

MISSING GOD'S HONOR ROLL

"And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets." Hebrews 11:32

Gideon! Barak! Samson! Jephthah! Samuel! David! There's a name that is missing! Where was Saul when God called the roll of the heroes of the faith? His name is not there. We look for it in vain. The absence of Saul's name in this verse speaks louder than pages of criticism and volumes of censure.

If you would go to West Point and walk into the old cadet chapel, you would observe on the east wall the black marble shields with the names of the major generals of the Revolutionary War. On each shield there are four lines, first the rank of the general, under that his name, under that the date of his birth, and under that the date of his death. There were twenty-nine major generals in the Revolutionary War, and there are twenty-nine shields. You will see the shield of Greene, of Gates, of Steuben, of Lafayette, and of all the others. You will find the shield of Arnold at the back, in the far corner, almost hidden by the gallery rail. On that tablet you will read this inscription -- Major General, _____, Born 1740, and _____.

There are many significant and striking things at the Academy. There are captured cannon, and tattered battle flags, and magnificent monuments. But nothing is any more significant than the missing name of Benedict Arnold. Upon the roll of honor on the walls of the old West Point chapel is a missing name -- the name of Arnold. Upon the roll of honor of God's heroes of the faith there is a missing name -- the name of Saul.

In thinking about Saul, you will recall that an unworthy motive prompted the Israelites to insist on having a king. That motive was expressed in the words of their elders to Samuel: "Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." This request was very displeasing to Samuel, and he hesitated to grant it; in fact, he advised against it and warned them of its consequences. Unwilling to heed Samuel's advice, they replied, "Nay; but we will have a king over us; that we also may be like all the nations." Like the other nations, they were especially interested in procuring a king who would be an outstanding military leader.

Saul was ultimately chosen to be the king. In many respects he is the supremely tragic figure of the Old Testament. He is commonly regarded as the greatest failure of all the kings of Israel. His life is certainly an effective illustration of the progressiveness of sin. As a means of instruction and warning to us, let us center our thoughts around the three logical divisions of his career.

I. Saul's Early Manhood Was Promising.

Saul was the son of Kish, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. Kish was a well-to-do farmer, so Saul had the advantages of rural environment and upbringing. He not only enjoyed the highest privileges of training which his day afforded, but his father wisely provided useful employment for him.

1. Saul was exceptionally attractive.

He was in the springtime of life with his best years yet before him.

"How beautiful is youth, how bright it gleams,
With its allusions, aspirations, dreams,
Book of beginnings, story without end,
Each maid a heroine, each man a friend."

Saul's personality exerts a strange fascination even today. Our contemplation of him should increase our appreciation of young people -- their capacities and their possibilities. Saul was very handsome -- tall in stature, graceful in build, princely in bearing, and kingly in appearance. He was good to look

at, and he was also worthy of admiration and confidence. He was amiable in his temper and laudable in his conduct. His majestic and impressive appearance commanded the admiration and respect of a nation that was fond of pomp and grandeur.

2. Saul was genuinely humble.

Most great men are. Saul did not suffer from family pride or personal conceit. When he was in the prime of early manhood, his father told him to take a servant and go in search of his asses which had wandered from their pasture and were lost. With alacrity and cheerfulness Saul obeyed. He was not too big to work faithfully at such a lowly task. In obedience to his father, he simply did as he was told, without asking a question or offering an objection.

When Samuel told Saul that he was to be the king of Israel, he replied with becoming modesty: "Am not I a Benjamite, 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?" Samuel anointed Saul privately by pouring a little vial of oil upon his head. When the people assembled at Mizpeh for the public election of their king, they cast lots and Saul was chosen, thus his private anointing was publicly ratified. While the voting proceeded, Saul had fled because he did not consider himself qualified for the position. They dragged him from among the baggage where he had modestly concealed himself, and the people acclaimed him king. After receiving words of counsel from Samuel, king though he was, Saul returned home and resumed his old work on his father's farm.

3. Saul was unusually courageous.

When the ruthless Ammonites made their outrageous demands, Saul displayed unusual courage by rallying the nation to arms with his stirring call, by arranging them in effective military style, by ordering an offensive, and by marching to the relief of the besieged inhabitants. The Ammonites were completely routed, and Saul was the hero of the hour. He was a good soldier and a superb general.

II. Saul's Middle Life Was Perilous.

1. He trifled with temptation.

The first few years of his reign were marked by successes at home and abroad. He distinguished himself in various ways. He organized an army for the defense of Israel against the Philistines. Samuel charged him to wait seven days for his arrival. Because Samuel tarried and the people were scattering, Saul intruded into the office of the high priest and offered the burnt offering.

2. He disobeyed the commands of God.

God commanded him to destroy completely the Amalekites -- men, women, children, flocks, and herds. Saul executed the order with dispatch and efficiency, except he took the king, Agag, captive, and retained the best of the flocks as booty. In other words, Saul obeyed God only in so far as it suited his whim to do so. Through all these centuries, that has been man's trouble. Man has thought he has known better than God, therefore, he has been unwilling to obey His commands. But, to presume to vary one iota from God's expressed commands is gross disobedience in His sight.

When Samuel charged Saul with having violated the Divine command, he adopted the miserable subterfuge of putting the blame upon those over whom he exercised authority. He insisted that the people reserved the best of the sheep and the cattle in order that they might offer them as sacrifices to God. Whereupon Samuel replied, "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice."

Added to his disobedience was the sin of falsehood and deception. He lied to Samuel by telling him that he had performed according to the commandment of God, when he had done so only in so far as he saw fit to do so. When his disobedience and lying were exposed, he reasoned that if the action was wrong to a certain extent, the motive was excellent as they meant to devote the prey to religious purposes. However, his plea of a good intention was both frivolous and false.

3. He became insanely jealous.

When by his prowess in war David gained the applause of the people, and Saul heard them singing: "Saul has slain his thousands and David has slain his tens of thousands," he became insanely jealous. Both secretly and openly he sought David's life, and his cruelty to David hastened his own fall.

III. Saul's Last Days Were Pitiful.

Samuel made it perfectly clear that failure was inevitable on account of Saul's disobedience. Saul had to have help, but he did not know where to find it. He did not feel that he could appeal to God because he had never repented of his sin. What could he do? Where should he go? In sheer desperation he turned to an old witch who had hidden herself in a cave when he had banished her in his better days. Early in his reign he had driven such characters out of the land. Now he has decided to consult one of that obnoxious number. Ah, how men change with sinful years! What once they did not think themselves capable of doing they come to do. That which they scorned others for doing they at length do themselves.

Saul knew that spiritualism was wrong because it was forbidden in the holy scriptures. Deuteronomy 18:9-12a. The whole spiritualistic traffic represents a curiosity which God abominates.

In the great battle on the slopes of Mount Gilboa on the next day, Israel was defeated and Saul's army fled, but Saul fought on with his old-time courage and heroism, until he was dangerously wounded by the Philistine archers. When his three sons had fallen at his side, then Saul, seeing that he had lost his sons and his kingdom, and feeling that he had nothing further to live for, begged his armourbearer to take his sword and thrust it through him. When he refused to do so, Saul, in his desperation, took his sword, fixed the hilt firmly in the ground, and then fell with his full weight upon the upturned point and committed suicide. There could scarcely have been a sadder end to a very promising career. Saul's life made be accurately summarized in these words: early promise, gradual deterioration, and ruinous fall. He made the terrible mistake of leaving God out of his life, and as a result he missed God's honor roll. In summarizing his own life, he said, "I have played the fool." What a different life his would have been if he had only repented of his sin and lived in accordance with the will of God!

Saul missed God's honor roll, in spite of all his splendid qualities and great possibilities, because he would not let God have His way in his life.

In driving my car I sometimes marvel at the wonderful way in which it responds to my will. The least pressure on the gas, and it leaps forward. The foot pressed on the brake, and it slows down. And sometimes when driving alone, I pray this prayer, "Oh, God, make me as obedient to Thy will as this car is to mine!" And one thing is absolutely sure, and that is, if we are truly obedient to His will, we shall not miss God's honor roll.