ate. He intended to use it to control his men. Instead, the lot ensures that the curse lands squarely on his own beloved son and heir, destroying Saul's dream of a lasting family dynasty.

The connection to David

By trying to kill Jonathan, Saul unknowingly symbolizes the self-destructive end of his own royal dynasty. Jonathan realizes his father's kingdom is spiritually bankrupt. This sets the stage for 1 Samuel 18–20, where Jonathan willingly abdicates his own right to the throne to submit to David, choosing God's anointed over his father's toxic legacy.