

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

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Saul, the Choice of the Carnal Minded

by Bob DeWaay

“For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God.” (1Corinthians 1:26-29)

A great irony of redemption history is that God consistently chooses to work through the unexpected. Whenever there is an apparently good candidate to be a leader, God passes him up for someone with obvious flaws. The reason, according to the Bible, is that God thereby shows that the outcome is of Him and not of man. He also uses His choice of those who are despised, weak and base to show the greatness of His transforming power. Examples of this are so numerous it is difficult to know where to start. They include: Abraham who was too old, David who was too young, Gideon who was too unimportant, Moses who was too slow of speech, Paul who was too sinful (a persecutor of the church) and nearly every other great person of faith mentioned in the Bible.

The problem with much of what passes for Christianity today is its attraction to the very things God chooses **not** to use: the wealthy, the powerful, the mighty, the handsome, the one with natural “charisma,” the

one who can make it happen. It is not that God cannot use anyone He chooses, but that we overlook the things highly esteemed by God in our talent search on the road to “success.”

“We Want a King”

Saul epitomized the kind of person the carnal minded look for in a king. In a sense, one could say that God “chose” Saul, but only to make him an object lesson to a rebellious people who did not want God to be their king. They wanted a king so they could be like the pagans: “*Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.*’ But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, ‘*Give us a king to judge us.*’ And Samuel prayed to the Lord” (1Samuel 8:5b,6). Samuel was right to be displeased, but God told him to listen to them in spite of their wrong motives: “*And the Lord said to Samuel, Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them*” (1Samuel 8:7). God then told Samuel to warn them that the king they wanted so badly was going to abuse them, and generally make life miserable for them (1Samuel 8:9-17). This was no deterrent: “*Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, and they said, No, but there shall be a king over us*” (1Samuel 8:19).

Since the people wanted a king in order to be like the pagans, God gave them a king that was like a typical pagan king — an abusive, self-centered, egomaniac who nevertheless looked good. “*And he [Kish] had a son whose name was Saul, a choice and handsome man, and there was not a more handsome person than he among the sons of Israel; from his shoulders and up he was taller than any of the people*” (1Samuel 9:2). Samuel was on a mission to find the man God would appoint king. At this time, Saul had not yet devel-

oped the characteristics that would be his undoing. God told Samuel, “*About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel; and he shall deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have regarded My people, because their cry has come to Me.*’ When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord said to him, ‘*Behold, the man of whom I spoke to you! This one shall rule over My people*’” (1Samuel 9:16,17).

Some may wonder at this point what is the problem with Saul. Remember that God had previously predicted his abusive behavior, had revealed that the people’s demand for a king was in fact a rejection of God, and had told Samuel to listen to them anyway. The appointment of Saul was a judgement of God upon a carnal minded people who wanted to be like the world. This is much like previous incidents where God gave people what they demanded as a vivid demonstration of their sin. For example, in **Numbers 11** the people demanded meat, so God gave it to them: “*You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you; because you have rejected the Lord who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, Why did we ever leave Egypt?*” (**Numbers 11:19,20**). The similarity in terminology with the incident that led to Saul becoming king is striking: “*you have rejected the Lord.*”

When carnal minded people want to be like the world, God may indeed give them what they want, **as a judgment upon them**. Saul ended up behaving just as the Lord predicted. **1-Samuel 15** tells the story of Saul’s rebellion and God’s rejection of him. Even after being repeatedly warned and called to repentance, Saul’s attitude never changed: “*Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal*” (1Samuel 15:12b). When faced with his sin, he

still longed for the glory of man: “*Then he said, ‘I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and go back with me, that I may worship the Lord your God’*” (1Samuel 15:30a). Notice that he said to Samuel, “the Lord **your** God,” not “my God.” Saul had only second hand knowledge of God and was filled with the motives of the world. He wanted the accolades of the people but refused to submit to the revealed will of God. He could not bring himself to destroy Agag the king of the Amalekites because he was too much like him. Ironically, it was an Amalekite that killed Saul (see 2Samuel 1:6-16).

Saul stands as an illustration of what happens when God’s people start longing for the things of the world. Eventually they want all the power, prestige and status the world has to offer. They tire of the scandal of the cross, and hate being considered lesser people by the unregenerate who look down on their lowly status. Paul noticed this in his ministry and delighted to find people who were not ashamed of the Lord or of Paul: “*Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,*” (2Timothy 1:8).

Saul Lusts for Glory

Saul had three major areas of wrong motivation in his life that became his undoing. He lusted for the glory of man, he did not take the word of the Lord seriously, and he loved the world so much he refused to take the necessary steps to cut himself off from it. These three problems tempt and afflict many people, even today, especially those in leadership. These sinful attitudes are evident in many of the scandals that have, in recent years, brought shame to highly visible ministries. I believe that they happen when professing Christians lust for the world and refuse to embrace the shame and suffering of the cross.

As we saw earlier, Saul was given to the people in response to their rejection of God and demand to be like the pagans. They wanted a king be-

cause a king could offer them status and glory like the “respectable” nations around them had achieved. They were even willing to give up much of their freedom if they could only have the glory that a king could provide. They were warned: “*He will also take your male servants and your female servants and your best young men and your donkeys, and use them for his work. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his servants. Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.*” (1Samuel 8:16-18, which is only a partial list of the negative consequences of having a king — see verses 11-15). Why would people knowingly “sign up” to be taken advantage of? Because they saw themselves vicariously gaining status through their king.

I have witnessed obviously avaricious preachers take advantage of people in this way: the preachers claimed that if people gave their money to the preacher, the people would thereby become prosperous. A number of times I have tried to warn them, showing them from the Bible that these supposed “great men of God” are teaching false doctrines and taking advantage of people. Ironically, their followers often become angry when so warned and retort, “don’t touch God’s anointed.” They are convinced that these greedy TV preachers are God’s anointed and that by helping them amass ample wealth to live lifestyles like Hollywood movie stars, they will share in the glory. The irony is that David called Saul God’s anointed and refused to harm him (1Samuel 24:6). How fitting, since Saul was so much like many of today’s supposed leaders. David used this phrase because God had anointed Saul king so David refused to kill him when he had the chance. This in no way vindicated Saul’s attitudes or actions, nor showed that people like Saul ought to be honored and revered by the people of God.

Popularity, glory and honor in the eyes of others is not a worthy goal for God’s people. Jesus said, “*You are those*

who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.” (Luke 16:15b). 1Samuel 18:6-8 tells how Saul’s jealously raged against David because David had become more successful in battle. Therefore, Saul set about to try to kill David, but never succeeded. He could not endure having anyone stand in the way of his “glory.” Ironically, this lust for glory caused Saul to act shamefully and led to his downfall.

Ultimately, those who lust for glory will be led astray from the purposes of God in Christ. The things of the world that capture the imaginations of the carnally minded are temporal and already rest under God’s judgment. God has chosen a way to separate the “Sauls” from the “Davids.” He has required that all those who would follow Him embrace the cross. The cross is a shameful scandal to the world. But for those willing to embrace it, the cross will produce a radical change in motives and purposes, and result in eternal life. The cross of Christ appears to the world to be a “shameful scandal” because it involves committing one’s self to following an executed “criminal.” Paul said, “*But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*” (Galatians 6:14). Those whose motivation is a lust for the glory of the world will refuse to embrace the cross. Those who do embrace it have truly given up their hope for the world’s glory.

Perhaps God allows “Sauls” to exist in leadership today for the same reason Saul was king in the Old Testament — to separate those who truly will follow the Lord and those who profess to be God’s people but love the world. The carnally minded will flock to those who follow in Saul’s footsteps. Not long ago I was visiting my parents in Iowa and I turned on a “Christian” broadcast where the leaders of a huge television network were trying to raise money. The worldly behavior was

shocking. Everything was over-done to the point of embarrassment. The dress, jewelry, pomp, self promotion, and melodrama were excessive and distasteful. I was embarrassed that this was being presented as Christianity. Then one of the preachers started to prophesy. He prophesied that the people watching were like the young lad who gave up his lunch so that Jesus could do a miracle. If people would send their money to this TV network, then God could do a miracle.

There is nothing in **John 6** or any of the other Gospels to indicate that without this young lad's lunch Jesus could do no miracle. The point that the Gospel writers are making is that Jesus is God incarnate and that His power over all things shows it. If Jesus is God, then He does not depend on anything outside of Himself to do miracles. Just the opposite is true. The Bible claims that He created the whole universe out of nothing! (see **John 1:3**, **Hebrews 1:2**, & **Colossians 1:16**) The young man and his lunch were incidental. The synoptic gospels do not mention the lad's lunch and John does not say that the young person decided to give his lunch so Jesus could do a miracle. This "prophetic" interpretation is no better than those offered by liberals who claim that no miracle happened; but that the lad's generosity caused everyone to follow his example and share from lunches they had stashed away so there was enough. In both cases wrong motives and premises have caused the misuse of scripture.

Saul Does not Take God's Word Seriously

This contemporary incident shows how the lust for the glory of the world and Saul's second problem (failing to take God's Word seriously) go together. If someone wants something badly enough, he will often twist the truth to get it. God had told Saul to totally destroy the Amalekites (**1Samuel 15:3**), the perpetual enemies of Israel (**1Samuel 15:2**). Saul disobeyed God: "*But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was*

good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (**1Samuel 15:9**). Saul evidently thought that the "good" things from Israel's enemies would make valuable spoil and that by destroying what he did not want anyway, somehow God's command had been obeyed. It is amazing how sin deludes us into thinking that by rationalizing our own behavior, God's will is being done!

God spoke to Samuel, "*I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands.*" And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night" (**1Samuel 15:11**). However, Saul did not even understand what the problem was. When confronted by Samuel, he claimed obedience, blamed the people, and rationalized his behavior.

And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the Lord! I have carried out the command of the Lord." But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" And Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed." (**1Samuel 15:13-15**)

When we do not seek God and love His word, we lose sight of its convicting power. David also sinned against God, but when he was confronted, his heartfelt repentance was recorded forever in **Psalms 51**. This stands in stark contrast to Saul's response.

A few years ago a preacher of the "health and wealth" gospel was confronted by a TV network about his use of funds. It turns out that he was asking people to send in prayer requests which went directly to the bank. The donated money was taken out and deposited and the prayer requests went directly into dumpsters. When asked about what he was gaining from all this, he claimed that the ministry had provided him with a "parsonage." It

turns out that there were three, one being a huge mansion on the Gulf of Mexico with a massive yacht docked out front. Yet he offered spiritual explanations and claimed no wrong doing. Those of Saul's ilk seem oblivious to the problems. They never consider the words of Jesus: "*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows' houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers; therefore you shall receive greater condemnation"* (**Matthew 23:14**).

Samuel reminded Saul of something he apparently had forgotten: "*And Samuel said, 'Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the Lord anointed you king over Israel'*" (**1Samuel 15:17**). Now he was great in his own eyes and God rejected him. Samuel's words to Saul are often repeated and familiar: "*Samuel said, 'Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king.'*" (**1Samuel 15:22,23**). To twist and manipulate the word of God and rationalize rebelling against it, is as blatantly sinful as pagan idol worship. Yet many today feel just as justified as Saul in doing so.

Saul Loves the World

Saul in his rebellion against God spared Agag because he made a value judgement. He destroyed "*everything despised and worthless.*" He surveyed the situation and decided what to keep and what to destroy. It is ironic that the verses quoted at the beginning of this article state that God has chosen the things that are despised by the world to participate in His glorious purpose. The things Saul loved were those hated by God.

The things of the world are all under God's judgement. Saul wanted to spare the "good" ones. The cross shows that nothing less than death can remedy our sin problem and make us right with God. Jesus embraced

death on the cross to bring eternal life to those who deserved eternal damnation. Death on a cross was a curse (**Galatians 3:13**) and exposed the one so sentenced to ridicule and shame. When Jesus endured death on a cross as a common criminal, (though He was sinless and innocent) He insured that people would not become His disciples for the wrong reasons. Embracing the cross will not mean glory, honor, prestige, and accolades from the world. Paul told what happened to him and the other apostles because of the message of the cross: “*we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now*” (**1Corinthians 4:13**). The gold plated cross as a popular ornament is not the executioners device of the first century.

The cross means that everything in my old life, **not just the despised and worthless things**, must die! The “good things” that Saul decided to spare from the worldly enemies of God turned out to be his undoing. Christianity is not a self-betterment religion. It is a way of life that is symbolized by death — death to the world and everything it stands for. It is embracing the crucified and resurrected Messiah and willingly confessing Him before a mocking world. Jesus said, “*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*” (**Mark 8:38**). The context of this teaching was His approaching death on the cross (**Mark 8:31**) and the ramifications of following in the paths of His suffering. In a day when so-called “Christianity” is paraded before us as a religion of money, power, prestige, privilege, and worldly accolades, it is no wonder that Jesus’ statement in **Mark 8:38** makes little sense to many people. Why would anyone be ashamed of something that promises to make you rich and famous?

However, the temptation to be ashamed becomes clear when the claims of the cross are considered: “*And He summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s shall save it.’*” (**Mark 8:34,35**). This

type of statement is not designed to maximize the number of “seekers.” One must pick up and carry an executioner’s device. The reason one would do this in the first century, was because he had been condemned to death. His life in the world was effectively over. He has “lost” his life in this world. For the Christian, this means that we have died to everything for the sake of Christ.

This means that Christ is our Lord and everything belongs to Him. This is the very relationship Saul rejected. He decided what stayed and what went. Saul loved the “good” things of the world. Conversely, true disciples of Jesus have died to this world and come alive to God through the cross. There is a built in incongruity in Christians falling all over each other trying to gain the power, prestige, money, fame, and accolades of the world. Sadly, the great irony of the 1980’s & 90’s is that some who have done the “best” at this are considered the greatest leaders. Like the ancient Israelites, we have wanted so badly to be like the pagans, that we end up with “leaders” who emulate the pagans. Far too often we have Sauls rather than Davids for leaders.

A Man After God’s Heart

Saul was rejected by God; but that is not the end of the story. “*And Samuel said to Saul, ‘You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, for now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure. The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you’*” (**1Samuel 13:14,15**). David was chosen by God. Though suffering sorrow, rejection, tragedy, and failure, David loved God and became the one through whom the lineage of Messiah would come.

The Psalms of David testify of the many difficulties David encountered, but every one of them ends on a note of hope. God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong. Messiah came as a suffering Servant (**Isaiah 53**). **Philippians 2:3-11** tells us of His selfless attitude that we should emulate. If we are to be His witnesses in these last days, we must embrace the cross and die to the world. We must reject

the way of Saul.

Conclusion

I am thankful that when I first became a Christian over 26 years ago, mature and godly teachers made these things clear to me. I was confronted with the cross and told that even the “good” things that I thought I had to offer the Lord were but filthy rags in His sight. I needed to die to my old life and trust Him to make me a new creature in Christ. The radical call to discipleship seemed to me to be Biblical and from God. Sadly, I have failed many times to live up to this truth, but it provides a baseline to get back on track. It is sad how often pride and selfish motives have delayed what God is seeking to do in my life. But I am thankful that I heard the truth early on and that it continues to change my life.

What alarms me is that so many who are coming to Christian churches today do not even hear these things. How are we to be changed from self-centered sinners to cross-embracing disciples when all we hear is how great we are and how popular and wealthy we can become now that we have Christ? Had I heard **that** message and responded to it 26 years ago I shudder to think of the horrible outcome. I am convinced that we need again to emphasize the message of the cross. There is a whole generation who have been fed a worldly version of Christianity that is likely to turn out more Sauls than anything else. If those of us who know better say nothing, we are not fulfilling our responsibilities to the Lord and the people He has sent us to minister to. In the early days of my Christian life, I heard older men preach on Saul and the Amalekites, and it struck home to me. I offer this article to those who have yet to hear this message and in thankfulness to those who first preached it to me.

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