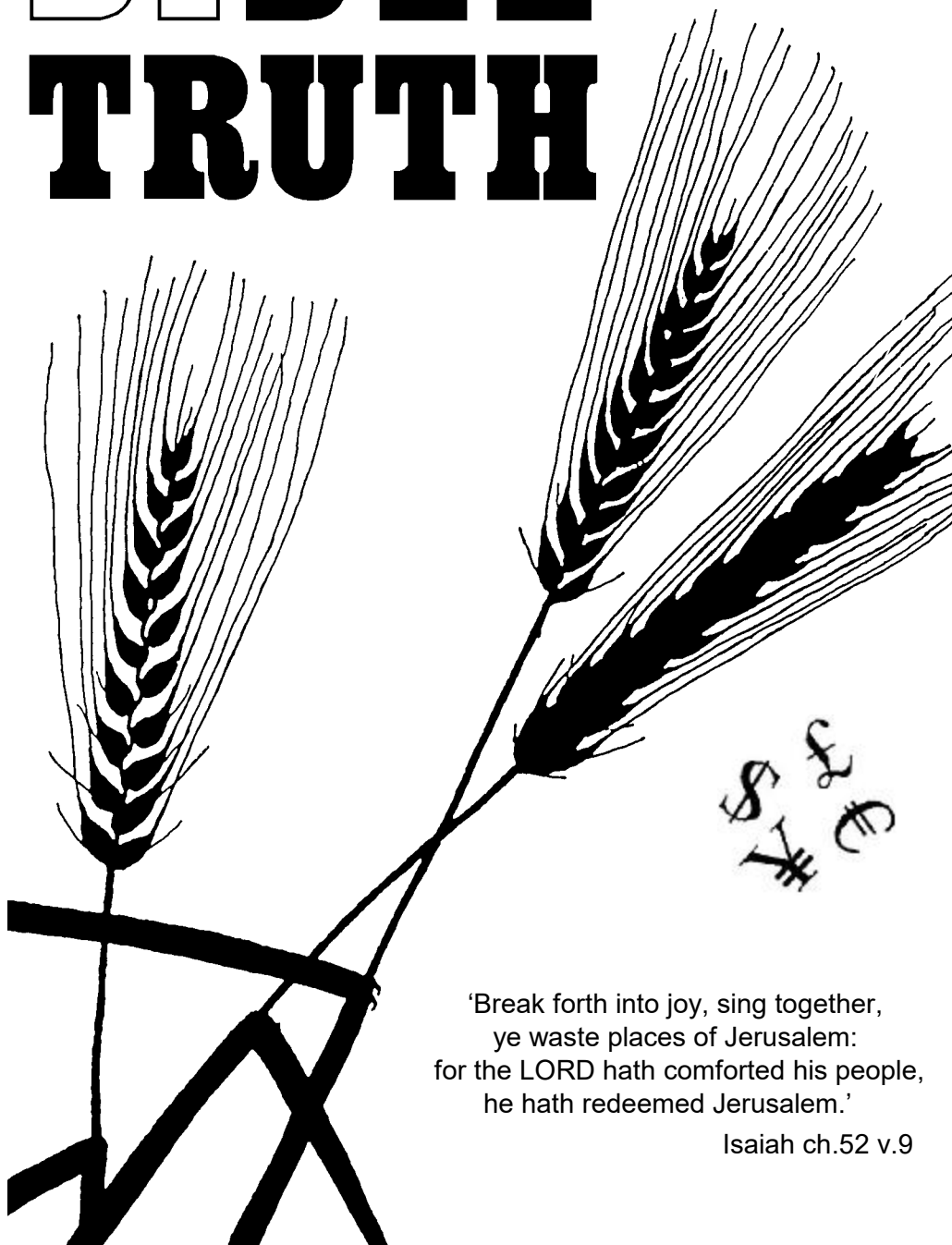


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'Break forth into joy, sing together,
ye waste places of Jerusalem:
for the LORD hath comforted his people,
he hath redeemed Jerusalem.'

Isaiah ch.52 v.9

King Saul - A Character Study

by Tamar Mc Kay

When the elders of Israel came to Samuel and demanded that he should give them a king to reign over them, the Almighty instructed him to give them their desire, but to protest solemnly and show the manner of king that would reign over them. Ever obedient, Samuel told the people the kind of king they would have; one who would take their sons, daughters, servants, lands and livestock for himself to serve him (see 1 Samuel ch.8). Part of this prophecy was fulfilled in ch.14 v.52, where it says, '... when Saul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he took him unto him'. Despite the warning the people still demanded a king, and Samuel according to God's instruction gave them a king - namely Saul.

Who was this man and what was he like? He was the son of Kish, who was a mighty man of power, of the tribe of Benjamin. Physically, the Scriptures record that he was '... a choice young man, and a goodly: and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he; from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people' (see 1 Samuel ch.9 vv 1-2). Later, in his lamentation over Saul and Jonathan when they had been slain, David says how they were 'swifter than eagles' and 'stronger than lions'. He also repeatedly speaks of their might, thus showing that throughout his life, Saul remained physically strong and mighty (see 2 Samuel ch.1 vv 17-27).

However, what was Saul like in character? What kind of man was he? When first reading about him in 1 Samuel ch.9, his father sends him to seek his asses which were lost. As instructed, Saul takes one of the servants and goes to seek them. After searching a great area and, therefore being gone for a long time, Saul expresses to his servant that they should return home before his father gets concerned for them. His servant advises him to seek Samuel's help to know what course they should take, and Saul heeds his servant's advice. This situation reveals two things about Saul's character. First, that he was one who was subject to his father, giving him honour and respect, even when away from his presence.

The second thing is that he was humble enough to consent to the wise counsel of his servant. Saul's humility was further displayed

when, hearing Samuel's words, '... on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on thee, and on all thy father's house?' he replies, '... Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? ... and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? wherefore then speakest thou so to me?' (see 1 Samuel ch.9 vv 19-21). Thus he was small in his own sight. Such was his humility that it led to a certain shyness, so that when the time came for Samuel to present the people with their new king, he was nowhere to be found because he had hidden himself 'among the stuff' (see 1 Samuel ch.10 vv 9-22). After Samuel had showed the people their king and 'the manner of the kingdom' (v.25), he sent them home. 'Saul also went home to Gibeah' (v.26), for it is recorded in 1 Samuel ch.11 vv 4-5 that when messengers came to Gibeah, ' ... behold, Saul came after the herd out of the field; ...'. Despite the fact that he was now king of Israel, Saul still went home to his family and did the humble work of caring for the herds on his family's land.

More can be learned about what he was like in 1 Samuel ch.11 vv 1-13, after Nahash the Ammonite came up against Jabesh-gilead, and only agreed to make covenant with the men of Jabesh on the condition that he could 'thrust out' all their right eyes, and 'lay it for a reproach upon all Israel'. When messengers came to Gibeah and Saul heard the tidings of the men of Jabesh, the Scriptures say, 'And the Spirit of God came upon Saul when he heard those tidings, and his anger was kindled greatly'. This was righteous anger at one seeking to lay a reproach upon all Israel, and therefore, seeking to defy the Redeemer of Israel. Later in the chapter when, under Saul's leadership deliverance had been gotten for Jabesh-gilead, the people then said to Samuel, 'Who is he that said, Shall Saul reign over us? bring the men, that we may put them to death'. To this Saul replied, 'There shall not a man be put to death this day: for to day the LORD hath wrought salvation in Israel'. Even though the men who did not want Saul for king were in the wrong, yet because salvation had been wrought in Israel, Saul shewed mercy to these men and spared them from being put to death.

This side of Saul's character is not the one that is generally thought about, for Saul is renowned for his bad character. Saul started off righteous, that much can be seen from the account of Scripture. However, he became unrighteous, and what a change came over him compared with when he was righteous!

Saul's change of character began with a lack of trust and patience, which resulted in disobedience through the sin of pride. In 1 Samuel ch.13 vv 5-13, the Philistines came to fight against Israel, the men were distressed and the people hid. Now Saul '... tarried seven days, according to the set time that Samuel had appointed: but Samuel came not to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him'. Instead of waiting longer for Samuel and trusting in God to keep him till then, Saul, who had been so humble before, allowed pride to enter in, and offered the burnt offering which was not his place to do. This was an act of pride, and disobedience against God's law, which Samuel made quite clear to him.

The next change to be noticed about Saul's character is in 1 Samuel ch.14. In this passage, when the Philistines were come against Israel, Jonathan and his armour-bearer fought against the Philistines and the Almighty gives them the victory. The men of Israel on seeing this are gathered together to join in the fight and 'So the LORD saved Israel that day: ...'. However, as the Israelites pursued the Philistines, Saul swore an oath saying, '... Cursed be the man that eateth any food until evening, that I may be avenged on mine enemies ...'. Unlike when Nahash the Ammonite had come against Jabesh-gilead and Saul had been righteously angry for the reproach that Nahash had sought to lay on all Israel, this time Saul had selfish motives; to avenge himself of his enemies!

Later on in this same passage, Saul reveals another change of character. After he had made his oath that none should eat until evening, Jonathan, who had not heard the oath, ate some honey. After the Philistines were further smitten, it came to light that Jonathan had eaten and Saul was going to have Jonathan put to death. The people had to deliver Jonathan saying, '... Shall Jonathan die, who hath wrought this great salvation in Israel? God forbid: as the LORD liveth, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground: for he hath wrought with God this day ...'. As well as delivering Jonathan from death, the people's words would have served as a reminder to Saul about what he had said in chapter 11 in regard to the men who had not wanted him for king. 'There shall not a man be put to death this day: for to day the LORD hath wrought salvation in Israel'. Saul had changed; where had mercy in the day of salvation gone?

The final change to come over Saul is found in 1 Samuel chapter 15. Here he was commanded to smite and utterly destroy the Amalekites but he did not follow this through and when Samuel confronted him with his disobedience he refused to acknowledge it saying, '... Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, ...' (v.20).

Whereas before, Saul willingly listened to what the Almighty had to say through his servant Samuel and obeyed, on this occasion he disobeyed and now stubbornly refused to acknowledge it! From that time onwards Saul was never the righteous man he had been before, but instead he became an angry, distrusting, murderous, and greatly troubled man. What a different man he had become! Such a change of character from the man who had been so humble and righteous.

What caused Saul to change to this man for which he is infamously remembered? A look at two major mistakes which became the turning points in his life and had resulting consequences, will be beneficial at this point. The first mistake was when he presumptuously and proudly offered up the burnt offering mentioned in 1 Samuel ch.13. As a result of this, Samuel declared unto Saul,

‘... Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue: ...’.

1 Samuel ch.13 vv 13-14

Although Saul would still be king, his children would not follow after him as king. This was the first blow and turning point in Saul’s life. His second mistake was when he disobeyed the Almighty’s command to utterly destroy Amalek and then stubbornly refused to acknowledge it. The consequence of this was that the Almighty got Samuel to say to Saul, ‘... to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king’ (ch.15 vv 22 -23). Samuel repeats this judgment in verse 26, saying, ‘... thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD hath rejected thee from being king over Israel’. Now it was not just that his kingdom would not continue, but Saul himself was now rejected from being king, and the kingdom was to go to someone better than him (see v.28).

These two mistakes were the points in Saul’s life where his character changed. The consequences of these two occasions meant his family line would not be the kings of Israel, and that he himself would no longer be king in the sight of the Almighty. Although these words of judgment had to come to pass, he could have repented and been delivered. However, Saul, like it says of Esau in Hebrews ch.12 v.17, ‘... found no place of repentance’.

From that point, Saul's character continued on that downward spiral, right up to the day of his death, when he took his own life (see 1 Chronicles ch.10 vv 2-4). Saul was standing sure, but fell to unrighteousness. Let us take warning from his example and remember those words in 1 Corinthians ch.10 v.12, 'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall'.

Although not about Saul's character, there is one more thing to be noted. In the Almighty's will, Saul had to lose the kingdom, though that is no excuse for Saul to then continue in his wicked ways. The reason his kingdom could not last was because he was of the tribe of Benjamin, and the kingly line was to come through the line of Judah (Genesis ch.49 vv 8-12). Therefore, ultimately, Saul's line could not have continued as the kings of Israel. This however, is another study in itself and may be covered in another article.
