When Fear Overwhelms Us
1 Samuel 13
Bellevue Baptist
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If you would, open your Bible with me to 1 Samuel 13, where we continue our series The Search for the King.

If you are a fan of the Olympic games, I'm sure you know the story of Lindsey Vonn and all that she has gone through. Lindsey, one of the most decorated skiers of all time, had come out of retirement at the age of 41 to make one final run at Olympic glory. Just days before the competition, she tore her ACL. For most athletes, that would have ended the dream. But Vonn was determined to compete anyway.

Americans were cheering her on. We couldn't believe she was going for it, with such a significant injury, and we were all nervous as her race began. Hopes were high, but 13 seconds into her downhill run, she clipped a gate, lost control, and crashed violently, suffering a devastating injury that required an airlift off the mountain.

It was heartbreaking. Her Olympic dream was over almost before it started. And I thought of her as I was studying our passage this week, and what happened to Saul. His reign is virtually over right after it started. If you remember last week, this reluctant young king was caught hiding in the baggage on inauguration day. He was afraid to step forward and embrace the opportunity God had given him.

This young man had so much going for him. God has chosen him, Samuel has anointed him, and the Spirit of God has empowered him. Everything was in place for an incredible story, but he's about to crash. In 1 Samuel 13, Saul makes a disastrous decision.

Let me set the context for you. Here's what's happening.

Saul has assembled a small army of 3,000 men and is in his first moment of military battle, and the enemy, the Philistines have shown up with 3,000 chariots, and 6,000 horsemen. The enemy is overwhelming, and fear begins spreading through the ranks.

Now, look at 1 Samuel 13, verses 6 and 7:

When 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. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul, however, was still at Gilgal, and all his troops were gripped with fear. 1 Samuel 13:6-7

As I said before, fear is a powerful emotion and when fear gets bigger than our faith, it can cause problems. This passage reveals what fear does.

What Fear Does

1. **Fear creates pressure, which reveals what's inside of us (vv. 1–7)**

In the opening verses of this chapter, Saul sees his army dissolve and the pressure on him was intense. Pressure doesn't create our character–it reveals it. We find out what we're made of, under pressure.

It's easy to trust God when everything is going well. But what happens when the odds are stacked against us? When people begin abandoning us? When God seems silent? So here's my question for you today: What is the pressure in your life right now that's testing your trust in God?

Take a moment and let the Holy Spirit bring something to the surface. What is that thing in your life right now that isn't right? That situation that's robbing you of rest? That problem you can't seem to get off your mind? Most likely, there's fear attached to it. You're afraid of what might happen. You're afraid that if you don't handle this just right, things could go south in a hurry. And so you worry. You rehearse the worst-case scenarios. You lie awake at night trying to figure out how to fix something that may be completely outside your control.

But Jesus reminds us that worrying cannot add a single hour to our lives. The right thing now is to accept the challenge and to make the most of it. To trust the Lord and move forward.

This reminds me of one of my favorite moments in *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo Baggins has discovered that the little ring he inherited, the one that could make him invisible, carries a terrible burden. The Ring must be destroyed, and Frodo finds himself caught up in a dangerous mission he never asked for. He's overwhelmed. He's frightened. And he looks at the great wizard Gandalf and says:

"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.

“So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

–*Fellowship of the Ring*, J.R.R. Tolkien

Isn't that powerful? We don't get to choose all the trials that come into our lives. Sometimes, the trials choose us. Nobody asks for a cancer diagnosis. Nobody volunteers for the dysfunctional family. Nobody puts a financial disaster on the calendar.

Nobody wakes up and says, "Lord, I'd love a season of overwhelming uncertainty."

But sometimes those seasons come anyway. And when they do, the question isn't, "Why did this happen to me?" The better question is, "What am I going to do with the circumstances God has allowed into my life?" Because pressure has a way of revealing what's inside us. It reveals whether we really trust the Lord or whether we've simply learned to trust our own ability to keep life under control. And that's where Saul finds himself.

He didn't choose the size of the Philistine army. He couldn't control the soldiers who were running away. But he could choose whether he would trust God in the middle of it all.

Now, let's move on in the story and see what happens next.

Remember, Saul is watching his army disintegrate. His soldiers are running scared and he’s desperately trying to hold things together. But there's another problem. He's waiting for Samuel to arrive. The prophet Samuel had instructed Saul to wait seven days, and Saul knows that he's supposed to wait for the prophet before moving forward. But the clock is ticking…

And this brings us to the second thing fear does.

2. Fear makes us impatient, tempting us to take matters into our own hands (vv. 8–12)

Look at verses 8–9:

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. So Saul said, “Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings.” Then he offered the burnt offering.

This was a huge mistake. Then v.10..

Just as he finished offering the burnt offering, Samuel arrived. So Saul went out to greet him, 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, 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.” 1 Samuel 13:10–12

Now, don't miss what's happening here. God had established a distinction between the role of the king and the role of the priest. The king was responsible for leading the nation, but the priests had been set apart for the sacred work of offering sacrifices to God. Samuel, who served as a prophet and judge, had specifically instructed Saul to wait for him, but just as life often goes–things do not happen at the speed we prefer. Saul takes matters into his own hands and offers the sacrifice himself, stepping outside the boundaries God had established for him.

I can relate to Saul’s struggle. Waiting on God starts to feel like doing nothing. That works for a while and then it’s easier to say–well, God, if you’re going to sit on your hands, I’ll do something with mine, but just because you feel compelled to do something doesn't mean God has given you permission to do it. Part of being a Christian is learning to wait on the Holy Spirit.

In an old book on the power of the Spirit, author R.A. Torrey writes:

The Holy Spirit guides us in the details of daily life and service, as to where to go, where not to go, what to do and what not to do…

There is no doubt that Philip met many people as he journeyed to Gaza, before he met the one of whom the Spirit said: “Go near and join thyself to this chariot.” In the same way, the Spirit is ready to guide us in our personal work. He is ready to guide us in all the affairs of life. –R.A. Torrey

Now, what is this story that Torrey points us to? Who was Philip? Philip was an ordinary man in Acts 8, a man full of the Holy Spirit and boldly preaching the Gospel. He wasn’t sure where to go with the message. An angel instructed Philip to travel toward Gaza, without explaining why. Along the way, the Spirit directed him to approach a chariot carrying a high-ranking Ethiopian official who was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Philip obeyed, explained the Gospel, and the man became a follower of Jesus. Christian tradition associates this encounter with the spread of Christianity into Ethiopia. This is often how God works. He doesn't show us the entire road. He gives us enough light to take the next step. Saul, on the other hand, knew exactly what God had told him to do, but didn't.

And this brings us to the third thing fear does.

2. **Fear can force decisions we later regret (vv. 13–23)**

Saul was so desperate to save his army at that moment that he made a decision that would cost him the future of his kingdom.

Look at what Samuel says to him in verse 13.

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, 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."1 Samuel 13:13–14

I don't know about you, but this passage feels almost graceless to me. I've had to wrestle with it.

I mean, my goodness, Saul was a rookie! He'd never been a king before. He was still figuring this whole thing out. And to his credit, he actually waited seven days for Samuel. It wasn't his fault Samuel hadn't shown up! And what did Saul do that was so terrible? He offered a sacrifice! It's not like he built a temple to Baal or erected a golden calf. He was trying to seek God's favor before going into battle.

I'm a little surprised God didn't just give him a hard slap on the wrist. Maybe put him in timeout for seven days. Give him a stern warning and say, "Saul, don't ever do that again."

But to take the kingdom away from his family this early in the game? To rip the ball out of his hands when he's barely had a chance to run a play? Doesn't that seem a little extreme? So what do we make of this?

Well, there are a handful of other moments in Scripture that remind me of this one.

Do you remember the story of Achan in Joshua 7? The Israelites had just experienced a miraculous victory at Jericho and were beginning to take possession of the Promised Land. God had specifically commanded them not to take any of the devoted things from the city. But Achan secretly took treasure and buried those things beneath his tent. Nobody knew what he had done, but God knew. Eventually, Achan's sin was exposed, and he and his household faced a devastating judgment. At the very beginning of Israel's conquest, God sends the strong message: take obedience seriously.

Another example is Ananias and Sapphira, in Acts 5. The early church in Jerusalem was experiencing an extraordinary movement of God. Believers were selling property and generously sharing the proceeds to care for one another. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property but secretly kept some of the money while pretending they had given the entire amount. They wanted the reputation of generosity without making the sacrifice. When Peter confronted Ananias about lying to the Holy Spirit, he fell down dead. A few hours later, Sapphira repeated the deception and suffered the same fate. The Bible says great fear seized the entire church. Again, at the very beginning of something new God was doing, He made it unmistakably clear that His people must walk in truth and integrity.

Both of those stories occur at the beginning of something new God is doing among His people. Achan's sin comes as Israel is beginning to take possession of the Promised Land. Ananias and Sapphira's deception comes as the early church is being established. And here, Saul's disobedience comes at the beginning of Israel's monarchy.

In each case, God seems to be sending a message that will echo for generations.

God's work must be done God's way.

And no amount of pressure, fear, or good intentions gives us permission to disregard what God has clearly commanded.

Francis Schaffer said:

Let us not think that waiting on the Lord will mean getting less done. The truth is that by doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way we will accomplish more, not less. You need not fear that if you wait for God's Spirit you will not get as much done as if you charge ahead in the flesh. After all, who can do the most, you or the God of heaven and Earth? –Francis Schaeffer

The tragedy of Saul stands as a reminder to all of us–that waiting on the Lord is always better than charging head in the flesh.

Where has God told you to be content, but you are restless? To walk slowly, but you fight the urge to run? To let Him provide, but you daily struggle to go and get it yourself. This is a word for someone today, and you know who you are. The Bible is always on time.

Now, with my time remaining, let me unpack some questions that rise from the passage.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

I've been praying about something for years, and nothing seems to change. How do I keep my faith from turning into frustration with God?

That's a complicated question because the Bible offers us two different perspectives, and both are true. One is what we don't want to hear. The other is what we do want to hear.

Let's start with what we don't want to hear.

In 2 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul tells us about a thorn in his flesh. We don't know exactly what it was, but we know it was a persistent problem that caused him great pain. Three times, Paul pleaded with the Lord to take it away. He begged God to remove this burden from his life.

And God's answer was no. Listen to what the Lord said to him: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9) In other words, Paul, I'm not going to take this away. I'm going to give you the grace to live with it. And through this weakness, you're going to experience a dimension of My power that you would never have known otherwise.

Sometimes God doesn't remove the pain because He's doing something through the pain. He's developing a depth of character, a tenderness of heart, and a dependence on Him that could never be developed any other way. Years ago, I met with a pastor search team of a church in Washington D.C. I wasn't interested in the position. I had just landed in my new role at Lifeway, but the team wanted to know if I had any advice for them as they began their search. I said, “Well, let me ask– What are you looking for in your next pastor?”

I'll never forget their answer.

They said, “We're looking for a man who has suffered. We believe the best pastors are those who understand what it's like to struggle."

I was so impressed by that answer. They weren't looking for the most polished preacher or the most impressive résumé. They wanted a shepherd who had cried real tears, wrestled with real disappointments, and learned to trust God when life didn't make sense.

And that follows the pattern of Paul's life. Some of the greatest things God does in us happen through the things He chooses not to remove from us. But there's another side to this question. Sometimes God doesn't say no. Sometimes He says, “Not yet. Keep praying.”

One of my favorite examples of this comes from the life of Elijah in 1 Kings 18. Israel had been suffering through a devastating drought for three and a half years. The land was parched. The crops were dying. People were desperate for rain. And then God told Elijah that He was going to send rain. Now, you would think that would settle it. God had made a promise. Rain was coming. But Elijah did something fascinating. He climbed to the top of Mount Carmel, bent down to the ground, put his face between his knees, and began to pray. Then he sent his servant to look toward the sea. The servant came back and said, “There's nothing.” So, Elijah prayed again. And he sent the servant back again. Nothing.

A third time. Nothing. A fourth time. Nothing. A fifth time. Nothing. A sixth time. Still nothing!

Can you imagine? God had promised rain, and Elijah was praying for the very thing God had promised, but the sky remained empty. And then, on the seventh trip, the servant returned with a report. "I see a cloud the size of a man's hand rising from the sea." That's it. One little cloud. But Elijah knew what it meant. He told Ahab to get in his chariot and head home because a mighty rainstorm was coming. And before long, the sky grew dark, the wind began to blow, and the rain came pouring down. Now, here's what I love about this story.

God had already promised the rain, but Elijah still had to pray for it. And he didn't just pray once. He kept praying when there was no visible evidence that anything was happening. I wonder how many times we stop praying because we've looked toward the sea a few times and haven't seen a cloud. We assume that because nothing is happening visibly, nothing is happening spiritually.

Don't mistake an empty sky for an absent God. Elijah reminds us that the absence of visible progress is not proof that God isn't at work.

So here's the tension we have to learn to live with. Sometimes God gives us the grace to endure what He doesn't remove. And sometimes God calls us to keep asking until He answers. And the hard part is that we don't always know which kind of season we're in. So what do we do? We keep praying. We keep trusting. We keep bringing that burden before the Lord. We surrender our preferred outcome without surrendering our faith that God can intervene.

A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:

If Christianity is supposed to be about grace, why does this passage seem to be all about obedience and punishment? There seems to be a lack of grace in Old Testament stories.

That's a fair question. And I think part of the confusion comes from a common misunderstanding about the Bible. Some people have this idea that the Old Testament is all about law and judgment, while the New Testament is all about grace and forgiveness. It's almost as though there are two different gods in the Bible. The God of the Old Testament is angry, demanding, and ready to punish people for stepping out of line. But the God of the New Testament is loving, patient, and willing to let people off the hook for their shortcomings.

But that's simply not true.

For one thing, the New Testament has plenty to say about the judgment of God. Just read the book of Revelation! It describes a coming day when God will pour out His wrath upon a rebellious world that has rejected Him and chosen to worship the creation rather than the Creator. Jesus Himself spoke repeatedly about judgment, hell, and the eternal consequences of rejecting God. The New Testament describes a final judgment, when Satan and his angels will be cast into the lake of fire. It's not all sunshine and rainbows!

And on the other side, the Old Testament is overflowing with examples of God's kindness, patience, mercy, and grace. Think about Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. They rebelled against the one command God had given them, and yet God came looking for them in the garden. He clothed their nakedness and gave them a second chance.

Or think about Abraham in Genesis 12. God chose a man from a family that worshiped idols and made an extraordinary covenant with him.

Or remember Israel and the golden calf in Exodus 32–34. God had just delivered His people from Egypt, and they turned around and worshiped an idol! Yet God renewed His covenant with them and described Himself as "a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth."

So don't ever let someone convince you that the Old Testament reveals an angry God, and the New Testament reveals a loving God. It's the same God from Genesis to Revelation.

God has always been holy, and God has always been gracious. He has always taken sin seriously, and He has always delighted in showing mercury. The cross is where all of this comes together.

At the cross of Jesus Christ, we see both sides of God's character displayed more clearly than anywhere else in Scripture. We see the seriousness of sin because Jesus had to die to pay its penalty. But we also see the astonishing love of God because He willingly sent His own Son to bear that penalty for us. The cross doesn't mean God stopped caring about obedience. It means God loved sinners enough to make a way for them to be forgiven and transformed.

So where is the grace in Saul's story?

Well, remember that Saul's story isn't over in chapter 13. God doesn't strike him dead. He doesn't immediately remove him from the throne. Saul continues to reign and one of the saddest parts of his story is that Saul was more concerned about preserving his position than cultivating a repentant heart.

The good news for us is that when we come to Jesus Christ in genuine repentance and faith, we discover that the same God who takes our sin seriously is the God who has made a way to forgive it completely.

A Student Asks:

When I'm anxious about my future, what's one practical thing I can do?

You're going to find my answer surprising. Tell someone. That's right. Find someone you trust and tell them you're afraid. I was this photo on social media the other day…

“Best thing I ever did was stop telling people what’s going on in my life.”

That may be good advice when it comes to posting every moment of your day for the world to see, but it’s bad advice when dealing with fear.

God gave us the emotion of fear, in part, to remind us that we weren't designed to do life alone. We need Him, and we need other people, and sometimes one of the healthiest things we can do for our souls is to sit down with someone who walks closely with the Lord and admit that we're struggling.

Imagine sitting down with a trusted Christian friend or mentor and saying, “Can I count on you to pray for me? I'm dealing with a lot of fear about my future. I'm afraid I'm not hearing God's voice clearly. I'm afraid I'm going to marry the wrong person or choose the wrong major in college. Or honestly, I'm afraid my parents are going to split up. They've been fighting a lot lately, and I don't know what to do.”

You know what happens when we have the courage to say things like that? We invite intimacy into our lives. We give someone permission to step into our struggle. Biblical counselor Chip Dodd writes:

When you’re afraid, and you reach out for someone to be with you, you become part of your own healing. Reaching to another and to God acknowledges your inability to heal alone, and in reaching you find care, assurance, and help in another.

–Chip Dodd, *The Voice of the Heart*

Isn't that insightful? It’s a call to humility. It takes a humble person to say, “I need help.” A prideful person puts on a confident face and pretends he’s got everything under control. And the more we hide, the more isolated we become. That's why James 5:16 tells us to pray for one another. And Galatians 6:2 tells us to carry one another's burdens. God never intended for us to face life's uncertainties all by ourselves.

So, here's my challenge to you. The next time you find yourself overwhelmed with fear about your future, don't just sit alone and worry. Pick up the phone. Invite someone to coffee. Find a godly person you trust and tell them what's going on inside your heart.

Don't be afraid to tell someone you're afraid.

You may discover that the very thing you've been trying to hide becomes the doorway to a deeper friendship, a stronger faith, and a fresh experience of God's grace.