1 Samuel 13 **Fear Driven Failure** **November 8, 2026**

"The Philistines mustered to fight with Israel: thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude; they came up and encamped at Michmash, to the east of Beth-aven. 6 When the Israelites saw that they were in distress (for the troops were hard pressed), the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns. 7 Some Hebrews crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.

8 He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people began to slip away from Saul. 9 So Saul said, "Bring the burnt offering here to me and the offerings of well-being." And he offered the burnt offering. 10 As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to meet him and salute him. 11 Samuel said, "What have you done?" Saul replied, "When I saw that the people were slipping away from me and that you did not come within the days appointed and that the Philistines were mustering at Michmash, 12 I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down upon me at Gilgal, and I have not entreated the favor of the Lord,' so I forced myself and offered the burnt offering." 13 Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which he commanded you. The Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, 14 but now your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has appointed him to be ruler over his people because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

If you haven't had a chance to worship with us recently, we're in the midst of a series of sermons on Samuel, Saul, and the Search for a King. Samuel is a prophet who warned the people about the dangers of a king. The people, out of fear, demanded one anyway, and Saul was selected – an anxious man from an unexpected tribe and family.

And we're about to discover how Saul's fear becomes his downfall.

In today's text, which is just one small snippet of a greater arc that I hope and pray that you'll discover for yourselves, King Saul is facing yet another foreign army. Last week, it was the Ammonites. This week, it's the Philistines. And they've got a massive force. The original Hebrew says thirty thousand chariots. That just seems like an exaggeration, so other translations say three thousand, but that's still ridiculously intimidating. Plus, other fighters whose numbers are like the sands on the seashore.

And Saul is understandably worried, because he doesn't have an equivalent force. In fact, the Bible says that the Philistines had made sure that there were no blacksmith shops in Israel, and the Israelites had to pay the Philistines to even sharpen their farming tools. It says that the only two people with swords among the Israelites were King Saul and his son Jonathan. Everyone else fought with farm tools and such.

So, understandably, King Saul's troops looked out at the Philistine army and lost their nerve. Some hid in caves, others in water jars. Some deserted and fled all together.

And King Saul, meanwhile, is waiting for our friend Samuel, the old prophet. He has told Saul not to engage the Philistines until he has arrived to pray and perform the priestly rituals that would bless the fighters despite the overwhelming odds. But day after day, night after night, Samuel does not arrive, and the Israelite army is dwindling in numbers due to their fear. And Saul is increasingly afraid, too.

So, he decides to take matters into his own hands and perform the priestly rituals himself. It's day seven, and while the Bible doesn't say that Samuel was supposed to come at dawn or noon or evening on day seven, Saul isn't waiting any longer. He thinks, "if I wait another hour, the Philistines won't. Every moment that passes I lose more troops."

But just as he finishes up the ritual, guess who shows up? . . . Samuel! Right!

And he's furious. "You didn't wait for me! You did it yourself!?! Who do you think you are?"

And King Saul starts making excuses. Everyone else is to blame but him. You know that kind of leader? The “it’s not my fault,” guy? Even when it clearly is?

He says, “You were late. The army was deserting in fear. The Philistines were not going to wait much longer. I had to do this.” It’s not his fault. It’s everyone else’s.

But Samuel won’t let the excuses slide. He holds Saul accountable and says, “You did this. Therefore, your kingdom will not continue.”

Now, you should know that King Saul does actually get to continue being king for quite a while longer. He rules for many, many more years, about 18 more chapters, but the king’s fears create deeper and deeper tragedy as time goes by.

Now, I wish I could spend more time talking to you about Saul. Maybe I’ll do another series on him in the future. But since I have nine and a half minutes left, let me just say, scholars have had a field day reading into what we know of King Saul in the chapters that follow this one. Many have speculated about his mental health and have labeled him with a variety of diagnoses that we came to know in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But above all else, we have to remember that history is written by the “winners” who get the opportunity to write what they want about their adversaries. So, remember, King Saul’s story is written by the pigs, not the wolf, people who were not on his side in life or in death. (This is a reference to the book from the Young at Heart Moment.)

They paint their picture of him, just as World History is told from a European perspective and American history is written from a Caucasian perspective rather than a Native American perspective. We have to keep that in mind.

But King Saul, as we read about him, is a figure of Shakespearean proportions. We met him last week – a young, tall, handsome, and deeply insecure man who was just doing an errand for his father when he was anointed as the first king of Israel.

And it becomes a dramatic tale of paranoia and madness, jealousy, rage, deep depression, verbal abuse, attempted murder, and more. There's even a scene with a witch and a ghost, but I don't want to get too far ahead of myself.

And I'm not making this stuff up. Both Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik of Boston and Dr. Mary Jo Kietzman of the University of Michigan have written about the parallels that exist between King Saul and the Shakespearean character Macbeth. They argue that Shakespeare actually built some of his characters and plots upon the story of Saul!

And the more I read about King Saul, the more compassion I have for him. His is one of the saddest stories in all of scripture. He begins as a man of promise. He is humble. He did not seek power. He is chosen by God, anointed by Samuel, and empowered by the Spirit. He has to create a monarchy out of nothing. He has to protect the people. He has no protocols to follow, no palace to live in, no traditions to uphold. Yet he is victorious in many, many battles in which he is often outnumbered. However, by the end of his life, Saul's fearful spirit has made him into an erratic, isolated, paranoid man whose perception of reality is deeply distorted.

His downfall is not caused by a lack of talent or opportunity. It is caused by fear. Fear becomes anxiety. Anxiety manifests as jealousy, paranoia, narcissism, and gaslighting. And, ultimately, it isolates him and becomes self-destruction.

As we read Saul's story, we cannot help but think of the great tragic characters of Shakespeare. Like Macbeth, like King Lear, and even like Othello, Saul becomes trapped by fear that distorts reality. When someone is blinded by fear, they project those fears outwardly. They create danger where there is none. They make accusations without evidence. They label as enemies those who are anything from innocent bystanders to deeply devoted allies.

These Shakespearean literary figures help us see more clearly what scripture teaches us about King Saul: when fear replaces trust in God, it can consume the soul.

This is how fear works. Fear convinces us that blessings are threats. Fear teaches us to see rivals where there are none. Fear whispers that someone else's success somehow diminishes our own worth.

We hear echoes of this in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Othello begins as a noble and respected leader. Yet once suspicion enters his heart, he loses the ability to distinguish truth from imagination. His fear changes the way he sees reality.

Saul experiences the same collapse of perspective. Saul's fear and jealousy create panic. Once Saul begins looking through the lens of fear, every act of kindness appears suspicious and every success others have appears threatening.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* provides an even closer parallel.

Macbeth receives a prophecy that he will become king. Instead of waiting upon God's timing, he grasps for power through violence. Once he claims the throne, he lives in constant terror of losing it. Every friend becomes a possible enemy. Every alliance becomes potentially dangerous. Every shadow contains a threat.

Saul follows a similar path. Though he remains king for many years, he lives as though his throne has already been stolen. He becomes obsessed with a younger man who is beloved by many. He throws a spear at this young man. He sends soldiers after him. He hunts him through the wilderness.

And the younger man has multiple opportunities to kill Saul, but says, "Saul is God's anointed king." And instead, spends years running for his life, not because he seeks Saul's throne, but because Saul cannot imagine anyone *not* seeking it.

Fear narrows Saul's world. And how many people today, how many leaders of ours today, live in that same prison?

Insecurity and fear of failure becomes an obsession with achievement. Insecurity and fear of rejection becomes an inability to trust. Insecurity and fear of loss becomes an attempt to control everyone and everything. Insecurity and fear make it impossible to

humbly acknowledge your own failures. Insecurity and fear can do their jobs *so* efficiently.

But perhaps the most moving Shakespearean comparison is found in *King Lear*.

Lear begins his story with power and authority, yet gradually loses his wisdom and judgment. He becomes isolated from those who truly love him. The people who tell him the truth are pushed away, while he only listens to voices that confirm his fears and insecurities.

Saul follows that same tragic pattern. Samuel tries to guide him, prays for him, grieves for him, but Saul resists correction. Saul's son Jonathan loves him, serves him, but Saul rejects his counsel, and in a fit of rage, throws a spear at him which, thankfully, misses. Saul's armor bearer and court musician serves him faithfully, but Saul drives him away, too. Fear turns enemies into friends and friends into enemies. Fear creates erratic and inconsistent behavior that no one around him can predict.

The farther Saul drifts from God, the fewer trustworthy voices remain in his life. Eventually, he stands almost completely alone. This may be the most frightening consequence of unchecked fear. It isolates. It convinces us that nobody understands us. It persuades us to distrust the very people God has sent to help us.

By the end of Saul's life, we encounter one of the most heartbreaking scenes in Scripture. The Philistines gather for battle once again. The same enemies from chapter 13 are back; and again, Saul is terrified. He seeks guidance from the Lord but receives no answer. So instead, he seeks out a woman who is known for witchcraft.

The king disguises himself and visits her in secret – I believe Macbeth did the same, only there were three witches in that story.

Fear has carried him through broken relationships to sleepless nights down deep rabbit holes of conspiracy stories that are entirely fabricated out of paranoia and insecurity.

Again, Shakespeare understood this pattern well. The tragic hero rarely falls all at once. The downfall happens step by step. One fearful choice leads to another. One compromise opens the door to the next.

And the witch summons the ghost of Samuel who tells Saul, “by the end of the day tomorrow, you’ll be a ghost, like me. This is the end of your story. The kingdom shall pass to the young man you’ve jealously feared for so long.”

And chapter 28 verse 20 says, “Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel.”

Saul's tragedy is not merely that he did not pass the kingdom on to his son. It is that his insecurity and fear and perhaps a mental illness that could not be diagnosed and treated back then as it can today, created a lifetime of paranoia, depression, jealousy, and rage that hurt his country and those he was closest to.

Most Christians around the world don’t know this story, but it did inspire an Englishman from the 1500s who captured the tragedy of Saul in the stories that live on with different names in classic literature and on stage and on screen around the world.

And next week, we hear about the young man who ruled after Saul’s death. You might know about him. His name is David. Amen.