

Opening Scripture Psalm 99

Illus. In the haunting tragedy of Shakespeare's play, "Macbeth," we follow the descent of Macbeth, a Scottish nobleman, into madness, tyranny, and self-destruction.

The story begins in a dimly lit chamber of a medieval Scottish castle; Macbeth stands at a crossroads. Three witches, shrouded in an eerie mist, whisper prophecies that foretell his ascension to the throne, and the prophecy ignites a fire of ambition to become the King.

The most pivotal scene in the play is nightfall at the castle where King Duncan had been invited to stay the night; Macbeth initially has second thoughts about committing regicide. For a brief moment, he contemplates the horrors and consequences of going through with his plan. Despite being torn between his ambition and moral conscience, he follows the advice of Lady Macbeth, who persuades him to carry out his intentions. Macbeth kills Duncan and becomes King.

This single choice reveals a transformation that begins to take place within him, a descent into ruthlessness and dark ambition. Guilt and paranoia become his constant companions, with the face of the slain king haunting his every step.

Isolated from friends and allies, Macbeth's rule is marked by cruelty and bloodshed. The prophecy that once promised splendor and freedom now feels like a millstone around his neck, too heavy to carry, his many sins too horrifying to contemplate as he puts words to his despair over his empty pursuit of power at all costs: "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

As the footsteps of approaching armies grow louder, Macbeth meets his fate on a misty battlefield. Fueled by greed and marked by treachery, his tragic story leads to one final confrontation. His original sin foreshadowed a life that came to be defined by a malformed, crooked character, causing him misery and concluding in an inglorious death.

Sometimes, one single moment or one action can give us a glimpse into someone's character, foreshadowing the direction that their lives will take.

Transition: Such is the case with the newly coronated King Saul in our text

today, who has come into power through divine prophecy, whose intentions, in the beginning, seem noble, a man who shows initial promise and popularity but then tragically sins, forewarning a tragic end. Today's text will highlight the misshapen character that begins with one choice, which sets Saul on a path of tyranny and tragedy. Saul will face a total of 3 tests: (1) Ch. 13 is a test of patience; (2) Ch. 14 is a test of judgment; (3) Ch. 15 is a test of obedience. Ultimately, Saul makes up the rules as he goes and thinks that God's commands don't apply to him.

The first lesson we learn from this story today is...

1. Don't be intimidated by your enemy (13:2-4). "He chose three thousand men from Israel for himself: two thousand were with Saul at Michmash and in Bethel's hill country, and one thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin. He sent the rest of the troops away, each to his own tent.

³ Jonathan attacked the Philistine garrison in Gibeah, and the Philistines heard about it. So, Saul blew the ram's horn throughout the land, saying, "Let the Hebrews hear!" ⁴ And all Israel heard the news, "Saul has attacked the Philistine garrison, and Israel is now repulsive to the Philistines." Then, the troops were summoned to join Saul at Gilgal. The Philistines also gathered to fight against Israel: three thousand chariots, six thousand horsemen, and troops as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Michmash, east of Beth-aven. ⁶ The men of Israel saw that they were in trouble because the troops were in a difficult situation. They hid in caves, in thickets, among rocks, and in holes and cisterns. ⁷ Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead." Now, in this part of the story, Jonathan and his team decide to take on the Philistines by launching an attack on their outpost in Geba, which is pretty close to Jerusalem, about five miles to the north. The text really hammers home the idea of just how big the Philistine threat is.

Fear grips them before the battle even begins. *But here's where it gets interesting. Some of the Israelites, taking a page from their ancestors' playbook,* decided to hide in holes, caves, wells, and anywhere they could find. Others flee across the Jordan River to seek safety in places like Gad and Gilead. These areas are on the other side of the river, between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Gad is a bit smaller than Gilead, just to the south.

They forgot the greatness of God. *The description of the Philistines' innumerable army with chariots and charioteers evokes the memory of God defeating* Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea (Exod 14). Why is no one, particularly the King, inclined to remind them of the God they serve? The Philistines are no match for Him.

We must also be reminded of the battle that we face as believers.

2 Timothy 1:7: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgment." The power of the gospel and the strength of the Holy Spirit to our inner man. While outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day after day by the Power of the Holy Spirit. Our lives have been set ablaze with the love of God now poured into our hearts by the Spirit. And our commitment to truth gives us rational, sound judgment and self-discipline.

1 Peter 5:7-9: "Casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you. Be sober-minded, be alert. Your adversary the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour. Resist him, firm in the faith, knowing that the same kind of sufferings are being experienced by your fellow believers throughout the world."

Peter urges us to live under God's watchful care, practicing clear thinking and vigilance as the devil stalks us and seeks to devour us. Lions target the youngest, the weakest, the most vulnerable. We must take care to live under the watchful care, the unmatched power, and the unwavering truth of our God. Finding comfort in the shared trials faced by believers worldwide.

The problem with Saul's troops is that they just forgot their story. They forgot the power and the awesomeness of the God they served.

2. Delays can tempt us toward disobedience (1 Samuel 13:7–9). Back in Chapter 10:8, Samuel gave Saul instructions: "Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do." We pick up the story in verse 7: "Saul, however, was still at Gilgal, and all his troops were ***gripped with fear***.⁸ ***He waited seven days*** for the appointed time that Samuel had set, but Samuel didn't come to Gilgal, and the troops were deserting him.⁹ So Saul said, 'Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings.' Then he offered the burnt offering.¹⁰ Just as he finished offering the burnt offering, Samuel

arrived. So, Saul went out to greet him.”

Saul's sacrifice is unauthorized. In the sections of Deuteronomy 17–18, outlining the regulations for Israelite kingship: Deuteronomy 17:14, 15, 18–20 states, “When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, take possession of it, live in it, and say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations around me,’ ¹⁵ you are to appoint over you ***the king the Lord your God chooses...***¹⁸ When he is seated on his royal throne, he is to ***write a copy of this instruction for himself on a scroll*** in the presence of the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ It is to ***remain with him***, and he is to ***read from it all the days of his life***, so ***that he may learn to fear the Lord his God***, to observe all the words of this instruction, and to do these statutes. ²⁰ Then his heart will not be exalted above his countrymen, he will not turn from this command to the right or the left, and he and his sons will continue reigning many years in Israel.” In that section of Deuteronomy, a clear distinction is made between the roles of the king, the priests (Deut 18:1–13), and the prophets (18:14–22). As mentioned earlier, Samuel explicitly states his intention to perform sacrifices (cf. 10:8) and, in his prophetic capacity, provide instructions to the king. This act symbolically puts him above God’s Word—because the prophet represents God’s voice.

Saul is caught red-handed. vv.7–10 The greatly reduced number of men who remained with Saul at Gilgal were understandably frightened (v. 7). When the prophet failed to appear at the appointed time, even more of Saul’s troops began to defect. Desperate, Saul rushes ahead in disobedience, and the moment the flame engulfs the burnt offering, Samuel arrives on the scene. Saul is busted!

Illus. Getting caught red-handed cussing and smoking at age 10. I didn’t get a time out or a little spanking, I got what we call in the South “a whoopin.” Caught red-handed. Whenever someone gets caught in this fashion, then excuses begin to multiply.

Notice Saul’s excuses offered to Samuel.

¹¹ and Samuel asked, ‘What have you done?’ Saul answered, “When I saw that the troops were deserting me and you didn’t come within the appointed days and the Philistines were gathering at Michmash, ¹² I thought, ‘The Philistines will now descend on me at Gilgal, and I haven’t

sought the Lord's favor.' So I forced myself to offer the burnt offering." The core of Saul's problem is not that he is just impatient—but that when he fails, he immediately begins to make excuses rather than take responsibility.

Making excuses can lead to...

- **Blame shifting/deflection**—Saul immediately blames his disobedience on his troops, who are disbanding, and on Samuel—I sinned because of *you*. Saul will have a tendency throughout his life and career to shift blame to others. Projecting our failures onto other people rather than owning our stuff is a sign of immaturity, shallowness, and deception. That's why Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the Serpent, and the Serpent said, "Yeah, it was me." It is literally the oldest response to God in the Bible.

Illustration: My pastor and mentor had to rebuke me for my failure as a Youth Pastor. I immediately got defensive and began shifting blame to him, to our situation, to the kids, to my leaders. And he stopped me right there and taught me one of the most important lessons of ministry—don't go down this path. Because in his wisdom, he knew where this would lead—to me washing out of ministry over unchecked character problems. As I prayed about it, I realized I was in the wrong—I needed to listen to his advice. I confessed my sin and took out my own trash. My pastor literally saved me from this path.

- **Violating one's conscience**—there's no reason to say, "I had to force myself to offer the burnt offering sacrifice" if there is no internal conflict here. Meaning he violated his conscience. We can sympathize with a leader who is under immense pressure due to the imminent battle with a superior foe, who is dealing with anxiety in the ranks, desertion, the need to prove himself, and the fact that he has waited the seven days commanded by Samuel. As his troops dwindle and resources become scarce it reveals two faulty beliefs: (1) A belief that his victory was dependent on the size of his human army, rather than the LORD. (2) It reveals a faulty theology that puts ritualism before heartfelt obedience. Leading to our next point...

In his impatience, he offers the thing he's not authorized to do, gets caught red-handed and then begins to make excuses.

3. Heartfelt obedience is the worship God seeks (1 Samuel 13:13–15).

Samuel said to Saul, “You have been **foolish**. You **have not kept the command** the Lord your God gave you. It was at this time that the Lord would have permanently established your reign over Israel,¹⁴ but now your reign will not endure. The Lord has found a man after his own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over his people because you have not done what the Lord commanded.”¹⁵ Then Samuel went from Gilgal to Gibeah in Benjamin. Saul registered the troops who were with him, about six hundred men. As the days passed and Samuel had not yet arrived, Saul's soldiers began to grow anxious and jumpy as the situation became more dire.

In the text, we can see that Saul clearly recognizes the value of *worship before war*. The Philistines were gearing up for battle, his troops were bailing on him, and Samuel was running late, not showing up when he said he would (v. 11). So, Saul felt an urgency to get on with the war (verse 12). There's a sense in which he desires to just get the worship stuff out of the way so we can get on with the work, even though it is true that he acknowledges the value of worship before warfare.

What Saul missed is that heartfelt worship with sincere and faith-filled hearts, according to God's prescription, is the real battle. You don't need a large army when God is on your side. In fact, 600 troops are twice what Gideon had, and he fared just fine.

The text equates Saul's disobedience with being unwise and foolish. *The phrase, “you have been/acted foolish,” is found in three places: Saul, David, and Asa (v. 13; 2 Sa 24:10 = 1 Ch 21:8; 2 Ch 16:9).* His heart toward disobedience is foolishness. Failing to live and act as the LORD has prescribed is foolishness. The key to this is that the King was to be a man of the Word.

Samuel rescinds the Promise of a permanent monarchy for Saul. By ignoring the prophetic command and devaluing Samuel's office, Saul

forfeits the dynasty that could have been his. Samuel's message to Saul was clear: God had someone else in mind to take Saul's place, someone who would seek the LORD's will and follow after God's heart. A leader of God's choosing. *Saul's failure is no surprise to the Sovereign God of heaven*—God already has a backup plan; turns out that David was Plan A all along.

Illustration: In John 4, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well in Sychar. Breaking societal norms, Jesus engages in a conversation with her, revealing his knowledge of her past and offering the promise of living water. As the conversation unfolds, Jesus transcends cultural barriers, addressing the woman's spiritual thirst. He unveils his identity as the Messiah, and the woman, recognizing him, becomes a witness to her community. This encounter showcases Jesus' heart for the lost, breaking down divisions and revealing his transformative power to satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.

But the story also communicates one powerful theological truth—John 4:19–24 “Sir,” the woman replied, “I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ Jesus told her, “Believe me, woman, an hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We worship what we do know, because salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But an hour is coming, and is now here, when the **true worshipers** will worship the Father in **Spirit and in truth**. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship him. ²⁴ **God is spirit**, and those who worship him must worship in **Spirit and in truth**.”

Conclusion: Saul fails his first critical test as King and aborts his potential. He fears his enemies more than he fears God. He and Israel forget their stories, God's faithfulness and they get their eyes on their circumstances. He puts himself and his office above the prophet—who represents God's authoritative word. He misses the point in worship—he thinks it's about checking the boxes so he can get on with the business of the work of God. And he doesn't see that

worship is the job, worship is the war.