

## Samuel to King David 1 Samuel Ch.15 – Saul's Disobedience

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.  
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

We now conclude our series on the life of Samuel. Let's turn to 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel chapter 15, where the focus is on Israel's king, Saul. In this chapter, Saul is instructed to execute vengeance on the nation of Amalek in the name of the LORD. Saul does not properly carry out God's commands and seals his fate as a rejected king. And out of this incident emerges a vital theme of Scripture – that it is obedience to God which matters, above all else, as a matter of the heart.

I will read selected verses of 1 Samuel 15. The subject matter is challenging and I encourage you to read the chapter in your own time and reflect on it prayerfully.

### The source of Saul's authority

1 Samuel 15:1-3:

“Samuel also said to Saul, the LORD sent me to anoint you king over His people, over Israel. Now therefore, heed the voice of the words of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey’” (1 Samuel 15:1-3 NKJV).

First, Samuel reminds Saul who he, Saul, was answerable to. “The LORD sent me to anoint you king...”, he says. This puts the next instruction into perspective: “Heed the voice of the LORD.” Saul's authority was not absolute, and certainly not derived from the people – although he was in many ways the people's choice. Neither was it derived from within himself – even though he was a towering and impressive individual. In fact he had a delegated authority from the LORD and therefore had to obey the LORD's voice in matters of kingship and not exercise his own supreme rights.

This is a crucial point Samuel makes, as Samuel is about to instruct Saul to carry out a severe act of judgement – indeed, vengeance – on God's behalf on the nation of Amalek. So Samuel makes it clear to Saul that it is the LORD who ‘will punish Amalek’ – but Saul was to be the instrument of judgement.

### Why punish the nation of Amalek?

So what was the problem with the nation of Amalek? Amalek had a distant blood relationship to Israel. Its founder, also named Amalek, was the grandson of Esau, the brother of Israel's patriarch, Jacob. However, over time they had become decided and perpetual enemies of Israel. Samuel

relays the voice of the LORD: 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt' (v.2). Around 400 years before, when Israel escaped out from their slavery in Egypt, Amalek had launched a raid on the stragglers of the Israelite column. The stragglers were likely to have been the very old and young – those who were most vulnerable and unable to defend themselves. It was a cowardly attack, not on the front lines, but to the rear.

Later Jewish tradition counts 613 commandments in total in the Torah, of which 3 relate to this incident with Amalek. The 3 commandments call for judgement upon Amalek - as found in Deuteronomy 25:17-19:

1. "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt."
2. "You will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven."  
and
3. "You will not forget."

### **Was Amalek's guilt hereditary?**

So this leads us to our first challenging question: why were the Amalekites of Saul's time to be held responsible for the sins of their forefathers of 400 years earlier? [How would we feel if we were held responsible for the actions of our national predecessors, say, from times of the 1600s and 1700s?](#) In what way can the instruction to punish a much later generation be considered just and right?

Well, what we certainly do find in Scripture is that God gives nations time to change their ways. Back in Genesis 15:16, Abraham was told that judgement on the Amorite nation was not to be executed as their iniquity was 'not yet complete' - there had been insufficient time to demonstrate the far end of their crimes, and to show whether they might change course. Similarly, the city of Nineveh was sent a message of certain judgement for their sins by God's prophet Jonah – and surprisingly, they repented of, and were sorry for, their sins. God did not bring the judgement upon Nineveh that He had intended – much to Jonah's great displeasure, who thought they very much deserved it!

The nation of Israel descended from her high calling as 'chief of the nations' (Jeremiah 31:7) due to prolonged disobedience to God's word and law. Nevertheless, even towards the end of that era, Jeremiah was sent by God to spread a word of repentance to the remaining cities in Judah, which had not been captured and enslaved by foreign powers: 'Perhaps everyone will listen', God says, 'And turn from his evil way, that I may relent concerning the calamity which I purpose to bring on them because of the evil of their doings' (Jeremiah 26:3).

So God indeed leaves room for nations to change – even, as we see in the case of Judah, in the dying days of the life of a nation - when near-certain judgement has already and often been pronounced.

[We see the same principle at work today too. We can look back to a period in our recent history when the slave trade was rife, operating freely in an economic triangle from Europe to Africa and on to the New World. The trade brought enormous wealth to the nations that 'benefited' from it – and, it is contended, this has given rise to a structural advantage enjoyed even today. So the question might arise: is it right for subsequent generations to be held responsible? The politicians of the 1800s felt the need to make reparations, and so the United Kingdom paid release money to all slave owners under the British Empire's jurisdiction by raising debt that was only paid off early in the present century. So this is not an arcane debate about matters from ancient history. And today there is also a widespread acceptance that we must distance ourselves from celebrating](#)

and honouring such activity if we are not to be thought guilty of enjoying the benefits of it. Politicians may debate how best to draw an acceptable line under these matters, and I do not bring this up to make any political comment, but simply to illustrate that society today does accept on occasions that there can be hereditary responsibility for wrongdoing, especially if there is no turning away from, or rejecting of, the original crimes.

So in the case for the Amalekites, are we given any clues as to their viewpoint and outlook in the times of Saul – 400 years or so after their attack on Israel which was so particularly remembered? I would suggest the generation of the Amalek under question in Saul's time were just as 'bought in' to their hatred of the nation of Israel in Saul's generation as they were 400 years earlier. As we have seen, God is presented to us as a God who gives nations the time to change – and indeed He stands ready to reverse His judgement, if there is evidence of such change. But we see no such reversal evident in the case of Amalek. Indeed we see later in this chapter that Amalek has retained its violent character, when Samuel says to their king, Agag, 'As your sword has made women childless...' (v.33). Amalek's propensity to evil and violence has not changed.

### **Was the judgement on Amalek just and right?**

So the message to Saul is unequivocal now. Amalek must be judged, and Saul is to be the leader to do it. The instruction continues from Samuel: 'Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey' (v.3).

Well, as we read this verse it throws open further challenging and indeed vexing questions. A full consideration of these would require a separate broadcast. But let us consider some pointers for further careful reflection.

Firstly, I have heard one supposedly 'Christian' minister insist that 'his God' could not possibly have issued such a command, and if God had done so, he would not worship such a God! Therefore, he concluded, Samuel must have misheard God. But for that to be the case, Moses and Joshua must have also 'misheard' God, when they were commanded to clear the land of Canaan of the barbarous and child-sacrificing nations that occupied it. And further, the Bible records that it was God Himself who was the direct agent of the judgement of all of humanity, except the eight in the Ark, at the time of Noah's flood - and also of particular judgement of two whole cities in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The Bible says that God, in fact, controls all life and death – whether young or old. "If He should set His heart on it, if He should gather to Himself His Spirit and His breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust", Elihu tells his friend Job in Job 34:14-15. No-one dies outside the active will of God – and our life right now is equally dependent on His permissive will. I believe we must accept that if we deny God's right to be sovereign over life and death, we are denying who He is as the Originator and Creator of life. At heart is the denial of the right of God to be the final Judge.

So I fear this 'Christian' minister has fallen into the trap of redefining God on his own terms – a view he could only form by discounting and disregarding Scripture's testimony about God's character, rather than reading and receiving the Bible 'not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God' (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

### **Understanding God's character and ways**

But does this mean God operates in a moral vacuum, so that He can do what he likes, whether good or evil? Not at all! Scripture is clear that God is the objective source of justice and morality: "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without

injustice; righteous and upright is He”, was Moses’ song to the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 32:4). Much later, Paul the apostle affirmed that God ‘cannot deny Himself’ (2 Timothy 2:13). God is the source of moral goodness and cannot act against His own character. So God calls for judgement to be executed on Amalek, but if, like me, you understand and agree with David when he concludes that he would one day see his recently-deceased child again, after death (2 Samuel 12:23), so God is just in his dealings too with those under an age of responsibility. The great man of faith Abraham somewhat fearfully posed God this question: ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?’ (Genesis 18:25). And we can take assurance that indeed He will do.

Lastly, the dispensations of God’s ways with mankind outlined in Scripture help us to frame and interpret Scripture. So while Israel occupied her place as the ‘chief of the nations’, she was expected, from time to time, to execute judgement on God’s behalf and in His name – theocracy was put to the test. But Israel failed in her responsibility, and such commandments are now completely and wholly withdrawn. In our time of grace in the Church age, we see Jesus has introduced a new principle: ‘My kingdom is not of this world’, He says to Pontius Pilate, ‘If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight’ (John 18:36). Similarly, all judgement is now reserved to God Himself: “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19). So there never will arise an occasion where Christians today are called upon to act as God’s agents of judgement. Judgement at a future time remains certain, but it is God, not us, who will carry it out.

### **Saul's failed obedience**

So with all of these points in mind, we proceed to verses 4-6, where we see Saul has assembled an army and is approaching an Amalekite city. He gives the opportunity to another tribe, the Kenites, to escape, as their support and kindness to the people of Israel during the time of the exodus is remembered. The Kenites lose no time in leaving, and the attack begins. From a military point of view, the attack is successful, and Saul captures their king, Agag, and takes the best of their animals and livestock as spoil.

However, a chilling word is heard from the LORD, through Samuel: ‘I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king’ (v.11) ‘For he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed my commandments.’

So what is Saul’s fatal error? Simply put, he has not fully carried out the LORD’s commandment. He has substituted his own – ostensibly similar – plan for God’s plan. The end result is that he spares some provisions for himself and for the people as spoil, and he also spares Agag, the Amalekite king. This was definitely not part of God’s instructions.

And in case we think this was due to any high principles of Saul, it’s clear that Saul had no difficulty in carrying the other elements of the attack – this is not the action of a king with moral qualms about his duty. Saul has his own interpretation of God’s commands guided by his own desires.

Samuel rightly understands the seriousness of all of this, and he cries out to the LORD all night in grief at the situation. He then makes his way to meet with Saul to pass on the message that Saul’s days as king are numbered. [And on the way, he hears that Saul has taken the time, not to celebrate and acknowledge that the victory has been given to him by God, but instead by making a monument to himself! Perhaps inspired by this occasion or other similar instances, the sons of Korah pen Psalm 49, in which they observe the futility of preserving a name for future generations - the ‘fool and the senseless person’, they say, ‘call their lands after their own names’ \(Psalm 49 vv.10-11\).](#)

### **Saul is confronted with his sin**

When Samuel meets Saul in Gilgal, Saul’s uneasy conscience is evident. ‘Blessed are you of the

LORD!', he says to Samuel, in an exaggerated greeting, 'I have performed the commandment of the LORD' (v.13). But Samuel is ready to bring the truth directly and immediately to Saul's conscience – by highlighting the obvious evidence that all the best animals of the Amalekites, which God had commanded to be slaughtered, can be heard in the nearby fields! Immediately Saul turns his fire on to his own people. 'They have brought them from the Amalekites', he says, 'to sacrifice to the LORD your God' (v.15). Saul's escape route is to claim a high principle, but Samuel sees straight through it and dismisses Saul with a sharp word. 'Be quiet!', he says in v.16. Samuel reminds Saul that God had brought Saul from nothing to make him king – so why did he not obey God's voice in this instance? Again Saul tries to pass over the matter and again blames the people.

### **A great principle – obedience is better than sacrifice**

But what benefit to the LORD is a sacrifice that follows the rites and ceremonies of the prescribed law, when disobedience to the LORD is at its root? It is fitting that the communication of a great new principle is given to Samuel, who is inspired by God to bring clarity out of this confusion: 1 Samuel 15:22:

“Has the LORD as great 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.”

And so 'obedience' – in other words, a response of the heart inspired by faith in God's word – is set above and before 'sacrifice' – in other words, an apparent and external adherence to form - but which, in this instance, was devoid of faith.

Saul's eventual successor, King David, understood this perfectly when he confessed in Psalm 51:16-17.

“For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart— these, O God, You will not despise.”

David realised that his observance of any order and form was meaningless without his repentance and obedience, which had to be from the heart.

[A scribe years later would summarise this in his conversation with Jesus, saying, “And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” \(Mark 12:33\). It is noteworthy that Mark records that Jesus 'saw that he answered wisely'.](#)

### **Saul's motivation revealed**

Samuel's pronouncement does have an effect on Saul. Saul confesses his sin, and in doing so reveals his underlying motivation – 'I feared the people' (v.24). But Saul was the king, the leader – and a leader must be able to rise above the tumult of the mob. “The fear of man brings a snare”, as Scripture states in Proverbs 29:25, “But whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe.” Saul's safety could have been found in trusting the LORD, but he allowed fear to dominate. Now, Saul's days as king are numbered. 'The LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel' (v.26). As Samuel turns away, Saul desperately grabs and tears Samuel's robe – handing Samuel a great opportunity to illustrate the tearing away of the kingdom from Saul. And although God gives time for repentance, the die is eventually cast – and so today the Scriptures still urge 'Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation' (2 Corinthians 6:2). We should never presume upon or exploit God's grace.

Lastly, we return to Samuel. Now many struggle with the concept of capital punishment today, but Samuel is called to execute the judgement that Saul failed to do. It is a distasteful episode, but we are left in no doubt that Agag had been a violent man, and God's judgement was for Agag to suffer the capital penalty. In one way, we are all subject to the same penalty: 'It is appointed for men to die once', the writer of Hebrews says (Hebrews 9:27), and then adds 'but after this the judgment.' We all have that judgement to face. Samuel and Saul go their separate ways, but Samuel takes no joy over the outcome. We read in conclusion that 'Samuel mourned for Saul' (v.35).

### **What can we learn for today?**

So how can we summarise this challenging chapter? Paul writes that, 'Whatever things were written before' – in the Old Testament scriptures - 'were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope' (Romans 15:4). So we can be assured that we can learn, and gain instruction and hope, from this passage in 1 Samuel.

Here are some pointers for us to reflect and pray over:

- First, as noted earlier, a right understanding of the distinctions or dispensations in Scripture which relate to God's dealings with mankind will help us to interpret and apply the lessons from all of Scripture – including challenging portions like we have read today. God does not change, nor does His principle that the just shall live by faith, but Scripture does show us that God has developed the way He interacts with His creation. Let us read the Scripture accordingly, 'rightly dividing the word of truth' (2 Timothy 2:15).
- We must recognise obedience to God's revealed word is a 'heart' issue. We cannot redefine who God is, or rewrite His word, according to our own preferences. We should challenge ourselves – do I read and understand who God is, and what He wants of me, as guided by His word, rather than by my own ideas? Do I understand what the Lord requires of me in my day? That is for regular prayerful study and consideration.
- And if we are found in positions of leadership, we must remember that our foremost responsibility is to the Lord and to be led by His word. We should not allow the 'fear of man' to mislead us. Leaders should show Samuel's courage rather than Saul's cowardice. May those who lead, lead wisely and in dependence upon God's word.
- Similarly, we all find ourselves in situations where we are not the 'leader' but part of the 'people.' So let me ask myself - do I realise my actions and desires may have an influence on those who lead? Am I a prayerful help, or a self-centred hindrance in my local church? And it's right that if we see a leader fall from his position due to sin, we, like Samuel, take time for subdued reflection – not celebration.
- Finally, we should be under no illusion as to seriousness of sin and the certainty of judgement. The nation of Amalek institutionalised their violent hatred of God's people Israel down through their generations, and God called time on it. So while God is gracious, and there is a time for repentance, all of us should remember that 'now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation.'

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk entitled "Samuel's disobedience" in our series on Samuel to King David, talk number T1316.

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