

Hanging out With Heros

SAUL

Anatomy of a failure



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SAUL: ANATOMY OF A FAILURE

Introduction

Do you ever imagine what your ten-year or fifteen-year class reunion will be like? Do you try to picture what you and your friends will look like then? Take it from those who have attended such reunions: Don't be surprised if some of the people who were the most popular in school and seemed most likely to succeed end up with nothing but problems. There is no guarantee against a messed-up life.

How do people wreck their lives? How can you keep it from happening to you? Jimmy Carter knew one secret of prevention: learn from others' mistakes. When he ran for President of the United States, he read biographies of all the presidents – because he didn't want to make the same mistakes they

had made. You can do the same thing by studying the life of Saul.

In the 11th century B.C., a tall, young, good-looking Hebrew man started from home to search for his father's donkeys. He had no idea that before he returned he would be anointed king over Israel. (It was the custom to pour oil over the head of the person chosen king.) His name was Saul. While searching he encountered the prophet Samuel, who gave him the royal oil treatment.

Soon, Samuel called all of the Israelites together at Mizpah to introduce Saul as king. When he called the new king forward, Saul didn't appear, so the men searched for him. He was hiding among the baggage. After publicly being proclaimed king, he returned home. But when one of the cities of Israel was threatened with invasion, he gathered an army and saved the city.

Impetuous and Impatient

Saul's first big mistake came in a tight spot while fighting against Israel's number-one enemy, the Philistines. Samuel, God's prophet, knew the people needed God's instructions if they were to win their battles, so when the Philistines came with their huge army to fight against Israel, Samuel told Saul to wait. Saul and his army were to camp at Gilgal for seven days until Samuel came to make a sacrifice to God and bless the army. Unfortunately, Samuel was late and the soldiers were deserting by droves. In fact, only six hundred men were left. In desperation, Saul finally offered the sacrifice himself, thus disobeying the Law of Moses. (Only a priest, such as Samuel, was allowed to sacrifice.) Just as Saul was finishing the ceremony, Samuel appeared. He rebuked Saul, saying, "You acted foolishly ... You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you" (1 Samuel 13: 13).

Saul soon made his second mistake by issuing a rash order that almost forced him to execute his own son, Jonathan. A man of great faith, Jonathan and his armor-bearer boldly attacked a group of Philistines and threw them into great disorder. When the rest of the Israelite army (even the deserters) heard that the Philistines were fleeing, they returned to join the pursuit. Saul, under threat of death, rashly ordered his soldiers to eat nothing until sundown. The

heroic Jonathan, however, didn't hear the order; so when he found some wild honey, he ate it. When Saul learned about this, he decided Jonathan should die. He preferred killing his son to admitting he was wrong and retracting his command. Although Jonathan was willing to die, the people argued that killing the hero of the battle wasn't fair, since he hadn't even heard the command.

The Way to a Hard Heart

Because he never repented, Saul sank deeper into sin and rebellion. Through Samuel, God ordered Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites, including everything they owned. (As we saw in the section on Joshua, when a group of people become so corrupt that they endanger many others, God may decide that group must be destroyed to save His world.) Instead of obeying, Saul and his soldiers saved King Agag and the best animals, then Saul went to erect a monument in his own honor for having won the battle. On the way he met Samuel. He lied, saying he had done everything God had commanded. Saul's heart was so hard that he had no conscience left.

Then Israel's old enemies, the Philistines, came to fight again. Their army stood on one hill, facing the Israelite army on another hill, waiting for the battle to start. Suddenly, a giant, about nine feet tall, swaggered into the valley and challenged any Israelite to a duel. The duel would decide the outcome of the battle. The Israelites were terror-stricken.

Into the scene walked David, probably only a teenager, coming to check on his brothers in the army. He was shocked that Goliath was being allowed to dishonor God and His armies. So, David volunteered to fight the giant. Confident that God would honor his zeal, David slung a stone into Goliath's forehead, and then proceeded to behead the nine-foot corpse.

To Saul's dismay, David instantly became a national hero, the subject of a women's folk song that elevated David above Saul. Saul became (literally) insane with jealousy. In the remaining years of his life, he spent much time with his army pursuing David, trying to kill him.

Far from God, Saul ended his life in defeat. While battling the Philistines, he

was wounded by a sharpshooter's arrow; and dreading the thought of being finished off by his enemies, he asked his armor-bearer to kill him. The man refused. So Saul, in desperation, fell on his own sword, committing suicide.

You don't have to repeat Saul's mistakes. You don't have to disobey God's Word even if you're in a very tight spot. You don't have to make rash statements. You can admit when you're wrong and repent completely. You can obey God to the letter and avoid pride and jealousy at all costs. You can be closer to God at the end of your life than you are now. Let Saul be a reminder to you and don't follow in his footsteps.

Change the S to P and Add AUL

THE SAUL OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

His beginning:

“There was a Benjamite, a man of standing, whose name was Kish ... He had a son named Saul, and impressive young man without equal among the Israelites – a head taller than any of the others” (1 Samuel 9: 1, 2).

His end:

“Surely I have acted like a fool and have erred greatly” (1 Samuel 26: 1).

“So Saul took his own sword and fell on it” (1 Samuel 31: 4).

THE SAUL OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

His beginning:

“Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem” (Acts 9: 1, 2).

His end:

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”
(2 Timothy 4: 7).

You have just read how two men with the name of Saul started and ended their lives. King Saul of the Old Testament was an outstanding young man apparently headed for great success. Near the end of his life, however, he admitted to his supposed archenemy, David, “I have played the fool ...” Not long afterward, he killed himself. The Saul of the New Testament, because of Hebrew custom, changed his name to Paul following the greatest experience of his life. This Saul began his life “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” determined to annihilate Christianity. But Jesus met him, and Saul’s life changed drastically – he became a Christian. Near the end of his years spent preaching Jesus’ gospel, Paul said with satisfaction, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”. What made the difference? You need to know.

You have great dreams and aspirations. You want to follow God and live a good life. Saul and Paul’s lives show that the outcome of your life will depend on each decision you make along the way at each fork in the road – each chance to decide for or against God. Once he became a Christian, Paul chose God every time, and his life ended in triumph. In contrast, Saul repeatedly scorned God's ways, and his life ended in tragedy.

You will face many temptations that coax you to turn from God's path. You will be tempted to work too many hours to buy things you really don’t need; tempted to make commitments without checking with God; tempted to waste your life in pursuits that don’t matter. Warning about the danger of such temptations, Walter Hendricksen writes in *Many Aspire, Few Attain*: “You can climb on the shelf and render yourself ineffective for God in many ways. You can sign peace treaties with Satan and let him go his way while you go yours.” Don’t fall for such temptations.

Decide not to ride the fence, dividing your interests between God and the things of the world. Decide that God will own your heart, that you will hate sin, and that you will love God's Word. Trust Him and be willing to admit when you're wrong.

Such a life will be demanding – you'll never be able to sit back and take it

easy. Doing what is foolish and making your life a mess is easy but following God and making your life count for Him requires combat – lots of it. The Apostle Paul called it a fight of faith. But someday you, as Paul did, will look back and evaluate your life. Will you have been a Saul or a Paul?

“Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown” (Mark 4: 15-20).

1. What you do with God's truth throughout your life will determine what you will become. What things can crowd God out of your life?
2. In the Scripture passage above, what made the difference in the kind of crop produced?
3. What is going to be most important, the highest priority, in your life?
4. What can you start doing today to make sure you become a Paul, not a Saul?

Forgetting to Forgive and Flights of Fantasy

“Saul also sent to his home in Gibeah, accompanied by valiant men whose hearts God had touched. But some troublemakers said, ‘How can this fellow save us?’ They despised him and brought him no gifts. But Saul kept silent” (1 Samuel 10: 26, 27).

“The people then said to Samuel, ‘Who was it that asked, “Shall Saul reign over us?” Bring these men to us and we will put them to death.’ But Saul said, ‘No one shall be put to death today, for this day the Lord has rescued

Israel’’ (1 Samuel 11: 12, 13).

“After Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, ‘David is in the Desert of En Gedi’’ (1 Samuel 24: 1, 2).

When Saul became king he was tenderhearted, ready to forgive people who slighted him and refused to honor him as king. When men questioned his ability to lead, he kept silent. Even when some seemed ready to rebel against him, he forgave them. After his first military victory, instead of killing those who had not wanted him to be king, Saul gave God the credit for his victory: “No one shall be put to death today, for the Lord has rescued Israel” (1 Samuel 11: 13).

The people of Israel responded enthusiastically, appreciating the sense of security such a king gave them. After Saul had forgiven his enemies, the citizens “went to Gilgal and confirmed Saul as king in the presence of the Lord. There they sacrificed fellowship offerings before the Lord, and Saul and all the Israelites held a great celebration” (1 Samuel 11: 15). Saul began his reign with kindness, willing to overlook the sins of others.

The experiences of Saul and the teachings of Jesus show that a spirit of forgiveness isn’t just a nice ornament, an optional extra for your personality. It’s an absolute necessity. Jesus warned, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6: 14, 15).

When the disciple Peter heard Jesus say that, he probably thought there must be some limit to what God expected of a person. Later he asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18: 21, 22). God expects you to forgive people over and over again, whether or not you feel like it, and no matter how unfair they have been. Impossible? Yes. Unless you're hooked up to God's power.

Somewhere along the line, Saul got tired of forgiving people – temptation that strikes almost everyone. His life as king of the people of Israel, of course, was not an easy job. Their ancestors had murmured against Moses,

and their fathers and grandfathers had not kept the laws God had given Moses. Therefore, it seems reasonable that once Saul's subjects began complaining they kept doing it. Saul finally became fed up. He decided to stop tolerating the griping, and he stopped forgiving.

When a person deliberately sins, as Saul did, he opens the door for Satan to fill his mind with lies. Soon Saul was not only refusing to forgive people who had offended him but was imagining that everyone was against him. Eventually, plagued by fantasies, Saul could no longer think rationally. He even turned against David who had always shown him loyalty – he went after David with an army of three thousand men.

What happened to Saul could happen to you. You're not made of different stuff. If you stubbornly refuse to forgive, you'll become touchy. Little things will grow into mountains and you'll soon imagine no one is treating you justly. You'll make unreasonable demands of others and exaggerate your own sense of importance. You'll soon be against everyone, and everyone will be against you.

So, do a little self-examination. If you've fallen into "Saul-ish" thinking, forgiving others is the cure. Determine now that you will forgive everyone – no matter what – always.

"He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends" (Proverbs 17: 9).

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4: 8, 9).

"Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3: 13).

1. If you refuse to forgive someone, why does that go against the Bible?
2. What attitude on your part will cover the faults and sins of others?
3. What does it mean to forgive others as God has forgiven you?

4. Is there someone you are unwilling to forgive? Talk to God about it now and find out what you should do to straighten out this problem.

No Exceptions, Please!

“Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul’s men began to scatter. So he said, ‘Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings.’ And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him. ‘What have you done?’ asked Samuel. Saul replied, ‘When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, “Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord’s favor.” So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.’ ‘You acted foolishly,’ Samuel said. ‘You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the Lord’s command’” (1 Samuel 13: 7-14).

Saul found himself in a tight spot. The Philistines, with their horses and chariots, had come to attack the Israelites who didn’t even have swords for their soldiers. (The Philistines, who knew how to make iron, had refused to sell their weapons or their manufacturing secrets to the Israelites.) According to the Bible, the Philistines came with 30,000 chariots, six thousand cavalry and foot soldiers as numerous as “the sand on the seashore” (1 Samuel 13: 5). Fear had struck the Israelites, including King Saul, and soldiers began deserting. But Saul could do nothing until the prophet Samuel arrived.

Samuel had instructed Saul to wait for seven days; at that time, he would come to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. God would then reveal his strategy and give His blessing. Well, Samuel was late. And Saul knew his soldiers would hesitate to fight without sacrificing to God first. But instead of waiting his soldiers were leaving. Saul was getting desperate. So, he offered the sacrifice

himself, thus disobeying the instructions of God's prophet and the biblical command that stated only a priest should offer special sacrifices (Numbers 16: 40). This was Saul's first major blunder.

When you get in a pinch, when things come down to the wire, your relationship with God comes to the surface. When you're earning an *F* in algebra, so everything depends on your grade for the final, and you get that perfect chance to cheat, what you do will disclose your view of obeying God. If you've let your car insurance lapse because you lost your job, and you back into a car at midnight in the parking lot, what you do will reveal how much you love God. When you've promised to pay your friend for the stereo you got from him, then discover he gave you a raw deal, what you do will show what place God has in your life. No matter how spiritual you've made your "act," any hypocrisy will eventually be uncovered – as Saul's was.

Saul's main problem was unbelief. He didn't believe the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – with or without an army – could defeat the Philistines. Saul thought the age of miracles was past. He felt forced to take things into his own hands, quite sure he knew better than God. Saul's lack of true faith was the first big step toward his downfall.

The same principle holds for you. If you don't determine to obey God always and to trust Him no matter how hopeless the outlook, soon every problem will become a "special case," and another chance to disobey. And you'll begin your downhill tumble.

Because God made you, none of his commandments are impossible to carry out – *if the Holy Spirit lives in you*. But you must trash the mentality that makes excuses for "special cases." Your life will not be ruined if you flunk the algebra final; God is more important than your report card. You won't go into bankruptcy and starve to death if you're honest and keep your promises – no matter what. God says, "Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you" (Jeremiah 7: 23) – no exceptions, please.

"Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law

of the Lord. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways” (Psalms 119: 1-3).

“Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight” (Psalm 119: 33-35).

1. The best way to keep from sinning as Saul did is to develop the right attitude toward God's Word. List the attitudes mentioned in the above passages.
2. Do you delight in God's commands?
3. If there is some commandment of God that you are fighting against, ask God to change your heart. Then meditate on His Word until you can delight in it.
4. You cannot delight in God's commandments unless you realize that He is all-powerful and knows what is best for the people He created. Think about God's faithfulness and His power and learn to delight in His commandments.

Five-Page Assignments, Paper Airplanes, and Three Simple Words

“When all the Israelites who had hidden in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were on the run, they joined the battle in hot pursuit ... Now the men of Israel were in distress that day, because Saul had bound the people under an oath, saying, ‘Cursed be any man who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!’ ... So none of the troops tasted food ... But Jonathan had not heard that his father had bound the people with the oath, so he reached out the end of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it into the honeycomb. He raised his hand to his mouth, and his eyes brightened ... Then Saul said to Jonathan, ‘Tell me what you have done.’ So Jonathan told him, ‘I merely tasted a little honey with the end of my staff. And now must I die?’ Saul said, ‘May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you do not die, Jonathan.’ But the men said to Saul,

‘Should Jonathan die – he who has brought about this great deliverance in Israel? Never! As surely as the Lord lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground, for he did this today with God's help.’ So the men rescued Jonathan, and he was not put to death” (1 Samuel 14: 22, 24, 27, 43-45).

You’ve probably encountered a similar scene in a classroom: The discipline is dreadful, so the exasperated teacher finally bellows, “If one more person throws a paper airplane, the whole class will get a five-page homework assignment – and the culprit will be suspended!” Soon after the pronouncement, Bobby Bookworm, armed with a green pass from the counselor’s office, enters the room and quietly slips into his seat. The teacher doesn’t see him enter. Absentmindedly, Bob begins construction of a paper space shuttle, and as he tests its flightworthiness the teacher catches him. He immediately writes the five-page assignment on the board and prepares to escort Bob to the assistant principal’s office. Suddenly, the classroom becomes a replay of the scene between King Saul and his soldiers as Bob’s classmates desperately protest the unfair punishment.

It’s quite easy to leave such a class complaining that “Mr. Talkathon” lectures nonstop, makes threats without thinking, and stubbornly refuses to admit his mistakes. However, these characteristics exist in most people – maybe in you. They are the fruit of pride, a subtle destroyer.

Pride begins with small stuff. You can easily brag about good grades, athletic success, or popularity. Then without thinking, you can slip into pretending you know all about the conflict in the Middle East, or the rock group currently at the top of the charts. Soon, you find yourself defending the most ridiculous statements – just to protect your pride.

If you’ve helped with the Girl Scouts, or babysat for the neighbor kids, or coached Little League ball, you know that once you’re in a position of authority, the temptation to make rash statements and to give impetuous orders increases greatly. And once you’ve said something in front of the whole group, it takes a lot of courage to admit that you’re wrong and to back down. Sometimes, your stubbornness can make the situation even worse. Obviously, some caution would have avoided the mess in the first place.

Stubbornness that never says, “I’m sorry, I was mistaken,” or, “I was wrong

and I want to apologize,” causes tremendous problems. First, it seals your downfall – “He who conceals his sins does not prosper” (Proverbs 28: 13). Second, it makes people lose respect for you and your word. Third, it causes great heartache for those who are close to you. It’s not easy to live in the same family with someone who won’t ever say, “It was my fault.” It’s hard to be a friend to an I’m-always-right person.

A big factor in Saul’s first step to failure was stubbornness. He refused to choke his pride and admit that his ban on eating during the battle was an unwise decision. He began to lose the respect of his subjects. And more tragic, he began to lose the blessing of God.

Don’t be a Saul. Pray with the Psalmist, “Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord, keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141: 3). When you hastily say foolish things, correct your statements, revising every false remark. Three simple words, “I was wrong,” can do wonders for your spiritual life.

“Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5: 16).

“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin” (1 John 1: 7).

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5: 23,24).

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4: 2, 3).

1. If you have said or done something you shouldn’t have to a person, what does God command you to do?
2. If you walk with Jesus “in the light,” letting that light expose your

defects, what is God's promise to you? What happens if you refuse to admit you are wrong?

3. List all the things you are supposed to do to get along with other people.
4. Is there someone to whom you must go and ask forgiveness? Do it right away.

Just a Bunch of Lions

“Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, ‘Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal’” (1 Samuel 15: 12).

You don't enjoy listening to bragging; and hypocrisy turns you off. You'd like to avoid them, but you definitely notice the “I'm the greatest” dude and the “You're lucky to have me around” chick – because you can't help it! You avoid at any price the course taught by the “Do as I say, not as I do” teacher. You ignore the speaker who flaunts himself as an archetype of virtue. But deep inside you feel the same pride about yourself.

It's a typical human problem. You hate pride in others but feel it is quite becoming in yourself. You scoff at the monuments others set up in their own honor but erect your own and expect others to admire them. You quote “Pride goes before destruction” (Proverbs 16: 18) when you see the haughtiness of others but fail to apply it to yourself. You even recognize pride was a chief ingredient in Saul's downfall – but think it's not so dangerous for you.

Pride raises its ugly head in a number of ways. You get offended and hurt when people don't notice and thank you for the great things you've done. You don't realize, however, that pride makes you think you're so important that the world should pay attention to you. You bristle against criticism, imagining you aren't an ordinary mortal who makes mistakes and has bad habits. (If it weren't for your arrogance, you'd be thankful for such an opportunity to improve yourself.) You tend to exaggerate – just a little – to make yourself look good, and you like to boast about your successes. You criticize others for the very things that you overlook in yourself. (You are so

sure that the misunderstanding or the accident was the other guy's fault that you don't even bother to evaluate your own words and actions.)

Admit it. You're hooked on pride. But there is a way out.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (Romans 12: 3). Faith in God puts sense into this matter of self-concept. If your faith is in God, not in yourself, your reason for pride and ego-feeding disappears. You will realize that everything you have comes from God, so you can't take any credit. When you live by faith you will have no reason to brag in order to cover up feelings of inadequacy, because God's unlimited resources are yours to make you what God wants you to be.

How can you get such faith? According to the Bible, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word" (Romans 10: 17). You'll get faith by digging into the Word of God. Read it, study it, memorize it, and meditate on it. Make it the center of your thoughts. After all, you can never believe the truth unless you know it. The more of God's truth you know, the better your life will be.

One definition of "pride" is "group of lions". That is quite fitting for the kind of pride you deal with – just a bunch of lions. But these lions would like to get you. They have names, such as Hurt Feelings, Bragging, Defensiveness, and Criticism. True faith in God and His Word will shut the mouths of these lions. Only faith will defeat pride and keep you from being a Saul who starts well and ends in disaster.

"The Lord detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: they will not go unpunished" (Proverbs 16: 5).

"When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but with humility comes wisdom" (Proverbs 11: 2).

"And those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (Daniel 4: 37).

1. What happens to proud people?
2. How can you get rid of pride?
3. What kinds of pride in your life is God showing you?
4. Are you willing to humble yourself, to study God's Word, and receive faith from God for each of those pride problems?

Having a Heart Checkup

“When Samuel reached him, Saul said, ‘The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord’s instructions.’ Samuel said, ‘Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, “Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.” Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?’ ‘But I did obey the Lord,’ Saul said. ‘I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal.’ But Samuel replied: ‘Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king’” (1 Samuel 15: 13, 17-23).

You’ve seen it happen. First Christi Christian goes out with Agnostic Alan, and even feels a little guilty about accepting the date. After a couple of months, she’s dating him steadily, but still wondering if she’s doing the right thing. After a few more weeks she’s thinking as he thinks and doing things she never used to even imagine doing. As time passes, she defends herself vehemently when asked about her actions, and even tries to arrange for her Christian girlfriends to date Alan’s friends. The process is called hardening of the heart. As a person keeps ignoring God's voice, he goes deeper into disobeying the Lord, becoming almost immune to the Holy Spirit’s nudging,

called conviction of sin. Hardening of the heart is dangerous. In fact, it's deadly. Saul is living – oops – *dead* proof.

Saul had a terrific start, depending on God's advice as he ruled Israel. Saul's heart, however, grew cold as he neglected to diligently study God's law and make it part of his life. He didn't trust God. Overly impressed by his royal authority, yet unduly worried about taking charge, he succumbed to the pressure of the moment and disregarded one of God's commandments – that only a priest could offer a special sacrifice. Later he gave the rash order that his soldiers were not to eat during battle, then he stubbornly refused to admit he was wrong. He never repented. Thus his heart became harder and harder, paving the way for premeditated, willful disobedience.

Then God gave Saul a job that included specific instructions: Attack the Amalekites, and then totally destroy them and their possessions. (The chapter on Joshua showed that some groups of people were so corrupt that God had to destroy them for the good of the human race.) But Saul purposely disobeyed God's order, and then made pious excuses to cover up his disobedience. God told Saul that his rebellion was as bad as witchcraft – and that's pretty bad!

Sin always harms others, and the result of Saul's sin almost wiped out God's people a few hundred years later. In the chapter on Esther you'll meet Haman, a descendant of an Amalekite who was not destroyed, and he almost succeeded in killing the entire Jewish nation – all because Saul had hardened his heart against God.

What would be the worst thing that could happen to you? Losing your entire family? Failing in your career? Being rejected by all your friends? No. The worst thing that could happen is hardening your heart against God – becoming so calloused that your conscience no longer registers guilt. That will ruin your life.

Give yourself a spiritual heart checkup, using the “Christian cardiogram” below. If you answer yes to any of the questions, get that matter straightened out with God before your heart gets any harder.

A CHRISTIAN CARDIOGRAM

1. Do you have a goal you are determined to reach, whether or not God wants you to have it?
2. Is there any Bible verse you are reluctant to read because it makes you feel guilty, or because you're not sure you want to obey it?
3. Is there anyone whose opinion you value more highly than God's?
4. Are you neglecting Bible reading and prayer because other things are more important to you?
5. Have you persisted so long in a sin that you no longer feel guilty about doing it?

“So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4: 17-24).

1. List all the things that cause a hard heart or are symptoms of a hard heart.
2. What must you do with the old self?
3. What things can keep you from being “renewed in the spirit of your mind?”
4. Ask God for a soft heart and do anything necessary to get it.

Playing with Poison

“When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the

women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.' Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. 'They have credited David with tens of thousands,' he thought, 'but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?' and from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David. The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the harp, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, 'I'll pin David to the wall.' But David eluded him twice" (1 Samuel 18: 6-11).

The people of Israel rejoiced when they heard David had killed Goliath, for now the Philistines would not occupy their country. It was a great day! The women came out to meet the soldiers with singing and dancing. Wishing to honor David for winning this great victory, some woman composed a song: "Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands." Saul hated the lyrics. Instead of being grateful that David had saved his kingdom for him, he became super jealous. His one aim was to kill David.

Jealousy is unbelievably dangerous stuff. It's poison. Jealousy ruled and helped destroy Saul's life. First, jealousy inspired murder in his heart. Rather than respecting David's bravery and loyalty, he wanted to kill David. Eventually, jealousy destroyed Saul's reason and emotions. He had been quite rational until he became consumed with jealousy. From the sequence of events, it appears that Saul's insane jealousy made him mentally ill. After that Saul suffered greatly. His life revolved around trying to kill David, the object of his jealousy, and he would mobilize an entire army to pursue David in the hill country of Judea. There was no peace for Saul.

Jealousy is one of the most effective weapons in the devil's arsenal. If he wants to get you off balance, just a little jealousy will do the trick. He tries to insert it in your mind in many situations; if you meet someone more attractive and more talented than you; if your friend finds school easy and you don't; or if others own things you wish you had. God considers jealousy so terrible that He put in the Ten Commandments: "You shall not covet (long for, crave) your neighbor's house ... or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus

20: 17).

You can personalize that commandment this way:” It’s wrong for me to be jealous of Vicki’s good looks, her boyfriend, her designer clothes, or her good grades”; or, “It’s wrong for me to be jealous of Eddie’s fast car, his charming personality, his muscular build, or his leadership ability.” In other words, jealousy is breaking one of God's commandments.

When the devil tries to tell you, jealousy is okay because it’s natural, don’t listen. Sin might appear natural, but it is not okay. Jesus Christ is supernatural, so the new life He gives to a Christian is supernatural. Jesus died to break the power of all sin, including jealousy. Through the Holy Spirit He gives you power to reject jealousy. You can therefore thank God for everything you have and are. More than that, you can thank God for everything you will be because of what He will do for you.

Because God owns everything and gives his children what they need, it’s foolish to covet; to be jealous. Instead of poisoning yourself with jealousy, you can simply ask God for what you need. He can transform your personality and make you attractive to others (if you cooperate with Him), so why be jealous of others?

Jealousy about attitudes can be more subtle than jealousy about possessions and status. For instance, you may be a sitting duck for jealousy if your little brother is your mother’s pet and gets more attention than you; or if you're so shy that teachers and classmates ignore you; or if you think members of the opposite sex don’t notice you because you're not very good-looking. It’s easy to think you're not very important to anyone, and when you think that, the poison of jealousy starts seeping in.

You wouldn’t drink poison, even if it came in a pretty bottle and looked harmless, so why drink the poison of jealousy? It’s sin. It will ruin your life. Therefore, you can't afford to have any of it around. Jesus has the power to deliver you, but the first step is realizing how bad jealousy really is. Saul swallowed jealousy in big gulps – and it destroyed him. If you don’t stop putting up with the poison of jealousy, you, too, will be a victim.

“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5: 19-23).

1. Considering the sins that it is listed with, how bad is jealousy?
2. What sins can result from jealousy?
3. If you put off the old nature and let the Holy Spirit take control, what characteristics will automatically develop in you?
4. Why can't the Holy Spirit be in control of you if you, even for a minute, defend sins in your life, such as jealousy, hatred, or immorality? If you are harboring any jealousy, be willing to do anything to eradicate it.