

SAUL, The Self-Acclaimed Fool

by Walton Weaver

The word “fool” appears fifty-six times in the King James Version of the Bible. Of these, forty-eight of them are in the Old Testament and eight in the New Testament. Most of the Old Testament references are in the wisdom books of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, but primarily in the book of Proverbs (32 occurrences). The most familiar in the book of Psalms is the passage which says that the one who says in his heart there is no God is a fool (Ps. 14:1). My own favorites from the book of Proverbs are the following:

- “He that hideth hatred with lying lips, and he that uttereth a slander, is a fool” (10:18)
- “It is as sport to a fool to do mischief: but a man of understanding hath wisdom” (10:23)
- “He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind: and the fool shall be servant to the wise of heart” (11:29)
- “The way of the fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise” (12:15)
- “A wise man feareth, and departeth from evil: but the fool rageth and is confident” (14:16)
- “A fool despiseth his father’s instruction: but he that regardeth reproof is prudent” (15:5)
- “Better is the poor that walketh in his integrity, than he that is perverse in his lips, and is a fool” (19:1)
- “It is an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling” (20:3)
- “Speak not in the ears of a fool: for he will despise the wisdom of thy words” (23:9)
- “As snow in summer, and as rain in harvest, so honour is not seemly for a fool” (26:1)
- “As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly” (26:11)
- “A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards” (29:11)
- “Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? There is more hope of a fool than of him” (29:20)

In the New Testament, Jesus called the rich farmer of Luke 12:13-21 a “fool” because he worked simply to store up more and more of the fruits of his labors while ignoring God in his life. Paul also used the word to identify people in various situations (1 Cor. 3:18; 15:36). When he found it necessary in 2 Corinthians to glory somewhat in his own sufferings in order to defend his apostleship, he conceded that he was using the language of a fool (2 Cor. 11:23; 12:6, 11).

Who Is A Fool?

So what does it mean for one to be a fool? Basically the word “fool” means “without reason, senseless, foolish” (Arndt-Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*: 72). The word “foolish” appears almost fifty times in Scripture, so the two words, “fool” and “foolish,” when added together are used about one hundred times in the King James Version of the Bible.

When looking for self-acclaimed fools in the Bible we probably should not count the times Paul admits to acting as a fool in speaking of his sufferings as an apostle. Paul was not really

acting foolishly, but he certainly was made to feel like a fool, and others no doubt would consider him to be acting foolishly by using his own sufferings in his defense. It made him appear to be glorying in himself. If we omit Paul, as I am convinced we should, then the only time we have a frank admission from anyone in the Bible that he had been a fool is when Saul, the first king of Israel, said, “I have sinned: return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold, *I have played the fool*, and have erred exceedingly” (1 Sam. 26:21, emphasis mine, ww).

Saul is a clear case of one who truly played the fool. There is no room for doubt here. He is one who had acted without reason both before God and in his treatment of David, and Saul was honest enough to see it and admit it. This is not usually true of those who act this way. But notice, first, before Saul began to play the fool—

He Had Much Going For Him

Like others who had gone before, and many who have come after him, there were many things that were true of Saul that if used as intended they would have made him do better.

1. *He was from a prominent and wealthy family.* Saul’s father is described as “a mighty man of valor” (1 Sam. 9:1). His father being of great wealth and substance shows that his family was of high consideration in the tribe of Benjamin, even though Saul himself, “adopting the common forms of affected humility which Oriental people are wont to use” (Jamieson, I, Part 2: 154), describes it as “the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin” (v. 21).

2. *He was a choice young man and handsome.* The word “goodly” in First Samuel 9:2 is rendered “handsome” in the NASB. The verse goes on to say that “there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he,” i. e., a more handsome man. In addition to this, he was a head higher than any of the people. When we put it all together we have a man with the strength and looks of youth, and a very good-looking young man at that! As one person put it, “a gigantic stature and an athletic frame must have been a popular recommendation at that time in that country.” But has there ever been a time and a country where such a young man did not receive a “popular recommendation”? Such a person, at least from the physical side of his makeup, was surely very well suited to serve as king over Israel.

3. *He had a changed heart.* After Saul had been chosen by God as the first king of Israel, according to First Samuel 10:9, “God gave him another heart.” This appears to be a way of informing that God was instrumental in leading Saul in another direction and enabling him to now give himself wholly to the administration of his kingdom. With his new heart Saul was no longer burdened with other matters such as being concerned about his livelihood. Instead he now had the heart of a statesman, a general, a prince. Matthew Henry describes this change in the following way: “A new fire was kindled in his breast, such as he had never before been acquainted with: seeking the asses is quite out of his mind, and he thinks of nothing but fighting the Philistines, redressing the grievances of Israel, making laws, administering justice, and

providing for the public safety; these are the things that now fill his head” (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2: 260).

4. He was a humble man. First, notice Saul’s response when he is first informed by Samuel of God’s plan to appoint him as king over Israel. Even though Samuel does not say he is God’s choice in these words, his question to Saul, “And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on thee, and on all thy father’s house?” implies as much. Saul clearly understood what he meant, and with this understanding, he asked Samuel, “Am not I a Benjaminite, 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?” (1 Sam. 9:21). In other words, “I’m not important enough to be king over Israel, am I”?

Second, when they were looking for Saul to present him to the people he was hard to find. He was not seeking the attention of the people, even after he had been told what God had planned for him. Where was he found? The Bible says “he was hid among the stuff” (1 Sam. 10:22). His humility is apparent in this statement. He was not seeking a place of prominence in God’s kingdom. This is one of the most important qualities for success in God’s work.

5. He was numbered among the prophets. Saul was told that he would meet a company of prophets who would prophesy, and that he also would receive the Spirit of God, “and . . . prophesy with them, and . . . be turned into another man” (1 Sam. 10:5-6). It was after this promise that God gave him another heart and the signs promised to him were fulfilled. After Saul prophesied as promised, the people began to say one to another, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (1 Sam. 10:10-11).

We might think that in light of all these advantages, surely such a man would not fail, would he? But in spite of all of these things in his favor,

He Still Played The Fool

It is sad to hear from Saul himself, “God is departed from me, and answereth me no more” (1 Sam. 28:15). What had Saul done to lead him to this sad conclusion, “I have played the fool”? Several things may be noted.

1. He disobeyed God. The fact that he disobeyed God belongs at the top of the list. And he did so more than once. The first example of Saul’s disregard for God’s word is when he went up to Gilgal ahead of Samuel and offered a burnt offering unto God. Samuel had told him to go ahead of him, “and, behold, I will come down to thee, to offer burnt offerings, and to sacrifice sacrifices of peace offerings: seven days shalt thou tarry, till I come to thee, and show thee what thou shalt do” (1 Sam. 10:8). But Saul got impatient while waiting for Samuel. The Bible says that he waited for the seven days as instructed, but when Samuel did not arrive in the specified time Saul took it on himself to offer up the burnt offering (1 Sam. 13:8-10). When Samuel arrived he rebuked Saul for his misdeed and said he had acted foolishly: “Thou has acted

foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee” (1 Sam. 13:13). Because of his disobedience Samuel told him that God would take his kingdom away from him and give it to another, even to the David, “a man after his own heart” (vv. 13-14).

Saul also disobeyed God when he failed to slay Agag and he “spared . . . the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them” (1 Sam. 15:9). God had told him that he was to “smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (v. 3). Samuel described Saul’s sin as “rebellion” against God (v. 23). As in the former case, so in this instance as well, Saul’s attempts to justify his actions were rejected. He finally admitted, “I have sinned” (v. 30), but it seems to have been an empty confession, and it was too late..

2. *He became envious of David’s successes.* We are impressed with his unselfishness that seemed to characterize him before when he refused to destroy the sons of Belial for not bringing gifts to the new king (1 Sam. 10:27). Evidently it was expected that they bring such gifts. But Saul “held his peace.” Yet after Saul had disobeyed God and he had been told that the kingdom would be taken from him, we see a different man. When Saul returned from the slaughter of the Philistines, “the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet king Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of musick. And the women answered one another as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” (1 Sam. 18:6-7). Upon hearing this, we are told, “And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him And Saul eyed David from that day and forward” (vv. 8-9). A wise man tells us that envy “is the rottenness of the bones” (Prov.14:30). Saul had developed this terrible disease.

3. *He imagined troubles that were not there.* It is easy to become delusionary when we are jealous of others. We begin to imagine things that are not true. Saul simply would not believe that David would do him no harm and that he actually sought what was good for him. Jonathan told Saul to stop sinning against David, “because his works have been to theeward very good” (1 Sam. 19:4). But Saul would not believe him. When one reaches this state of mind he gives meaning to words that are not there, and he begins to interpret things that people do in the opposite way in which they were meant. He begins to fear the worst and becomes afraid of troubles that will never happen. Saul had become like that.

4. *He was unfair to David.* Saul was telling David he loved him while trying to kill him. He told his servants to go and tell David “secretly,” “Behold, the king hath delight in thee, and all his servants love thee: now therefore be the king’s son in law” (1 Sam. 18:22). It is hard for us to imagine that Saul would give David a wife (his younger daughter, Michal, who loved David, v. 20) only to take her back. But that’s what he planned. It was only a pretense of love on Saul’s part to provide him with an opportunity to kill him. David was the greatest asset to Saul’s kingdom, but Saul did not have the good sense to see it. David had respect for Saul and loved Jonathan, Saul’s son, as if he were his own son. He had opportunities to kill Saul but

always spared his life.

Big men like David do great things in the kingdom of God. Little men like Saul are envious of those who are able to do more than they can—or else do it better, and they get on the wrong track by majoring in trifles and do everything they can to destroy them. When they do, like Saul, they do no more than “play the fool.”