

**Testamentum Imperium**  
An International Theological Journal

[www.PreciousHeart.net/ti](http://www.PreciousHeart.net/ti)

**Volume 2 – 2009**

---

**Did Saul Lose His Salvation?**

**Dr. Paul Williamson**

**Moore College, Sydney.**

Does Israel's first king furnish us with an example of someone who forfeited his eternal salvation? It's certainly not difficult to see how such a question might arise in the mind of a Christian reading through the biblical account of his reign. After all, we read of 'the Spirit of the Lord' coming upon Saul in power, and bringing about a radical change in this man which one might easily equate with an experience of spiritual conversion (1 Sam 10:6, 9). Moreover, later we're informed that 'the Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him' (1 Sam 16:14)—a recurring motif in the subsequent account of Saul's reign (cf. 1 Sam 18:10; 19:9). We're implicitly told that the Lord 'turned away from Saul' (cf. 1 Sam 28:15-16) and had 'become his enemy' (1 Sam. 28:16). Finally, the Lord himself explicitly acknowledges that he 'took his love away from Saul' (2 Sam 7:15). Together these facts might lead to the conclusion that Saul was indeed someone who lost his salvation.

However, such a conclusion cannot be arrived at quite so easily as this. For one thing, it is important to employ our terminology somewhat more carefully. One must beware of simply transferring Christian categories back unto the Old Testament. It is a mistake to think of Old Testament characters like Saul as 'Christians', regardless of their spiritual status. To speak of Saul in terms of being 'saved' or 'regenerate' is somewhat anachronistic; thus it is probably mistaken to think in terms of such people 'losing their salvation'. Like the generation of Israelites who perished in the wilderness, Saul is certainly an example of those who forfeited God's blessings through disobedience. However, such loss cannot simply be equated with the loss of one's eternal salvation, even though there are legitimate analogies and lessons which clearly may be drawn—such as those highlighted in Heb 3:12–4:13 and Heb 12:14-29.

Nevertheless, while applying such categories or terminology to the likes of Saul may be misguided, the portrayal of King Saul in the biblical narrative does provide readers with important indications of his spiritual status: as Phillips Long observes, 'Saul's specific deeds of disobedience ... are symptomatic of his lack of true faith in God' (NIDOTTE, 4, 1180). While the biblical narrative focuses primarily on God's rejection of Saul as king, the reason for such rejection is spelt out quite plainly: Saul is rejected because he repeatedly disobeys the prophetic word. Moreover, when confronted by the prophet Samuel, Saul refuses to take responsibility for his actions, preferring rather to justify his behavior in one way or another, and so draws further stinging rebukes from God's prophet. His final act was yet another example of the flagrant disobedience which exposed him to God's judgement (1 Chron 10:13-14). It would therefore seem reasonable to conclude from this evidence that Saul lacked the one quality that really mattered: genuine faith in the Lord.

But how, then, do we explain those verses that seem to suggest that Saul did enjoy (albeit temporarily) some sort of spiritual relationship with God? To start with, it is important not to read more into these verses than a careful exegesis will support. Thus, the fact that God's Spirit came upon Saul is not evidence of spiritual regeneration or conversion, anymore than such is the case for

Bezalel (Exod 31:3) or Balaam (Num 24:2). Rather, such conveys merely that God equipped these people for their appointed tasks; it reveals nothing of their spiritual status before God.

In keeping with this, the idea that Yahweh ‘turned away from Saul and became his adversary’ primarily underlines that Saul is no longer equipped to reign; Yahweh has withdrawn his support and is now working against Saul’s kingship. Again, this should not be understood as implying a change in Saul’s spiritual status. The same applies to the statement found in 2 Sam 7:15. Yahweh promises here never to remove his covenant love from David’s heir(s), as he removed it from Saul. Clearly the allusion is to Yahweh’s rejection of the Saulide Dynasty: however much they might be chastened when they go astray, David’s line would never share the fate of Saul’s. Thus, rather than offering insights into Saul’s spiritual status before God, these texts relate more to the status of Saul’s kingship.

However, this still leaves the statements suggesting some kind of personal transformation (i.e. 1 Sam 10:6, 9). What does it mean for Saul to ‘be changed into a different person’ and for God to ‘change Saul’s heart’? Well, in the immediate context—in which Saul’s diffidence and temerity is paramount—the most obvious way to understand this transformation into ‘another man’ is surely with respect to God’s equipping of Saul with the requisite leadership skills. The same is true of the ‘new heart’ that God is said to give Saul. Both phrases convey the same idea; Saul’s transformation took the shape of a spiritual anointing for the specific task that lay ahead. Just as the earlier judges had been equipped as charismatic military leaders, so now Saul was similarly equipped as king. Saul’s transformation relates to how the Spirit equipped him for his role as king, not to a change in his spiritual status before God. Thus, even if OT saints were regenerated by the Spirit of God, such a concept cannot be adduced from the language used here to describe Saul’s experience.

Thus understood, it is wrong to use Saul as a ‘test-case’ for the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer. Little is said explicitly about Saul’s spiritual status, and what little there is, is at best ambivalent (cf. 1 Sam 15:15, 21, 30). While one could argue that, despite all his sin and unbelief, Saul was a true servant of God and benefited fully from God’s amazing grace, it seems at least possible to conclude that he has more in common with those ‘who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age’ (Heb 6:4-5) but ‘who were not able to enter, because of their unbelief’ (Heb 3:19). In other words, rather than someone who lost their salvation, Saul may exemplify those who, for all their spiritual privileges, never have demonstrated genuine saving faith.