The Saul Syndrome:

Its Symptoms, Causes, and Remedies, Including Options For Potential Codependents

By Ed Vainio

To all appearances Saul was special: chosen by God to lead a nation, anointed, publicly endorsed by God and the leading prophet of his time, divinely led, humble, nonassertive, and had a kingly appearance. Even his early days as king reflected God's favor. He was a success. Yet, incredibly, the same man developed an "above the law" mentality and a knack for denial and self-justification when challenged by God's prophet. Saul then began a nosedive into anxiety, paranoia, and depression. Jealousy consumed him as one of his servants, David, began to share in the limelight. Although Saul knew David was a dedicated servant who would lay down his life for him, his jealousy raged, driven by an evil spirit.

Scripture records Saul's relentless plots to kill David, to recruit others as assassins, and to even use his own daughters (at the expense of their hearts) as unwitting accomplices. In his paranoia he perceived his own advisors and his son Jonathan as disloyal, even threatening to kill Jonathan. Such was his delusion that he pronounced a blessing in God's name on a man who revealed David's hiding place.

Saul's life ended miserably after consulting a medium. Never was he able to bring himself to say, "I repent."

Sadly, men of God with dark sides are not limited to Old Testament times. Paul had his troubles with envious preachers in Rome (Philippians 1:15–18 NASB); a paranoid Diotrephes forbade his congregation to associate with John (3 John 9). Even to this day the ranks of godly shepherds have also contained some who have wounded the sheep. Like Saul, many enter ministry humbly and sincerely, but something snaps, triggering the dark side lurking within. I want to explore the symptoms, causes, and remedies for the Saul Syndrome and explore options for potential codependents.

Much like a family secret no one wants to talk about, symptoms of this syndrome (for example, "cluster of abnormal behaviors") are covered up by those who are aware of the problem while others admiring from a distance remain oblivious. Not only do many not see the dark side of a Christian leader — they do not want to. People need a hero — someone to prop them up for the week, to be a "father"; someone who has it all together and can offer a sense of security. An accusation against their hero is an attack on their feeling of security.

Blinded by what they interpret as his success (for example, financial and numerical growth), congregants cannot fathom the possibility of a dark side — or even a shadow — to their pastor. Gladly they offer unquestioning loyalty. Others remain loyal because they are intimidated by a warped interpretation of Psalm 105:15 ("touch not My anointed ones"), believing that any challenge of pastoral misconduct will bring swift vengeance from God — a view that an abusive pastor will promote and exploit. No one wants to incur God's wrath or be labeled troublemaker, unsuppliant, rebellious, not on the team, or disloyal. Staff and board members also feel hesitant for similar reasons. For staff, job security and blacklisting are a concern. Consequently, a "new caste of untouchables" has been created.

SYMPTOMS OF A NARCISSISTIC LEADER

Symptoms of narcissism abound in the Saul Syndrome. According to Drs. Floyd and Narramore, pathological narcissism is characterized by at least five of the following symptoms:

1. A need for constant attention and admiration. Like Saul, narcissists love the admiration of crowds and need to be the focus of attention. While taking credit for everything positive happening in their church, they distance themselves from weak or unsuccessful programs. Much time is spent posturing, demanding unquestioning loyalty that creates a wall of silence protecting them from scrutiny and maintaining their perfect image. Status conscious, they actually believe the prosperous image they project (for example, "C.E.O") enhances the image of the church, and therefore the success of the church. Even when they do things that seem motivated by service, they are actually motivated by their desire to look good. They become spin doctors — never admitting a failure, but spinning the facts to maintain the illusion of grandeur. They will not accept positions that will not bring them praise.

2. A sense of entitlement. Position comes with appropriate perks, say these Sauls who require extravagance as a salve for their fragile self-image. Since entitlements reflect their honored position, they expect and even demand perks that their secular counterparts (for example, business executives) receive, and are angry when these are not forthcoming. Such entitlements may include exorbitant salary and investment packages, luxury autos, travel opportunities, and the exclusive right to perform high-profile ceremonies (for example, funerals and weddings of
the wealthy) even when families may desire a staff member to whom they feel closer. Entitlement outweighs any sense of concern for the financial health of the church or its staff. Narcissistic pastors also feel entitled to blind loyalty and respect without earning either.

3. Interpersonally exploitive (for their own ends)? Money and favors are solicited from wealthy, influential members in the guise of friendship. Consequently, it is easy to understand why other church members feel slighted and why the narcissist has few enduring, close friends. Staff, (paid and volunteer), are worked unreasonably to make the pastor look good. When image is everything, no price is too high — especially when others pay it. Any attempt to reign in out-of-control church finances is a threat to their self-image. Such pastors believe the church and staff revolve around them. Consequently others never become the people God made them to be.9 When a staff member is finally used up he or she is replaced by someone fresh.

4. Lack of empathy.10 Saul’s lack of empathy and normal parental concern is chilling. And while empathy is professed by narcissistic leaders (that is, it is part of their projected image), they are self-engrossed and care little for the needs and feelings of their staff or congregation. For example, visits to the bereaved or dying may be made solely to ensure the family will do business with the church. (For example, a pastor visiting a wealthy, dying man turned to the wife after the man had taken his last breath and said, “Will you be having the funeral at our church?”) This inability to empathize with those they lead enables narcissists to pursue their own ends without any restraint (that is, no hesitancy to use and abuse workers). Any protest or reluctance is met with anger and self-righteous talk of dedication and sacrifice. Such pastors have no concern for the long-term health of the church or staff.

5. Envious of others or believes others are envious of them.11 They cannot stand to see anyone else getting credit or being in the limelight unless they put them there and can share in the people’s admiration. Even successful ministers in their churches are a threat to them if they can take credit for them. “More common in church ministry is a senior pastor who refuses to allow an associate to preach for fear the congregation might like the associate’s preaching better than his own. … He takes steps to limit the praise the associate receives, usually by limiting his public exposure.”12 Their belief that staff members are enviable of them also feeds their paranoia.

6. An arrogant, haughty attitude.13 Uncharacteristic of a servant of Christ, these Sauls exude an air of pride, aloofness, and an over-inflated sense of importance. They overestimate their achievements while stubbornly refusing to acknowledge other’s accomplishments or abilities because their significance is threatened as well as the exclusive admiration they crave.14 Narcissists are offended when others do not share their opinions of themselves and often become vengeful.

7. A preoccupation with fantasies of unlimited success.15 True narcissists are not interested in truth or reality — or you. They concoct a vision of success that becomes their obsession. These fantasies are often bred by the vain promises of church growth gurus and images presented by megachurches and television ministries. In the mean time, present reality is usually overstated. When contradictory facts and figures are submitted it makes them angry, and the messenger is denounced as negative. Data is doctored to reflect the illusion. Many churches have been destroyed because they were led into projects that were too costly for the congregation but were necessary to build the self-image of the pastor.

8. A belief that they are special and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people.16 This is reflected by their buddy up to superiors and big-name leaders while treating their own people like simple commoners. Therefore, they ignore advice and/or correction that may come from staff, board, or congregation. After all, “Who do they think they are?” This sense of specialness is also reflected in their tendency to live above the rules while rigidly enforcing them on others. Often this leads to unethical, immoral, or illegal behavior.

Besides narcissism, another maladaptive personality disorder accompanied Saul. Without question, Saul suffered with a paranoid personality disorder — a chronic pattern of distrust and suspicion of others such that their motives are interpreted as intending harm.17

“Persons with this disorder are considered hypersensitive, and they constantly read hidden meanings or threats into everyday conversations.”18 They are preoccupied with doubt regarding the loyalty of others and tend to bear grudges for real or imagined wrongs. Hostility lies close to the surface of their hearts, and they overreact to any criticism. Paranoid leaders are pathologically jealous of gifted people.19 They see their staff and board as their chief enemies — the very ones who are to be their chief partners in caring for the people. Paranoid leaders avoid social interaction and have few close relationships with anyone in their church because that would require some self-disclosure and transparency that they fear could be used against them. Instead, they prefer to be aloof.

An indirect symptom of the Saul Syndrome is codependency among those surrounding the leader (that is, staff, board, family). They try to conceal his dark side from the congregation, explaining, spinning, and otherwise doing damage control. A set of unspoken rules develops that governs their public behavior, relationships, and communications resulting in emotional repression and great stress.20 Further strain to overworked codependents occurs when they fail to say no to further demands and/or feel compelled to compromise their own integrity to hide their superior’s indiscretions. These repressed feelings will eventually burn them out, result in an explosion, or bring physical or emotional breakdown.

Perhaps the most frustrating symptoms are the leaders’ state of denial, their inability to even see their condition, and the fact they seem to be able to claim divine approval by their apparently successful ministry. (For example, one successful national evangelist brought many to Christ during the time of his involvement with prostitutes.) One of the most insidious aspects of the dark side is that it can maintain its presence in our lives without completely disabling us.”21

**CAUSES OF NARCISSISM**

Before going on to remedies, the causes of the Saul Syndrome must be identified. These are often the result of an “existential debt”22 created in childhood that presents continually unmet needs. For example, one component, pathological narcissism, is “a personality style that is deeply rooted in the structure of the entire personality from the first few years of life.”23 One of the results is a personality held together by a fragile, skeleton-like self-esteem that fears abandonment.24 Could it be that the very inferiority Saul felt as a young man was the same root that later erupted in tormenting fear and outrageous jealousy?

“A paradox of sorts exists in the lives of most of the leaders who had experienced significant failures — the personal insecurities, feelings of inferiority, and need for parental approval (among other dysfunctions) that compelled these people to become successful leaders were very often the same issues that precipitated their
The shadow making process begins early. (For example, one television evangelist’s obsession with image goes back to the embarrassment he felt as a child over his family’s poverty and the ridicule he was exposed to. He vowed to never let that happen as an adult, but to soothe his wounded self-image with luxurious living.)

Poor parenting skills figure largely as a cause of the syndrome. “If parents do not serve their growth-promoting functions, for example, by being preoccupied or hostile or intrusive, a number of narcissistic personality disorders … may develop, [for example] underestimated self resulting from lack of parental response. Such a person will do anything … to create excitement and ward off feelings of deadness.”47 Famished for admiration and attention they begin a life quest to gain the approval of their parents.48 Also responsible are parents who deny the emotional needs of their children by imposing age-inappropriate adult roles on their children, demanding unreasonable results. On the other hand parents who spoil their children create unrealistic expectations they carry into adulthood (and the ministry). They believe, “I deserve special treatment. I expect to get my way.”

“When lessons [from childhood] are not learned, it drives even successful leaders to make unwise, impulsive, unethical, or immoral choices.”49 “The potential narcissist fails to develop his true God-given self and shifts his energies into becoming the kind of person he thinks he must be to feel good about himself — someone that everyone will admire. … He can only feel good about himself when his false grandiose perfect self is being affirmed.”50 Children who never learn to “self-soothe”51 become adult narcissists who cannot accept their limitations or the fact their wishes will not always be met. Children who grow up in wealthy or influential homes but whose parents are not sufficiently emotionally nourishing can sometimes develop a strong sense of entitlement and a lack of sensitivity to others.52 In some homes parents were the focus and children were expected to serve their needs, implanting in them the unibiblical concept that leaders exist to be served. Also, parental neglect or indifference causes children to develop a “compensatory false self”53 that desires greatness and affirmation. They are driven by what Wenar calls “the cognitive triad of worthlessness (‘I am no good’), helplessness (‘there is nothing I can do about myself’), and hopelessness (‘I will always be this way”).”54

The modern church environment may also trigger the pastor’s dark side. Wild expectations of numerical and financial growth are fostered in seminars, progressive seminaries, and some megachurches and television evangelists. One church growth guru boasted, “These principles will work in any type of church anywhere in the world, and … if you present these principles [of marketing] will work every time.”55 (That is, if a church does not grow it is because the pastor and/or staff failed.) Cloaked in churchy language, this human ambition suits the narcissist well — he will drive himself and others towards the goal. When success is not forthcoming narcissists push harder, blame, explode, fire the staff, or leave.

A particularly dark side of Saul’s disorder was the turmoil perpetrated by an evil spirit. This factor has been grossly exaggerated by some who blame every malady on some demon. On the other hand, others deny demonic activity totally, ascribing a strictly psychological cause. As in Saul’s case, human nature is capable of plenty of mischief and dysfunction. However, Paul makes it clear that we wrestle with spiritual entities and that we are provided arrows from Satan assail the mind (Ephesians 6:16) and his lion-like roar (1 Peter 5:8) adds another dimension to human fear, insecurity, and paranoia. One source stated that when Satan is involved “it can be compared to gasoline poured on a fire.”56 While human nature alone is usually responsible for the Saul Syndrome, aggravating demonic influence should not be ruled out.

OVERCOMING THE DARK SIDE

Recovery is unlikely unless the affected one is willing to admit the disorder and seek help. It usually takes a series of conflicts or failures before narcissists consider the possibility of seeking help.57 “This is when he is most open to help.”58

Overcoming is not easy — it requires hard work and vigilance for a lifetime. The key that will determine whether they experience success or tragic failure is the degree to which they become acquainted with their dark side and put in place defenses that will prevent it from running rampant and trampling their ability to lead effectively.59 Approaches that do not work are minimizing, ignoring (the problem will not just go away) or shaming (this only exacerbates the problem).

Narcissists must cease their denial, rationalizations, and excuses, acknowledging their weakness while seeking God’s strength, for God’s grace is sufficient and His power is perfected in weakness, (2 Corinthians 12:9). The problem is that admitting to weakness is not well-received in today’s high-octane leadership world.40

To begin understanding themselves narcissists must look into the pain, sorrow, and rage they experienced in childhood. These emotions are still driving them. If such feelings stand out in their memory, they are doubtless worthy of closer examination; things they cannot remember are probably not the things that impacted them.61 After reflection, it may be necessary to talk with someone. In some cases writing a letter is more expedient. Some may not mail it as called for because the issue is too sensitive or the other party is not receptive. The person may even be deceased, but having expressed it on paper can be a release. Another important aid is to re-evaluate expectations and allow “the grace of God [to] liberate us from the poison of conflicts or failures before narcissists consider the possibility of seeking help.”57

Narcissistic leaders must be willing to open themselves to the scrutiny of the Spirit and the Word. It is a good idea to take a personal retreat to spend time in the Word, asking God to search heart and motive. (The book of Proverbs cuts to the chase very quickly and effectively.) Keeping an open heart and mind is vital. Leaders must be willing to endure the initial pain of the double-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12) and see themselves in the mirror of the Word (James 1:23–25) rather than the mirror of their rosy perceptions. They should anticipate that God’s healing and comfort are also freely available to the penitent. If they are willing to let God’s understanding and love soak in and permeate their thinking, they will not be so drawn to seek affirmation from others.62 Journaling thoughts, feelings, and insights gained during this time are very helpful.

Directed study of Scriptures is one of the “weapons of our warfare” (2 Corinthians 10:3–5) that will bring down the vain imaginations of the Saul Syndrome. Readings might include Philippians 2:3–8 where Paul exhorts us to regard others as more important than ourselves and to look out for the interests of others more than our own interests. Further, Paul exhorts us to follow Jesus’ example of humble service rather than grasping for privilege.
Peter’s admonition to pastors (1 Peter 5:1–4) calls for caring oversight without monetary or control motivations. In 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Paul reminds us that the church is a body of many, diverse members — each one significant, and each one deserving of equal care. Paul deals a blow to the spirit of entitlement by saying, “If others share the right [of financial remuneration] over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right but we endure all things that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 9:12, emphasis mine).

A study of the life and psalms of David would also be most helpful since he — in contrast to Saul — learned to overcome his dark side. Though he had many brushes with the shadow of fear he learned to walk in the light and security of God’s love. As proof of his security in God, when David became king he publicly showed favor to Saul's family, even giving room and board to Saul’s grandson, Mephibosheth. (Most kings would have been too paranoid to do such a thing.) He knew that “authority from God is not afraid of challengers, makes no defense, and cares not one whit if it must be dethroned.”44 While many of David’s psalms reflect his confidence in God, Psalm 23 is a classic. In spite of the valley of the shadow of death and enemies around his table, David exudes a sense of absolute security in his Shepherd.

The Holy Spirit is especially helpful in rehabilitation. After one identifies the wounds of early childhood, the Spirit is able to “bind up the broken hearted” and give “the oil of gladness instead of mourning,” (Isaiah 61:1–3). Jesus promised believers the Spirit as a personal Comforter (John 14:16,17) and divine antidote for a spirit of fear (2 Timothy 1:7). To experience the healing of the Spirit and the Word, afflicted pastors need to spend time in their light and warmth. As A.B. Bruce once said about one of Jesus’ disciples with a dark side, “The juice of the ripe apple is the same that was in the green fruit, plus sun-light and sun-heat. The zeal of the son of thunder did not disappear from John’s nature after he became an apostle; it only became tempered by the light of wisdom, and softened by the heat of love.”45

Professional counseling should be sought if other methods fail. Unfortunately, many narcissists fear going to a counselor because they believe it will send the wrong message to their congregation (that is, weakness and failure) and their image will be destroyed. However, counseling can be effective if the narcissist is willing to cooperate, being transparent and honest.

Perhaps a good starting point would be to take a personality profile. Individual psychotherapy is most effective because trained psychotherapists can gradually explore their underlying fears in a nonthreatening environment.46 Floyd and Narramore suggest the narcissists’ arrogance should not be attacked directly.47 Instead, most of the counselor’s time should be spent empathizing with their feelings of woundedness. Let their defensiveness and pride be diminished first. Only when they are comfortable with the counselor should the session(s) go further.48 Causes for deviant development in childhood should be researched, that is, their interaction with parents (especially noting pathological extremes) and with peers (noting rejection and isolation).49 It is important to learn when and why normal development was diverted.50

Personal accountability groups can be helpful, but the openness required is a stumbling block to narcissists and paranoids. A good church board, peers with great wisdom and spiritual insight, and denominational leaders, can provide such accountability. Richard Dorch, taking it further, believes accountability “means pursuing the [ministry] vision with such transparency that we gladly invite the world to look at our books.”51 Early in Billy Graham’s ministry he gathered his board and asked them to prayerfully recall all the reasons for moral and ethical failure in other evangelical ministries and then to develop a plan by which to avoid all such errors.52

Formal performance evaluations are also helpful. Too many leaders are allowed to ignore their need because they are never informed of their weaknesses. This is a threatening idea to narcissists, but an annual review by the church board or denominational superiors could prove most valuable. Group counseling will not work because of their defensiveness and pride. Medication alone is not recommended; sometimes it is necessary if one is struggling with intense anxiety or depression, but premature use can mask underlying maladaptive behavior.

Since Scripture reveals an active demonic world in which we operate, this possibility may need to be explored if all else has failed. Ignoring it may ensure failure to help the affected individual. However, great care not to misdiagnose must be exercised. In such a case, attributing the maladaptive personality disorder to a demon simply shifts blame and removes personal responsibility for change. Additionally, the credibility of the counselor is damaged. Prayer (and even fasting) for discernment is certainly called for as is the exercising of biblical authority over such powers. Personal responsibility and continued vigilance must still be emphasized.

Options for staff members or others who are potential codependents of the Saul Syndrome are not many. First, leaving for another ministry may be the best alternative (that is, “stay out of the way of all spear throwers”).53 Secondly, if one is to stay on he or she must learn to cope victoriously. Floyd and Narramore offer several ways of coping with the narcissistic pastor:

- Remember, it is inevitable you will trigger his feelings of shame and insecurity.
- Do not assimilate the guilt or shame he puts on you.
- Put some emotional distance between you. Fighting escalates emotions.
- Be clear minded so you can calmly see what he is doing; do not fall into his trap.
- Do not challenge him directly. Approach him with a group or go to a superior.
- Recognize that you cannot change him.
- Minimize direct confrontation.
- Maintain good personal boundaries.
- Develop wholesome friendships.
- Develop a deep relationship with the Lord.
- Seek professional help if necessary.54

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the disturbing paradox of the Saul Syndrome is that Christian leaders, whose holy calling implies Christlikeness and Spirit-led lives, are capable of exhibiting such incongruity. As a result many staff and congregational members leave Christian service wounded, bitter, and confused. Some never return. The good news is that the Saul Syndrome can be dealt with successfully, but the likelihood of the leader being open to help is negligible. Nevertheless, great hope is found in the One “who is at work . . . in you ... and to dowork for His good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13, emphasis added). Scripture illustrates God’s ability to bring change to the most resistant hearts with the most deeply rooted behaviors (for example, Jacob and Saul of Tarsus). Perhaps through
The earnest, compassionate prayers of those aware of a leader’s dark side change can be precipitated, for it is “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord of hosts,” (Zechariah 4:6).

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ENDNOTES


5. Ibid.


7. Floyd, 1.

8. McIntosh, 97.


10. Ibid., 1.

11. Ibid.


15. Floyd, 1.

16. Ibid.


18. Ibid., 78.

19. McIntosh, 108.

20. Ibid., 121.

21. Ibid., 196.


23. Floyd, 5.

24. Ibid., 3.

25. McIntosh, 11,12.

26. Ibid., 77,78.


28. McIntosh, 57.

29. Ibid., 71.

30. Floyd, 3.

31. Ibid., 4.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Wenar, 203.


37. Floyd, 3.

38. Ibid., 6.

39. McIntosh, 81.

40. Ibid., 157.

41. Ibid., 162, 163.

42. Ibid., 183.

43. Floyd, 6.


46. Floyd, 6.

47. Ibid., 7.

48. Ibid.

49. Wenar, 5.

50. Ibid., 24.

51. McIntosh, 198.

52. Ibid., 80.

53. Edwards, 18.

54. Floyd, 5, 6.

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