

# ***“Saul: Obedience vs. Sacrifice”***

## **1 SAMUEL 15**

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Several weeks ago, one of the children of this congregation asked me to preach a lesson on King Saul. Certainly we understand that King Saul is quite an exciting Bible character. After many years of being ruled by various judges, the people demanded a king, and God very reluctantly gave them what they wanted and the Lord gave them a man by the name of Saul. Saul was 30 years old when he began to reign, and he reigned 42 years over the nation of Israel. In many ways, Saul was blessed by God: He was specifically chosen for the job, he had Samuel (basically, his own personal prophet, to lean on for advice and encouragement), and the Bible also tells us that Saul was filled with God’s Spirit. There are a number of exciting scenes that we could consider from the life of King Saul, but I would like for us to think this morning about a turning point in Saul’s life, a time when the Lord had to teach him a painful but very important lesson, a lesson that most of us need to remember, more than 3,000 years later. I am referring to the passage in 1 Samuel 15 where King Saul was told to completely destroy the Amalekites (p. 460). Up to this point in his reign, King Saul had been almost constantly fighting various nations in the area, but the Amalekites were a stubborn enemy living in the southern part of the Promised Land. We will go into this a little bit deeper in just a moment, but the Amalekites had a long and very disturbing past with God’s people – 1 Samuel 15,

***<sup>1</sup> Then Samuel said to Saul, The Lord sent me to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore, listen to the words of the Lord. <sup>2</sup> Thus says the Lord of hosts, “I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. <sup>3</sup> Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”***

***<sup>4</sup> Then Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, 200,000 foot soldiers and 10,000 men of Judah. <sup>5</sup> Saul came to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the valley. <sup>6</sup> Saul said to the Kenites, “Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, so that I do not destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the sons of Israel when they came up from Egypt.” So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. <sup>7</sup> So Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. <sup>8</sup> He captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. <sup>9</sup> But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the***

*lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.*

<sup>10</sup> *Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, <sup>11</sup> "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands." And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night. <sup>12</sup> Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal." <sup>13</sup> Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the Lord! I have carried out the command of the Lord." <sup>14</sup> But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" <sup>15</sup> Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed." <sup>16</sup> Then Samuel said to Saul, "Wait, and let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night." And he said to him, "Speak!"*

<sup>17</sup> *Samuel said, "Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the Lord anointed you king over Israel, <sup>18</sup> and the Lord sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.' <sup>19</sup> Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord?"*

<sup>20</sup> *Then Saul said to Samuel, "I did obey the voice of the Lord, and went on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. <sup>21</sup> But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal."*

<sup>22</sup> *Samuel said,*

*Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices  
As in obeying the voice of the Lord?  
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,  
And to heed than the fat of rams.*

<sup>23</sup> *For rebellion is as the sin of divination,  
And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry.  
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,  
He has also rejected you from being king.*

<sup>24</sup> *Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice. <sup>25</sup> Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I may worship the Lord." <sup>26</sup> But Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you; for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel." <sup>27</sup> As Samuel turned to go, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore. <sup>28</sup> So Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you. <sup>29</sup> Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind." <sup>30</sup> Then he said, "I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders*

*of my people and before Israel, and go back with me, that I may worship the Lord your God.”*

<sup>31</sup> *So Samuel went back following Saul, and Saul worshiped the Lord.*

<sup>32</sup> *Then Samuel said, “Bring me Agag, the king of the Amalekites.” And Agag came to him cheerfully. And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.”* <sup>33</sup> *But Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the Lord at Gilgal.*

<sup>34</sup> *Then Samuel went to Ramah, but Saul went up to his house at Gibeah of Saul.* <sup>35</sup> *Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.*

I think you will agree with me that this is a rather dramatic passage! And I think we understand why some of the children of this congregation are somewhat fascinated with King Saul. If this chapter were a video game, it would be rated “M” for “Mature.” As we look back at these 35 verses, I would like for us to back up a little bit and ask ourselves the “So what” question. In other words: Why is this passage in the Bible? What does this passage really mean to those of us who are now living more than 3,000 years later? Looking at this chapter as a whole, I would suggest two very important ideas.

- I. **Based on what we have read here, I would suggest first of all, that OBEYING GOD ANYTHING LESS THAN 100% IS THE SAME AS REBELLION – or, as it says on the wall up here, “PARTIAL OBEDIENCE EQUALS REBELLION.”**

And at first we might think: Wait a minute! How is it fair for God to ask Saul to kill an entire nation of people, including the women, the children, and even the animals? I have included an article in the cubbyholes that addresses this question. There is a bonus article on top of the cubbyholes that goes into even more detail, including some references to a debate held several years ago with the head of the Freedom From Religion Foundation based here in Madison. So, I will leave most of the details to the articles, but for the purpose of our study here this morning, we need to understand who the Amalekites really were. The Amalekites were descendants of Esau, and you might remember some of the details from Exodus 17 concerning what the Amalekites did when the Israelites were leaving Egypt. God’s people had been in Egypt for 400 years, and instead of allowing the Israelites to pass through on their way to the Promised Land, the Bible tells us that Amalek took advantage of the situation and just kind of slowly and methodically killed off those Israelites who were falling behind – the weak, the lame, the elderly, those with children, those who were pregnant. When it first happened, God said to Moses, ***“Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it for Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”*** And the reason was: The Amalekites had no mercy. The entire nation was evil. In fact, many years later when Moses retold the Law near the end of the book of Deuteronomy, as the people were getting ready to cross over the Jordan, Moses had a reminder in Deuteronomy 25,

***17 Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, 18 how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. 19 Therefore it shall come about when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget.***

God, therefore, was saying: We will settle this score, but today is neither the time nor the place (paraphrased). In his great patience, God waited. He waited nearly 300 years. The Amalekites continued in their sinful ways. In fact, they eventually got to the point where they were sacrificing their own children in their religious rituals. They were involved in other violent forms of idolatry. We learn that during the time of the judges, the Amalekites would wait for the Israelites to till their ground and plant their crops, they would wait until just before harvest time, and they would swoop in take all of it. They would steal their flocks and herds and even the donkeys that were needed to till the ground the next season. They nearly starved God's people to death, so finally, after graciously extending the deadline for hundreds of years, after putting up with many attempts at genocide, God's patience had finally come to an end. Through the prophet Samuel, God told King Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites – kill them all and destroy everything associated with the Amalekite nation (some very simple instructions).

At this point, Saul rounds up an army of 210,000 men (the population of Madison), he sets an ambush, but instead of following God's instructions, Saul captures the king and brings back the best of the animals. We have the first clue about some of Saul's reasoning in verse 9, where we find that he was ***"not willing to destroy them utterly, but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed."*** We might want to think that Saul held back due to some level of compassion. But it is interesting: He apparently had no problem slaughtering the women and children, he had no problem slaughtering the sick and the elderly, but he saved the king and the best of the animals. Why save the king? We are not given the answer directly, but we do have a passage on an interesting event from the time of the judges. In Judges 1, we read about a local Canaanite king who bragged about having seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off who used to gather up scraps under his table. When you conquered a nation, the common thing to do was to bring back the king as a trophy – almost like a deer head mounted on a wall, it was a way to brag. I'm not saying this is definitely what Saul had in mind, but why else would he disobey God? He had to have a reason. And I would say, based on what Saul does in verse 12, this is a possibility. In verse 12, Samuel learns that Saul had ***"set up a monument to himself."*** In other words, Saul was in a bragging mood, and this is certainly a possibility why he spared the Amalekite king. He brought him back as a trophy.

As I was preparing this morning's lesson, I ran across an old story about a little boy who wanted to buy his mom a cookie jar for her birthday. He goes to the store and asks for help, and very carefully he goes through each jar and carefully lifts each lid and carefully puts each lid back on. He goes through each one and is obviously disappointed, and he turns to the clerk and says, "Aren't there any cookie jars here that don't make any noise?" You see, he was not really interested in a gift for his mother! Yes, he was giving her something, but he was giving for selfish reasons. In the same way, Saul only obeyed the parts of God's command that he wanted to obey, and the Lord classified that as ***"rebellion."*** He only obeyed the parts of God's command that seemed reasonable, only the parts that he agreed with! And yet, again, partial obedience is ***"rebellion."*** According to verse 23, ***"For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry."*** Disobedience, even partial obedience, is compared to witchcraft and idol worship. And I would just note here: These are at least two of the reasons why Saul was sent to destroy the Amalekites! He was sent on a mission to destroy some evil people, and he comes back no better than they are!

So what? What does this passage mean for those of us gathered here this morning? This passage is a reminder that partial obedience is not really obedience at all. When we pray, I doubt very many of us have ever asked God to forgive us of idol worship and witchcraft, and yet if in any area we have ever responded to God with anything but total obedience, it is not really a small thing at all. Partial obedience is classified as rebellion. God wants obedience even in the details. As I look at what Saul did here, I would estimate that he was maybe 95% obedient. Let's just assume he was 95% obedient to God. Even at 95%, God says (in verse 11), ***"I regret that I***

***have made Saul king, for he has turned his back from following me and has not carried out my commands.***” Even at 95% obedience, Saul had turned his back on God. To help us understand that a little better, let’s bring that over into modern terms. Would we settle for a spouse that was 95% faithful to us? You see, even those “little things” can be very important. That 5% can be incredibly important. And the same thing goes for our relationship with God. As the Lord himself said in John 14:15, ***“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”*** There are times when we might disobey God in some open and obvious way. Like Adam and Eve, we might stubbornly step across a line that God has told us not to cross, but more often, I believe it is much more common to sin like Saul – partial obedience. We obey, we get it right most of the time, but maybe we don’t go all the way. We obey, but maybe we are holding something back. The Lord describes that as ***“rebellion.”*** Let’s use this passage, first of all, as a reminder to obey God in everything. Is there any witchcraft in our lives? Is there any idol worship going on? Are we holding back on God in some way? Is there something we’re doing that we know we shouldn’t be doing? Are there things we are not doing that we should be doing? Let us learn a lesson from King Saul: Partial obedience is rebellion.

**II. There is a second and final main lesson for us to learn from this event in King Saul’s life, and that is: When we sin, GOD WILL NEVER ACCEPT EXCUSES.**

And we have some good ones in this chapter! Immediately (in verse 13 and in verse 20), Saul starts out by claiming that he really had obeyed the Lord. Excuse #1, then, is straight up denial! “What then is this noise? If you obeyed, then why do I hear sheep?” And so, when presented with the evidence, Saul shifts his tactics a little bit (starting in verse 15 and also in verse 21), and he starts blaming the people (Excuse #2) – the people saved the animals! By the way, it’s in verse 21 where we find that Saul really did understand the original command – the people took these things should have been destroyed – so, Saul really did understand! And then, as he continues digging himself a hole, he comes in with a third excuse, and that is: We were only doing this for God – we brought back these animals so that we could sacrifice them to the Lord! Did you notice the progression? To me, it sounds like a brother picking a fight: 1.) I didn’t do it! 2.) He did it! 3.) There was a reason why I did it! And that’s what Saul did: 1.) He denied the sin, 2.) He blamed others, and then, 3.) He tried to explain himself.

I would like to focus in on that last excuse, the idea that he disobeyed God in order to make God happy. When we word it like that, it’s obviously ridiculous, but that is basically what he’s saying: I disobeyed God so that I could make God happy. I did not obey so that I could sacrifice these animals to God. But think about that for just a moment. One of the main reasons for offering sacrifices under the Law of Moses was to allow the people to prove that they took God seriously, to prove that they were obedient even in the details. So here we have a king disobeying God in order to prove that he is obedient – disobeying God to prove that he loves God. That makes no sense! He is trying to spiritualize a sin. In reality, what would have really made God happy is if Saul had obeyed the command, if Saul instead of saving the animals had killed them right there on the battlefield – that is the sacrifice that God really wanted. And we know that’s what God wanted, because that’s what God told Saul that he wanted. The only way we know what God wants is when he tells us. Ultimately, then, God is not really looking for dead sheep, but he is looking for our hearts. He is looking for obedience, and the obedience is a test of our love. Again, remember what the Lord said, ***“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”*** (John 14:15). Disobedience or partial obedience cannot be covered up by religious activity.

I would point out something else here, and it comes at the end of verse 21 – speaking to Samuel, Saul said that he saved the animals, so that he could ***“sacrifice to the Lord YOUR God....”*** To me, that is a little strange. He doesn’t refer to God as being HIS God, but he refers to God as being SAMUEL’S God. Maybe that is nothing, but it might be significant. Saul was already starting to feel at least a little bit separated from God. Remember

from our study of Isaiah 59 several weeks ago: Sin makes a barrier between us and God. Saul, therefore, was already feeling as if God was not really his God. He was already feeling the separation.

And besides, the excuse of offering sacrifices might have in some way explained the animals, but it in no way explains saving Agag. In reality, Saul cared more about what people thought than about what God thought. Saul cared more about what he himself thought than he cared about what God thought. And another question to consider: If sacrifice had been the real reason, then why did Saul stop to build himself a monument before coming back and sacrificing to God? And even if they had sacrificed the animals, even that was self-serving. They gave to God what was not theirs to give. In fact, by sacrificing the Amalekite animals, it saved them from sacrificing their own animals! We remember what King David would go on to say near the end of his life, ***"I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing"*** (2 Samuel 24:24).

So, when we put all of this together, we find that God really does not accept excuses. Partial obedience is rebellion, and God is certainly not impressed if we go back later and try to put some kind of religious spin on it. Saul denied it, then he blamed others, and then he claimed that he did it for God, but in the end, Saul was guilty and could not get out of it.

In fact, as I see it, Saul never really accepted personal responsibility before God. Near the end, he tried to avoid embarrassment by talking Samuel into making a public appearance with him, but nowhere does Saul ever really work this out with God. And that's the lesson for us: When we sin, the best thing to do is to admit it and make a commitment to move forward without doing it again.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close, I find it interesting that Samuel is the one who ultimately took responsibility for killing Agag. Isn't that sad? We would like to think that when confronted with his sin, Saul would have stepped forward to finish the job. But as it is, we have this elderly prophet, and it is the old man Samuel who ends up finishing the job that Saul had failed to do. In fact, not only does Samuel put him to death, but the Bible explains that Samuel hacks the King into pieces. It is almost like the prophet is putting a little exclamation point on the lesson here. Partial obedience is the same as rebellion, and God does not accept excuses. And so, at the end of this chapter, we find that God ***"regretted"*** that he had made Saul king over Israel. That is King Saul's spiritual legacy. In the next chapter, the young man David is anointed to be the next king, the Spirit of God leaves Saul, he begins to be tormented by various evil spirits, he spends the next several years running around after David instead of fighting the Philistines, he goes on to consult a medium in an attempt to speak with Samuel (who had died by that time) – he tried to communicate with the dead, a clear violation of God's law, he goes on to try to kill his own son, and by the end of the book we have Saul taking his own life after being defeated in battle.

This morning, as we conclude our lesson on Saul (a lesson requested by one of the children here this morning), I would suggest that Saul is a life-lesson on the importance of obedience to God. All of this tragedy could have been avoided if Saul had simply put God first, if Saul had simply obeyed. As was read in our Scripture reading this morning, Jesus is our perfect example of obedience. Referring to the Lord, the author of Hebrews said that, ***"Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation"*** (Hebrews 5:8-9). That's how important obedience is to God. God's only Son had to learn obedience on the cross, and for that reason, he saves those who obey. That's the good news. We obey the good news by repenting of our sins and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. When we are buried with Christ, we are baptized into His death, and when we are lifted out of the water, we are raised up to start living the Christian life. If you

have any questions, we would love to study with you. Just let us know. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)