

1 Samuel Chapter 13

Verses 1-10: It was customary to never go against a foreign nation without first seeking God with sacrifices, offerings, and worship. But with the Philistines “gathered together” for battle and the Israelites “scattered” and afraid, Saul sinned in two ways here. By not obeying Samuel’s command to wait and by offering sacrifices himself. Impatience is often the gateway to impulse, and impulse can lead to either foolishness or sin.

1 Samuel 13:1 "Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel,"

Saul reigned one year, and nothing particular happened; but in his second year the events recorded in this chapter took place. For above a year he gave the Philistine time to prepare for war, and to weaken and to disarm the Israelites. When men are lifted up in self-sufficiency, they are often led into folly.

1 Samuel 13:2 "Saul chose him three thousand [men] of Israel; [whereof] two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and in mount Beth-el, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin: and the rest of the people he sent every man to his tent."

“Michmash”: This area was located about 7 miles northeast of Jerusalem.

“Jonathan”: “The Lord has given.” Saul’s firstborn son and heir apparent to the throne was evidently old enough to serve as a commander in Israel’s army at this time, much like David when he slew Goliath (1 Sam. 17:32-37).

“Gibeah of Benjamin”: This city was located 3 miles north of Jerusalem. It was called Gibeah of Saul (in 11:4).

The first year of Saul's reign was a time of learning for him. He had never been trained to be a king. He was unsure of himself at first, as it took two years for him to settle into the job as king. At the end of the second year, he chose 3,000 men to serve him. This was probably like an honor guard that was chosen out of the entire army. In case of a major war, the other men would be called. This 3,000 would be ready at all times. Even in peace, they needed an army ready instantly. Two thousand of these men stayed with Saul. The other thousand he sent to Gibeah with his son Jonathan. These men were well-trained and were the choicest of the soldiers. Sometimes, a few well-trained can do more than a large army, who are not trained.

1 Samuel 13:3 "And Jonathan smote the garrison of the Philistines that [was] in Geba, and the Philistines heard [of it]. And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, Let the Hebrews hear."

“Geba”: This outpost was located about 5 miles north northeast of Jerusalem, 1-1/2 miles southwest of Michmash.

“Blew the trumpet”: Saul used the trumpet to summon additional troops for battle.

This seemed to be an outpost for the Philistines. If Jonathan could take and hold this garrison, it would be a deterrent for the Philistines to attack Israel. This was on the way; they would have come if they attacked. When the trumpet blows, this calls all of Israel to war. When the Hebrews hear the trumpet, they know it is a call to arms.

1 Samuel 13:4 "And all Israel heard say [that] Saul had smitten a garrison of the Philistines, and [that] Israel also was had in abomination with the Philistines. And the people were called together after Saul to Gilgal."

“Abomination”: Israel could expect retaliation from the Philistines for Jonathan’s raid.

“Gilgal”: This is the town of Saul’s confirmation as king by Samuel and the people (11:14-15). Saul chose Gilgal because of Samuel’s word (in 10:8).

This was a favorite place of assembly for all of the people. Saul knew the terrible hate that the Philistines had for Israel. He also knew that the Philistines were planning a war against Israel. Saul made the first strike, or at least Jonathan struck the first blow successfully. Since Saul is king, it could be classified as his victory as well.

1 Samuel 13:5 "And the Philistines gathered themselves together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which [is] on the sea shore in multitude: and they came up, and pitched in Michmash, eastward from Beth-aven."

“Thirty thousand chariots”: This is probably a scribal error, since the number is too large for the corresponding horsemen. Three thousand is more reasonable and is found in some Old Testament manuscripts.

“Michmash” (see note on 13:2).

“Beth-aven”: Literally “house of nothingness.” It was less than one mile southwest of Michmash.

The topography of the battle area would seem to preclude the use of “thirty thousand chariots.” Moreover, in similar descriptions of the ratio of charioteers and chariots, the number of chariots is always significantly smaller (2 Sam. 10:18; 1 King 10:26). Such a sizable force is unprecedented even among the major powers of the ancient Near East. Because of these facts, the reading of “three thousand” in the ancient Syriac translation, as supported by some manuscripts of the Septuagint and the Arabic Bible, may well be correct.

Saul had moved to Gilgal from Michmash. These, mentioned above, are a large, well-equipped army that the Philistines brought up quickly. This proves they were already planning to attack Israel.

1 Samuel 13:6 "When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait, (for the people were distressed,) then the people did hide themselves in caves, and in thickets, and in rocks, and in high places, and in pits."

Though their wonderful success against the Ammonites had encouraged them to obey the summons of such a prosperous leader as Saul had been; yet when they saw the vast army of the Philistines, how well they were appointed, and themselves not provided. Their hearts failed them, and they slunk away from him as fast as they had flocked to him. The people were distressed, notwithstanding their former presumption, that if they had a king they would be free from all such difficulties and distresses. Hereby God intended to teach them the vanity of confidence in men; and that they did not one jot less need his help now than they did when they had no king. And probably they were the more discouraged, because they did not find Samuel with Saul. Sooner or later men will be made to see that God and his prophets are their best friends.

We see from this, that the people had soon forgotten their victory over the Ammonites. They are badly frightened by all of this war machinery and run and hide in the hills and caves. We remember that Saul had 2,000 chosen men stationed here to fight if necessary.

1 Samuel 13:7 "And [some of] the Hebrews went over Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. As for Saul, he [was] yet in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling."

“Gad and Gilead”: Areas east of the Jordan River.

“All the people followed him trembling”: The people were in fear over probable Philistine retaliation.

This is speaking of the people who did not hide in the caves and pits. It seems, they quickly ran to Gilgal, where Saul had gone to bring the Hebrew army together. Some of the Hebrews had gone over the Jordan and hid in Gad and Gilead. They do not seem to be very brave.

Verses 8-12: Saul’s self-will surfaces early in his reign as he has clearly disobeyed the previous command of “Samuel” (10:8). Samuel’s tarrying may have been designed as a test of Saul’s character. The Hebrew verb (in verse 9), may indicate that “Saul” did not personally offer the sacrifices, but merely had them made by the Levitical priests. Even if this were the case, his action was ill-advised and a violation of Samuel’s instructions. Further, it was done with the full knowledge that Samuel himself intended to officiate at the sacrificial ceremony.

1 Samuel 13:8 "And he 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."

“Seven days ... the set time that Samuel had appointed”: This is a direct reference to Samuel’s word (in 10:8). Saul was commanded to wait 7 days to meet Samuel in Gilgal.

“The people were scattered from him”: Saul’s men were deserting him because of anxiety and fear over the coming battle.

It seems, from this, that Samuel advised Saul to stay seven days at Gilgal. Samuel had not gone with them to Gilgal. This would be Israel's war for independence from these Philistines.

1 Samuel 13:9 "And Saul said, Bring hither a burnt offering to me, and peace offerings. And he offered the burnt offering."

“He offered the burnt offering”: Saul’s sin was not specifically that he made a sacrifice (2 Sam. 24:25; 1 Kings 8:62-64), but that he did not wait for priestly assistance from Samuel (see 10:8). He wished to rule as an autocrat, who possessed absolute power in civil and sacred matters. Samuel had wanted the 7 days as a test of Saul’s character and obedience to God, but Saul failed it by invading the priestly office himself.

It appears that Saul had decided that Samuel was not coming and offered the burnt offering himself.

1 Samuel 13:10 "And it came to pass, that as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might salute him."

Scarcely does the sacrificial ceremony appear to have been completed when the seer appeared on the scene. It was the seventh day, according to the solemn injunction given to the king, but Saul, in his impatience, had not waited till the end of the day.

“Saul went out to meet him.”: The reverence which the king, in spite of his disobedience, felt for Samuel is displayed in his going out to meet him thus publicly. This deep feeling of the king for the great prophet to whom he felt he owed so much existed on Saul’s part all the days of Samuel’s life, and, as we shall see, even after Samuel’s death.

We see that Saul still liked for Samuel to decide many of the things they did. Perhaps, he wanted to make sure, that these things were in the will of God. This is the seventh day that Samuel had told them to wait until. Saul runs out to meet him to receive a blessing.

Verses 11-14: Saul’s justification seemed reasonable, but his actions were ultimately disobedient. Saul’s punishment was severe, the loss of the kingdom; but it opened the way for David and the messianic line. The next two chapters of 1 Samuel outline the transfer of the kingship to David.

1 Samuel 13:11 "And Samuel said, What hast thou done? And Saul said, Because I saw that the people were scattered from me, and [that] thou camest not within the days appointed, and [that] the Philistines gathered themselves together at Michmash;"

“Because I saw”: Saul reacted disobediently based upon what he saw and not by faith. He feared losing his men and did not properly consider what God would have him do.

Instead of a blessing, Saul receives a reprimand from Samuel. The seven days had been a test for Saul. Saul got impatient and sinned when he offered the burnt offering himself. Samuel cannot believe that Saul would take it upon himself to sacrifice. Saul was a civil leader, not a spiritual leader. He had no right to sacrifice. We see that Saul gives excuses, some of which are not true. Samuel did come on the seventh day, as he had said he would. Even had he not come, Saul should not have sacrificed.

1 Samuel 13:12 "Therefore said I, The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the LORD: I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering."

Saul had come from Michmash to Gilgal, expecting to gather the force of the whole nation around him. Instead of that, the people fled, leaving him in the exposed plain with only 600 men (1 Sam. 13:15). The Philistines occupied Michmash, and might at any moment pour down the valley upon Gilgal. Saul's situation was obviously one of extreme peril. A few hours' delay might prove fatal to him and his little army.

"I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering": It was reluctance to him, and it was against his will as well as the command of Samuel, to offer before he came. He suggests; but such were the circumstances he was in, that he was obliged to it; these are the reasons or excuses he made, and some of them have a specious appearance.

Perhaps, Saul's fear caused him to do this thing. Saul felt that the sacrifice should be made before the battle and the Philistines were bearing down upon them. In this moment of fear, he had done a terrible thing.

1 Samuel 13:13 "And Samuel said to 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."

"Thou hast not kept the commandment": Saul's disobedience was a direct violation of the command from Samuel (in 10:8).

"Thy kingdom ... forever": How could this be in light of God's promise to Judah (Gen. 49:10)? This would correct the potential contradiction of Saul being from Benjamin, not Judah.

The prophetic promise of an eternal dominion in "Israel" for the house of Judah (Gen. 49:10), was made in the light of God's ordaining foreknowledge of Saul's self-will. Saul's disobedience illustrates well Samuel's previous warning (12:14-15; 24-25).

The most important thing for Saul to do; was to listen to Samuel on spiritual matters and do exactly as he was commanded. He had broken the commandment of the LORD spoken through Samuel. This will mean that Saul's kingship will not last forever. He will be replaced by someone more pleasing to God.

1 Samuel 13:14 "But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him [to be] captain over his people, because thou hast not kept [that] which the LORD commanded thee."

“A man after his own heart”: Instead of Saul, God was going to choose one whose heart was like His own, i.e., one who had a will to obey God. Paul quotes this passage (in Acts 13:22; of David 16:7).

“Captain”: Someone else, namely David, had already been chosen to be God’s leader over His people.

This is speaking of God choosing David, but he would be a mere child at this time. God knows the end, as well as the beginning. Even though David has not been anointed yet, God knows he will be. God's disappointment in Saul is shown through Samuel's words here. Certainly, the man that God would choose would not be perfect, but would love God and try to keep His commandments.

1 Samuel 13:15 "And Samuel arose, and gat him up from Gilgal unto Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people [that were] present with him, about six hundred men."

“From Gilgal unto Gibeah”: This was about a 10 mile trip westward. Samuel left Saul, realizing that Saul’s kinship was doomed.

“Six hundred men”: This indicates the mass departure of the Israelites (verse 6), and gives a perspective on what Saul saw (verse 5).

It seems that Saul went back home and Samuel went by there on his way to his home. Saul had 2,000 men surrounding him. This may mean that the 2,000 men he had were now dwindled down to 600.

1 Samuel 13:16 "And Saul, and Jonathan his son, and the people [that were] present with them, abode in Gibeah of Benjamin: but the Philistines encamped in Michmash."

Who were now joined to their men, on Saul's coming to Gibeah.

"And the people that were present with them": The six hundred men before numbered: abode in Gibeah of Benjamin; being perhaps a strong fortified place, not choosing to go forth to meet the army of the Philistines, so vastly superior to them.

"But the Philistines encamped at Michmash": The old quarters of Saul before he went to Gilgal (1 Sam. 13:2).

We see that Jonathan has come in to help Saul fight against the Philistines if they attack. They have grouped around the city where they live.

1 Samuel 13:17 "And the spoilers came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies: one company turned unto the way [that leadeth to] Ophrah, unto the land of Shual:"

“Spoilers ... in three companies”: Literally these were “destroyers” in the Philistine army, divided into 3 groups.

The spoilers of course, are speaking of the Philistines. They have divided themselves into three groups to come against Saul and his people. It appears they could have taken Saul better, when he was coming home, or when Jonathan was coming home; but they waited to taunt Saul the more. Now, they feel they have already defeated Saul, and they will attack him at will.

1 Samuel 13:18 "And another company turned the way [to] Beth-horon: and another company turned [to] the way of the border that looketh to the valley of Zeboim toward the wilderness."

Of which name there were two cities, the upper and nether, and both in the tribe of Ephraim (of which see Joshua 16:3). This lay northwest from the camp of the Philistines at Michmash; eight miles from it, according to Bunting.

"And another company turned to the way of the border, that looketh towards the valley of Zeboim, toward the wilderness": Some take this to be the Zeboim which was destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah. And the wilderness, the wilderness of Jordan; but as that, so the valley in which it stood, was turned into a bituminous lake. This seems to be a city in the land of Benjamin (Neh. 11:34), near to which was a valley, and this towards the wilderness of Jericho, and so lay eastward.

It seems that the Philistines were so sure they would win the battle, that they had divided their men into three groups to attack three different fronts at once.

Verses 19-22: Because the Philistines were skilled in highly prized metalworks, the Israelites were limited in battle to slingshots and bows and arrows. However, God’s power more than compensated for Israel’s military disadvantage (14:6).

1 Samuel 13:19 "Now there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make [them] swords or spears:"

“No smith”: The Philistines had superior iron and metal-working craftsmen until David’s time, accounting for their formidable military force. At this time, the Philistines enjoyed a monopoly on iron and the smith (1 Chron. 22:3).

This is not the entire land of Israel that did not have smiths to make swords or spears. It seems this particular area had no smiths. These Philistines felt as if they were going against an army without weapons.

1 Samuel 13:20 "But all the Israelites went down to the Philistines, to sharpen every man his share, and his coulter, and his axe, and his mattock."

“Mattock”: A pickax to work the ground by hand.

1 Samuel 13:21 "Yet they had a file for the mattocks, and for the coulters, and for the forks, and for the axes, and to sharpen the goads."

The Philistines charged a high price to sharpen instruments potentially that could be used against them.

The wording of the Hebrew text is difficult. Another possible translation of the verse is: “And the charge was two-thirds shekel for sharpening the plowshares and the “mattocks,” and one-third shekel for sharpening the “forks” and “axes,” and for fixing the “goads.”

It appears that the Benjamites had been dependent upon the Philistines to sharpen their farm instruments. We are not told why this condition existed. Perhaps, the Philistines had some kind of hold on the Benjamites. It seems they did have small files to keep their farm instruments sharp, after they had been sharpened.

1 Samuel 13:22 "So it came to pass in the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people that [were] with Saul and Jonathan: but with Saul and with Jonathan his son was there found."

“Neither sword nor spear”: The Philistines had a distinct military advantage over Israel since they had a monopoly on iron weapons.

This was an ill-equipped army of a handful of men. Saul and Jonathan were the only two who had a sword and a spear. The other men had clubs and crude instruments of their trade.

1 Samuel 13:23 "And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the passage of Michmash."

“The passage of Michmash”: Some of the Philistines had moved out to a pass leading to Michmash.

This seems that, the Philistines have cut off the pass, to keep the people of Saul from escaping, or getting help from that direction. This is a very bad situation for Saul and his men.

1 Samuel Chapter 13 Questions

1. When did Saul choose out men to make up his guard?
2. How many men did he choose for his army?

3. He sent 1,000 men with _____.
4. Jonathan smote the _____ of the Philistines.
5. What did Saul do, to bring the other Hebrews together?
6. The blowing of the trumpet was a _____ to _____.
7. Where did Saul go, to meet with all the people?
8. Why had Saul made the first strike against the Philistines?
9. How many chariots did the Philistines bring, to fight against Saul and his men?
10. How many horsemen did they bring?
11. Where had Saul gone from Michmash?
12. The people have already forgotten the victory over the _____.
13. Where did they run and hide from the Philistines?
14. Some of the people went over Jordan to the land of _____.
15. Who told Saul to wait 7 days?
16. What terrible thing did Saul do, spoken of in verse 9?
17. Why did Saul do this?
18. When did Samuel come?
19. Why did Saul run out to meet him?
20. What did Saul receive from Samuel?
21. What excuse did Saul give for offering the burnt offering?
22. Saul was a _____ leader, not a _____ leader.
23. Perhaps, Saul's _____ caused him to do this thing.
24. What has this moment of foolishness cost Saul?
25. Who is verse 14 speaking of being chosen?
26. How many did Saul number in verse 15?
27. Where did Saul and Jonathan abide?

28. The spoilers of the Philistines came out of the camp in _____.
29. There was no _____ found throughout all the land of Israel.
30. Who had the Israelites been dependent upon, to sharpen their farm instruments?
31. Who were the only people, who had a sword, or a spear?