

THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF SUCCESS

1 Samuel 13–14

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“The Internal Dynamics of Success.” Saul was not a success. He demonstrates in these two chapters the internal dynamics of failure. I thought, by demonstrating those principles, we could then flip them. We could say, “If you act oppositely from Saul, then you can have the kind of success that God wants you to have in your life.”

I. The first area of Saul’s failure is, he stepped outside of God’s known will for his life.

That’s the focus of chapter 13:1–15. As we enter into this chapter, we’ve already had an introduction to the person of Saul, the first king of Israel. It’s been a favorable introduction. He’s come out of nowhere—looking for lost donkeys is about as nowhere as you can get. He has been promoted to king. He has stepped outside the shadow of a domineering father—which taught him to live a very submissive and non-spirited existence. He’s had to step out of that and make decisions on his own. He’s had to transfer out of a spiritual background where he appears to have known very little about God. And already the Spirit of the Lord has come upon him, and he’s prophesied. He’s had to deal with a severe inferiority complex—which found him on the day of his public coronation out hiding with the pack animals among the baggage. He’s had to step out of that inferiority complex and assume the responsibility of leading a nation at war.

Now we find him at a pivotal time. It’s still in the beginning of his kingship. He’s thirty years of age—an awfully young age. We get upset when we hear a supreme court judge is forty-one years old. How can such a young man be in such a responsible position? God doesn’t necessarily appoint people by chronological years. Saul is thirty, and he’s king.

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In chapter 13, he faces a severe test—whether or not he’s going to do God’s will. It’s a test every one of us will face. As I read these verses in my initial going over of the text, I had a difficult time justifying what happened to Saul. My initial impression was that Samuel was short on patience. I thought Samuel may even have been misrepresenting God—to strip away the kingdom from Saul’s dynasty for such a small act of disobedience.

Here’s the situation: Saul is encamped at Gilgal, which is the lowest spot of their world, twelve hundred feet below sea level. Up in the mountains as the crow flies, seven or eight miles from him with cliffs and strongly sloping mountains, there’s perched a formidable enemy.

Saul has a formidable external threat facing him called the Philistines. They have numerical advantage. They are, as verse 5 says, “As numerous as the sand on the seashore” (NIV). Saul is down to three thousand troops. The Philistines are not only numerically superior to him, they are strategically superior. They have the heights. Today, that’s still strategic. Whoever has the heights has superiority. The Philistines had the high points. Not only did they have the numbers and the high points, but they had weaponry superiority. They had chariots—three thousand chariots. True, chariots aren’t going to do much good in the mountains, but just the psychological knowledge that the enemy’s got something superior is enough to scare you. Like “They’ve got nuclear weapons, and we don’t.” That would intimidate you, even if they weren’t going to use them. The Philistines also had the blacksmithing trade. They were skilled in metallurgy. The Israelites do not know how to melt down ore and make spears and swords. So in the whole army of Israel, only two guys have a sword or spear. And those two guys are Jonathan and his dad, Saul. Everybody else is using things like slingshots and clubs. Saul has a formidable external opponent.

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Isn't that the same situation we find ourselves in when we look at the problems of life? The problems that hit us are so often greater than the apparent resources we have to deal with them. The resources on Saul's part were very few. He started out with an army of 330,000 in chapter 11. They were on call. But now he has a standing army of three thousand. But given what was happening upon the heights and the numerical and weaponry superiority, his army had melted down to six hundred by the end of the week. The few that were still waiting were waiting in caves among the rocks. Some were even hiding in cisterns—that's a device built to catch and hold rain water for washing or drinking purposes. You've got to be desperate to hide in a cistern. I saw a cistern in a third world country. I decided, after seeing what was floating in that cistern, I did not want a drink. I'd have to be pretty desperate to hide in one of those things. His military situation was rapidly deteriorating.

Where's Samuel? He said, "I'll be there in seven days." Samuel's going to offer the sacrifice that's appropriate to commit the nation to battle and seek God's favor. All these seven days, Saul is waiting. Samuel has said that he'd show up within seven days, but he never shows. And the situation is getting worse. Finally, after Samuel doesn't keep his word and show up, Saul says that something's got to be done or the whole army is going to leave me. So he offers the sacrifice. Then, wouldn't you know it! As soon as he does, Samuel shows up and says, "No. You've disobeyed a command of God. The kingdom is stripped from you." Actually what happened is Saul continued as king for forty years. The rejection of him as king meant that he would not have a dynasty to reign.

In hearing this, don't you think that was a little bit unfair? It's Samuel's fault! Samuel's the one who has goofed up the whole situation. He's late getting there. Poor Saul has been trying his best to keep things together against a formidable enemy. Then he tries to do the one thing he thinks

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may be alright—to commit the nation to God before they go out to battle. But he gets judged by the prophet for doing something wrong, and the kingdom is jerked out from his family. Makes you mad at Samuel! Besides, Saul could say, “I never asked for this job. It’s not fair.” Isn’t that true in life? The things that happen to us that we don’t like—they’re not fair. We didn’t ask for it. That’s how I read the text. But I must not judge the Word. The Word must judge me. So there’s something here I’m missing.

Here’s an analogy I can use to illustrate what is missing. Saul is in school. He’s in training. He’s got a professor named Samuel, and he has just completed the first semester of required elementary lessons of being a king. It is now time for an examination—a final examination in first-semester kingship. Anyone who has ever taken a final exam or given one knows that the purpose of a final exam is to throw something in that’s unexpected. This will test whether or not you have learned the essential element of the course. You can never quite figure out in advance in which direction the professor will approach the exam. You just need to have all the data, so that in whatever way they approach it, you can spit back what’s needed. This is final exam time. Samuel, in real life, throws a question at Saul that asks, “When the going gets tough, will you still obey God?” A command had been given. We don’t even know what the command was. It was probably a command for Saul to wait, no matter when Samuel got there. But the command was given. Saul says, “I appear to be justified by the circumstances.” Yet, he had a clear word from God, “Don’t!” If we step outside God’s clear and known will, then we walk in the way of Saul—and we set ourselves up for failure.

I think there may have been a second question on the exam. It’s not explicit in the text. But it’s this question, “If you step outside God’s will, will you come back and ask forgiveness and ask for a second chance?” Saul doesn’t do that here. In verses 14 and 15, he doesn’t come back to

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God and ask for a second chance. He doesn't say to Samuel, "I'm sorry." I think his situation might have been profoundly different had he done that. God takes one look at the composition of this man and says, "There's a man that isn't after my heart. He's not willing to obey me, and when he does wrong, he's not willing to come to me and set it straight." The key to internal dynamics of success—walk in obedience to the known will of God.

II. The second step of success—when making a decision, anticipate the negative consequences of your decision.

Saul illustrates this truth by his failure. Don't be involved in hasty decisions. Consider the possible negative consequences. I would suspect if I asked, "Have you ever made a bad decision and regretted the consequences as a result?" every hand would go up. Saul makes that kind of decision.

The background for his decision is found in chapter 14. Saul is sitting under a pomegranate tree. He's gotten back to his home. He's doing what kings ought to do—rule. His son, Jonathan, is out on the cliffs trying to infiltrate enemy lines. He does a magnificent job of it. Through scaling up a sheer cliff, he comes upon a garrison of Philistines and knocks them out. The Philistines, after losing a few men, think that some mighty thing has smitten them. They all go into a panic. The text says, "God sent a panic among them." Saul stirs under his pomegranate tree and says, "Let's go for it! Let's chase them." Then he did a very stupid thing. He said, "Cursed is anyone who eats before sundown." That was his impulsive decision where he didn't regard the negative consequences. He probably had good intentions. He thought, "I've got to keep these men pursuing the enemy while they're fleeing. I don't have time for them to stop and get a Big Mac. It's going to take precious battle time." But he didn't anticipate several things.

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He didn't anticipate, for example, that the people who are doing the fighting under that hot Palestinian sky might need some nourishment during the day. They'd fight better if they had some nourishment. It is substantiated in the text that they needed nourishment. When Jonathan was walking in the area and chasing troops, he dipped his staff into the ground where there was a honeycomb and brought up honey. He tastes it, and the text says, "His eyes became bright." That's a sugar lift! Saul didn't read the consequences of saying to his guys on a hot day, "Don't eat." He deprived them of energy. He also didn't think that someone might not get the communication. He didn't have a radio, tv, or any sophisticated communication equipment. It was word of mouth. Sure enough, somebody didn't get the communication. And it was his own son, Jonathan! He also didn't think of how the starved people would eat after the sun went down. They weren't a sophisticated culture. As soon as the sun set, they thought it ok to eat. They started in on the animals and began to eat in a nonkosher way. It was offensive to the code of Moses. The other thing he didn't see was the punishment he imposed didn't fit the crime. He said, "Cursed be anyone." That curse meant something far different than just words. Cursed meant "You're dead." To be cursed was to be rubbed out. It's very clear from the text he intended to do that with Jonathan. "You are cursed when you ate that. You're gone. You're dead." The punishment didn't fit the crime.

So here's a person continuing in failure because he's making decisions without thinking through the consequences. I submit, that's a relevant and contemporary problem in our lives. It can have to do with a major purchase. It can have to do with a change of job before we've thought things through. It can relate to marriage. Saul gets into one of those kinds of decisions, and he sets into motion the third thing that leads him into failure.

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III. Thirdly, Saul remains inflexible and unbending when there is a clear and obvious reason that he should change his position.

He remains inflexible and unbending. Jonathan is before him, selected by lot. He's the guy that ate the honey. Saul looks at him and says, "I've got to kill you to be true to my word." We're getting a look from the Scriptures of a culture that places an important emphasis on keeping your word. Keeping your word was a big deal, especially for people like Saul and a guy, Jephthah, from a few decades before Saul. In Judges 11, Jephthah was at war and he made a vow. He said, "If God helps me win this battle, whatever comes out the door to meet me when I get home will be sacrificed." Whatever to him probably meant a goat or a cow. But it turns out, his only daughter comes out. And he sacrifices her. Saul should have learned from his example—from his own history—don't make stupid vows. But he hadn't. But both Saul and Jephthah said, "Our word is important."

That's in such contrast to our society. Today, you can never bank on anything anyone says, unless it's attested to by an affidavit, has three lawyers to witness it, and even then it might go to court and be reversed. Somehow, we need to find the balance between the need for flexibility and the requirement of honor. Keep your word.

Saul said, "I'm going to keep my word even if it kills you!" I submit that such a position is rigid and inflexible. It shows a lack of capacity to change and to bend. It is not based upon love. Saul's rigidity was destroying his own family, and it threatened to destroy his own son. The character deficiency in rigidity is a lack of love. If Saul were a loving person, he would find a way to admit that he made a mistake. He'd get up before his troops and say, "I made the dumbest vow, and I want God to release me. I want all of you to release me. I admit, as king, I am not infallible. Please forgive me." He could have asked for forgiveness. Love would have asked for

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forgiveness. “I’m sorry, Jonathan, that I put you through this terror.” Can you imagine thinking your own dad is going to kill you? Love would have found a way to take on humiliation. Love places a person above keeping your own so-called honor. Saul could have even substituted himself or backed off and not pressed. Rigidity and inflexibility are seldom, if ever, prompted by love. Rigidity chokes and blocks creative abilities—in ourselves and in others. Love calls us to be flexible within the framework of absolute standards. Saul got into great trouble because he wasn’t flexible. Rigidity always gets people into trouble.

What are the internal dynamics of success? First, walk in obedience to the Lord. Secondly, evaluate carefully the consequences of your decisions. “Choose your rut well,” as my dad used to say, “You’ll be in it for the next twenty miles.” That was a slogan from the mud days of dirt roads in western Pennsylvania. Choose your rut well, you’ll be in it for a while. Thirdly, develop a flexibility based on love. Having your own way could be the very worst thing to happen to you and to someone else. It was for Saul.

As we look at the personality of Saul, it’s fascinating to see an encouragement for us. God operates on some different principles with us evidently. He gives us more than one chance. “Seventy times seven” is what Jesus said. But it’s encouraging when you read the story of Saul and find that even when the Lord rejected him, Saul continues being king. In fact, Scripture tells us he was king for forty years. This means in rejecting Saul, God was specifically rejecting his dynasty. God was never rejecting Saul on a personal level. He was rejecting him from a position that would be passed on to his family. But God did not reject that man in chapters 13 and 14 on the personal level. I think it’s an open question in Scripture whether Saul was ever rejected as a person. God has high regard for us as people. To be a success, you must walk in God’s will, evaluate your decisions and their consequences, and stay flexible out of love.

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Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we come to You now in a moment of dedication and prayer. We ask that the Holy Spirit would search our hearts and make us conform to the wonderful personality of Jesus of Nazareth. Lord, we pray that we can identify areas of our life where we are walking in disobedience to You. We ask for Your help—that we may be placed back in a position of obedience to You. We're so glad that You forgive us, and You do not reject us. For those in this congregation who are on the verge of making important and major decisions which they are going to live with for years, may You give them a special grace and wisdom. Help them to pray that decision through and to think it through so that it might be lived out well and be for Your honor and glory. Give us, with one another, wonderful flexibility based on love. Help us, Lord, to have the attitude that it is more important to love than it is to be right. Help us to keep in balance the proper proportion of adherence to truth and being right and adherence to love and caring for another person. Sometimes, Lord, we do not know where those distinctions are. We need the help of Your Holy Spirit to show us. I pray especially for parents who are struggling with children. They may not know at one moment how flexible they should be. I pray that You'll give them great understanding and insight. May the time we spend in Your Word and on our knees illumine us and give us direction. Help us, Lord, to do differently than Saul. He was willing to sacrifice his child on the altar of inflexibility. Guard our homes and our hearts. We ask these things, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.