

TO OBEY IS BETTER

1 Samuel 14:47-15:23

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, June 28, 2009

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams (1 Sam. 15:22).

In Samuel 14 conclude with a rapid summary that chronicles in brief the long reign of King Saul. We find that Saul was more or less constantly beset with enemies on every side, fighting “against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines. All four directions find their representative on that list, and Saul prevailed over them all: “Wherever he turned he routed them. And did valiantly and struck the Amalekites and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them” (1 Sam. 14:47-48). “There was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul.” For this reason, Saul was constantly recruiting expert fighters: “when Saul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he attached him to himself” (1 Sam. 14:52).

Saul’s domestic life was equally active. He had three sons, “Jonathan, Ishvi, and Malchi-shua,” and God blessed him with two daughters, Merab and Michal (1 Sam. 14:49). In a passage that today would read like an obituary, the narrative recounts the name of Saul’s wife, Ahimaaz, and his uncle Abner, who commanded the army, along with Saul’s father Kish and Abner’s father Ner, and grandfather Abiel.

Thus was the life of Saul, King of Israel – a great life, to be sure. But what is the point of this summary, when so much of Saul’s reign is yet to be told? The apparent reason is one of charity and appreciation. This is the positive record that can be attributed Saul: his battles, his family, and his army of followers. If only these things

provided the sum of a man or woman! But they do not, and the lesson taught to us by Saul's decrepit end is that a person's life is finally assessed not by their worldly achievements but by their relationship to the Lord. How many people today possess glowing resumes and accomplishments, yet none of it ultimately matters because they are estranged from their Maker! To be a man or woman of God is better than to be a great king like Saul. Or, as we would put it in terms of the lesson of 1 Samuel 15, "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam. 15:22).

SAUL COMMANDED TO HOLY WAR

Chapter 15 is a pivotal account in 1 Samuel, since it closes the book of Saul's kingship and opens the book for his successor, King David. From the very start of the chapter, the matter at hand is obedience to the Lord. Samuel appears before Saul, saying, "The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD" (1 Sam. 15:1). Since Saul became king through God's anointing, Saul had an obligation to follow the instructions that came from the prophet Samuel. Literally, Samuel says, "listen to the voice of the words of the Lord." As king, Saul must harken to God's words and obey what the Lord tells him.

The particular command that Samuel brought to Saul pertained to one of Israel's ancient and hated enemies, the Amalekites: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey'" (1 Sam. 15:2-3).

Saul was to attack and destroy the Amalekite people, a nomadic people to the south and southeast of Israel, living in the Negeb and the Sinai desert. When Israel was passing through Sinai during the exodus from Egypt, the Amalekites attacked them. While Aaron and Hur held up Moses' hands, the Israelites triumphed in this battle (Ex. 17:8-16). Later, the Lord commanded his vengeance: "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary..."

Therefore... you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (Dt. 25:17-19).

In the timing of the Lord, the day had come for Amalek’s long-awaited judgment, at the hand of King Saul. We are reminded by this that the counsels of the Lord are known only to him, and that while wicked men scoff at God’s delays, the day of judgment comes with terrible and sudden swiftness according to God’s timetable.

Saul was commanded to put the Amalekites under God’s ban, the holy war provision of devoting to destruction “all that they have.” None were to be spared: not even women, children, and infants, and not even the Amalekite livestock. The purpose of Saul’s offensive was divine judgment; the entire Amalekite nation was to be offered to the Lord in a display of perfect divine justice. Having earlier opposed Israel during her weakness in the exodus, Amalek had continued in wickedness and the measure of God’s wrath was now full.

Some commentators struggle to accept the ethics of Samuel’s command to Saul, some dismissing it as “the provisional morality of the Old Testament.”¹ David Payne expresses concern that Israelites who practiced such all-out holy war “had yet much to learn about the character of God.”² The problem with both of these views is that it was God himself who issued the ban against the Amalekites and required Saul to practice holy war genocide. The ethics of God’s unchanging character are never provisional, nor can we plausibly declare that God was speaking in ignorance of his own character.

The only arena in which God’s people today practice holy war is spiritual warfare, as instructed in passages like Ephesians 6:10-18. No nation today – neither an Iran nor an America – can ever claim the mantle of God’s people engaged in legitimate holy war and thus claim the right to the kind of comprehensive destruction of an enemy that we witness in the Old Testament. The two purposes of such all-out Old Testament holy war were the preservation of Israel and the execution of God’s judgment on wicked nations that had fallen under his wrath. Today, reflecting on the horrors of Old Testament holy

¹ R. P. Gordon, cited in David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 391.

² David F. Payne, *I & II Samuel*, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1992), 76.

war, we must remember the reality of God's coming judgment which will be, if anything, much worse. God is a holy God and his fierce anger burns against all uncleansed evil. Revelation 19:15 tells us that when Jesus returns in judgment, "He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty." William Blaikie reminds us:

That God will execute wrath on the impenitent and unbelieving is just as much a feature of the gospel as that He will bestow all the blessings of salvation and eternal life on them that believe... It is most wholesome for us all to look at times steadily in the face of this solemn attribute of God [perfect justice], as the Avenger of the impenitent [for] it shows us that sin is not a thing to be trifled with. It [also] shows us that God's will is not a thing to be despised.³

Saul responded to God's command with energy: "Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah" (1 Sam. 15:4). Saul amassed a great army, although remembering that the Hebrew word for *thousand* can also mean *military unit*, it is possible that Saul's force did not number in the hundreds of thousands, though its strength was still very great. With this force Saul set out.

Drawing near to the Amalekites, Saul came upon the Kenites, a tribe of Midianite metal-workers, who dwelt among the Amalekites. It speaks well of Saul that for the sake of the Kenites' kindness to Israel during the exodus (the memory of which the Bible does not record, except that Moses' father-in-law, a Kenite (Jud. 4:11), gave aid to Moses after the battle with the Amalekites, Ex. 8:1-12), Saul gives the Kenites the opportunity to escape the battle (1 Sam.15:6). Saul then proceeded to defeat and pursue the Amalekites as far as "Shur, which is east of Egypt" (1 Sam. 15:7).

Yet for all of Saul's swift response to God's command, Israel's king did not fully obey it. We see this in Saul's response to the enemy king and to his possessions: "And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that

³ William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 2.

was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction” (1 Sam. 15:8-9).

THE LORD REPENTS OF SAUL

In 1 Samuel 13, Saul failed in the first task given to him as Israel’s king, offering the sacrifice to the Lord on his own rather than waiting for the prophet as he was told to do. This failure meant that Saul would not be permitted to found a dynasty of kings. Saul’s failure in chapter 15, disobeying God by sparing the life of Agag and his livestock, resulted in the Lord’s complete rejection of Saul as Israel’s king. “The word of the LORD came to Samuel: ‘I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments’” (1 Sam. 15:10-11).

This statement raises some questions, particularly as to how God can be said to “regret” or “repent” of his actions. For some readers, this and other statements of divine regret in the Bible (there are twenty-nine of them that use a verbal construction similar to that of verse 11) undermine the traditional Reformed teaching of God’s foreknowledge and sovereignty. This has been the recent position of scholars promoting what they call “open theism.” Open theism results from a radical emphasis on human free will, teaching that God does not know future events until they happen, since events do not exist until created by human choices. Thus God is said to be “open” to future events, learning them along with us as our sovereign choices determine – at least in large part – the course of history. Open theism thus not only undermines the Bible’s overall portrait of God, which emphasizes God’s predestinating sovereignty over all things (Isa. 46:9-10; Eph. 1:4-11; Rom. 9:1-23), but radically undercuts believers’ confidence in God’s ability to fulfill his promises and triumph in the end for our salvation.⁴

God’s repentance over his choice of Saul as king is seen by open theists as a classic text that proves their point regarding God’s ignorance of the future. John Sanders says that this passage proves “that the future is in some respects an indefinite event for God...

⁴ A comprehensive assessment of Open Theism’s impact on Christian faith can be found in Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000), chapter one.

God is not following a blueprint in working with us.”⁵ Gregory Boyd writes that God’s regret proves that God was not sovereign over Saul’s choices. He writes, “Common sense tells us that we can only regret a decision we made if the decision resulted in an outcome other than what we expected.”⁶

The problem with openness theology is that it conflicts with so many clear statements regarding God’s perfect foreknowledge of and sovereignty over all things. Consider, for instance, Isaiah 46:9-10, where the Lord says, “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’” Such a statement would be impossible under open theism, since God could not declare from the beginning an end of which he had no knowledge, and he could not claim to accomplish all of his purpose if he does not know how history ends (on the macro and micro scale). Likewise, Jesus assures believers of God’s care for their souls by asking: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father” (Mt. 10:29). God is sovereign in the smallest of details in his creation so that small birds live and die according to his will, predestining in advance and actively controlling history so that Paul is able to say that God “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

How, then, do we handle the Bible’s statements of God’s sorrow or repentance over sinful events? Ware provides three answers. First, he notes that such statements indicate that God is aware of and involved in changes to the human situation and responds in appropriate ways. Thus, when Saul persistently fails to obey, God responds by repenting of Saul as Israel’s king. Second, divine repentance “indicates [God’s] real experience, in historically unfolding relationships with people... Just because God knows in advance that some event will occur, this does not preclude God from experiencing appropriate emotions and expressing appropriate reactions when it actually happens.”⁷ This is why it is not sufficient

⁵ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 73.

⁶ Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 56.

⁷ Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 90-91.

to dismiss God's statements of repentance as instances of anthropomorphism – which means that even though God does not really feel the way the Bible says, human descriptions are used as an accommodation to us. But the Bible says that God really did sorrow and really did repent over Saul's selection as king, just as he was sorry he had made the human race prior to Noah's flood (Gen. 6:6) and just as God relented in his judgment when Nineveh repented through Jonah's ministry (Jon. 3:10). Dale Ralph Davis rightly comments: "Nonchalance is never listed as an attribute of the true God... Verse 11 does not intend to suggest Yahweh's fickleness of purpose but his sorrow over sin; it does not depict Yahweh flustered over lack of foresight by Yahweh grieved over lack of obedience."⁸

Third, Ware notes that God often expresses repentance and sorrow in order to elicit a response that he desires from his audience. God was making a point to his readers – to us – by expressing his repentance over making Saul king.⁹ What was God's point in telling us this? His point was that he demands careful obedience to his commands from those who would serve on his behalf. One of the chief points of the Bible's record of Saul's reign was to make clear to God's people their obligation to obey the Lord. Saul "has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments," lamented the Lord. The message for us is that faith in the Lord obliges us to careful obedience to the whole of his Word.

Probably the best commentary on God's repentance is given by Samuel towards the end of this very chapter. Verse 11 tells us that Samuel responded to God's message with great passion: "Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night." What distressed Samuel? At a minimum, the prophet shared God's remorse that the man who enjoyed such privileges as Israel's anointed king should respond with disobedience. But he may also have struggled to accept God's statement of repentance and sorrow over Saul. In the end, Samuel is resolved as to God's unchanging sovereignty, for he declares that "the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret" (1 Sam. 15:29). This is a fascinating statement, for when Samuel says that the Lord does not regret he uses the same

⁸ Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 130.

⁹ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 91-92.

verb that the Lord used when he said that God did regret making Saul king.

Some object to this apparent contradiction, arguing that it seems that God really does not feel repentance and regret the way that humans do. This is of course true. For God is, after all, God and not a man. John Piper writes, “He is not a man to experience ‘repentance’ [the way that humans do]. He experiences it his way – the way one experiences ‘repentance’ when one is all-wise and foreknows the entire future perfectly. The experience is real, but it is not like finite man experiences it.”¹⁰

The God who predestines and foreknows the future had ordained all the events of this chapter, including his own regret and sorrow over Saul’s disobedience. These events were a small part of a much greater history, also predestined and foreknown by God, a history centered on God not only regretting sin but himself bearing sin for his people on the cross in the person of his Son. For while the penal sacrifice of the blessed and sinless Son of God Jesus Christ was the most loathsome and hateful event ever to occur on planet Earth – so that the furies of God’s wrath poured out on the hard-hearted city that rejected Jesus – it also took place “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). The full purpose of history is that God might be glorified – that the perfections of the glories of all the attributes of God might be known and displayed to men and angels – attributes such as holiness, mercy, justice, forbearance, love and wrath. God is glorified by means of a history in which he displays his full hatred of sin even while he displaying such boundless grace in saving sinners through the death of Christ.

SAMUEL REBUKES SAUL FOR DISOBEDIENCE

Samuel, was, as we noted, bitterly grieved by Saul’s failure to obey the clear command of the Lord. Therefore his anguished night of prayer was followed by “one of the most spectacular confrontations in the pages of the Bible, when the prophet Samuel met the defiant King Saul.”¹¹ In a masterpiece of providential irony,

¹⁰ Cited in Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 97-98.

¹¹ John Woodhouse, *I Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 264.

Saul had been all this time building a monument to his obedience in attacking the Amalekites. Saul then returned to Gilgal, along with his spoils, eagerly awaiting his expected praise from the prophet.

The exchange that takes place almost belongs in a slap-stick comedy routine. There waits Saul as Samuel strides up the road. The king greets him with a well-prepared and smug self-congratulation: “Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the LORD” (1 Sam. 15:13). It is almost too much for us to believe that Saul could say this, until we remember how common it is for God’s people to pat ourselves on the back for obeying our own commandments rather than his. Samuel retorted with one of the greatest on-line comebacks in the Bible: “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?” (1 Sam. 15:14).

What follows is a potent primer on obedience to God. Samuel first points out that *obedience to God involves keeping his actual commands*. Saul had his own understanding of his mission against the Amalekites, and it was not precisely in line with the actual requirements God had given through Samuel. If Saul desired to celebrate his performance of God’s command, then he should have been careful to study those commands, remembering them always, and judging his own actions according to the standard given in God’s Word. His failure to do this was clearly evidenced by the braying of sheep and oxen, all of which God had ordered to be slaughtered and thus devoted to himself.

Saul’s error is extremely common today. Christians will often declare themselves obedient to God in any number of matters – in the doctrine they espouse, their approach to financial stewardship, sexual purity, marital faithfulness, their conduct as church members, manner of worshiping God, approach to evangelism, Sabbath observance, and more – when in fact their conduct does not line up with the Bible’s teaching. Very often, then, we will wonder why God’s blessing does not seem to be upon us, when a simple study of God’s Word will reveal our blatant disobedience to the command of the Lord.

In order to be praised by God, we need to obey what he has actually commanded. This is what Genesis 6:22 says regarding Noah: “he did all that God commanded him.” Had Noah not built his ark in careful

observance of God's instructions, it might not have floated during the great flood. Likewise, a failure by Christians today to preach and observe the actual doctrines and commandments of God's Word not only undermines our ministry but may well be our undoing. Saul pointed out that he had not completely rebelled: "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord," he asserted. "I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me" (1 Sam. 15:20-21). This was true. Moreover, he had devoted the vast majority of Amalekites to destruction. But by sparing Agag, the Amalekite king, along with the sheep and oxen, he had still flagrantly disobeyed the clear command of God's Word, undoing the value of what he had done.

Second, Saul's defense of his actions reminds us that *obedience to God requires unpopular actions*. When Samuel pointed out the bleating of sheep and the lowing of oxen, Saul replied, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction" (1 Sam. 15:15). In other words, Saul argued that he had devoted *most* of the Amalekite possessions, except those that the people thought should be kept for themselves, which happened to be "the best of the sheep and the oxen." In a suspicious explanation, Saul piously adds that these were spared so as to be offered as a sacrifice to the Lord.

This reminds us that spiritual leaders who would seek God's blessing must be willing to obey the Bible's commands even when they are unpopular. Paul exhorted Timothy that along with false teachers and imposters, the church will be plagued with congregations who "will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). Timothy should nonetheless "continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed" (2 Tim. 3:14), and faithfully "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2). An example to avoid was given by Aaron, Moses' brother and Israel's first high priest, when he presided over the making and worship of the golden calf. When Moses returned livid from the mountain top, Aaron provided an immortal and perennial explanation for his leadership failure: "You know the people, that they are set on evil" (Ex. 32:22).

Saul was cut from the same cloth as Aaron, and so many other failed leaders who did not obey the Lord because they feared the scorn of the people. But those who wish to honor and please God through true obedience – whether they are pastors, parents, or individual Christians – must be willing to tell the people that God had not permitted the taking of the Amalekites’ sheep and oxen and insist that things be done in accordance with God’s actual commands.

Third, Samuel answered Saul’s objection by pointing out that *obedience is the only thing that truly pleases the Lord*. Saul argued that the sheep and oxen were for a special offering to God. Samuel answered: “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 listen than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22). This is the way for God’s people to worship and honor him: by obeying his commands. This is true when it comes to the gathered worship of God’s people in church, the acceptability of which is regulated by God’s Word (Heb. 12:28), and it is true of the living worship that each believer is to offer to God day-by-day (Rom. 12:1-2). God is worshiped when he is obeyed. It is better for us to obey God than to perform songs and offer prayers in his behalf.

Saul’s failure on all three of these points brought Samuel’s stinging rebuke. First, the prophet berated Saul, reminding him that “though you are little in your own eyes,” he was still the king over Israel by God’s anointing (1 Sam. 15:17). God had given Saul a crystal-clear mission: “Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed” (v. 18). With these stubborn facts in mind, Samuel pressed his point: “Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?” (v. 19). Samuel, of course, saw through greedy Saul’s pathetic statement that the sheep and oxen had been intended for God, when they were in fact intended for Saul. Saul was an extremely privileged person among God’s people, anointed into an office of the highest responsibility, so he is held to high account. But all believers hold stewardships before the Lord, and we should be no less surprised to find ourselves accountable for disobedience and chastised by the Lord for our failures to keep the commands of his Word.

OBEDIENCE AND KINGSHIP

Saul might discount the significance of his compromises, but to God Saul's disobedience had the gravest repercussions.

Therefore, Samuel revealed his correspondence with the Lord. "Stop!" he commanded Saul, "I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night" (1 Sam. 15:16). Could Saul have still hoped for a commendation to match the memorial he had already erected for himself? If so, how mortified he was at hearing what Samuel had to report: "For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king" (1 Sam. 15:23).

Samuel states that "rebellion is as the sin of divination." In other words, to flagrantly reject the clear teaching of God's Word is practical apostasy. Saul might as well have gone to occult mystics to gain divine revelation (as he later will do), if he was going to follow his own inventions. Moreover, to presume on God's commands – as Saul and the people had done by considering their own wisdom an improvement on God's command (and by seeking to cover their greed in pious lies about offering sacrifices to God) – "is as iniquity and idolatry." Gordon Keddie comments that given Saul's arrogant rebellion, "He might as well have been worshipping other gods. Saul's will was his real god. In practice he had dethroned the Lord in his heart."¹² What a warning this is to our generation in the church, which presumptuously assumes that our taste in spiritual consumerism must always correspond with God's approval and blessing. Instead, the only way to be sure that we are pleasing and truly serving the Lord is to act in clear obedience to the precepts and commands of his Word.

The ultimate contrast with Saul is the true king of God's people, the righteous Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus presented himself to God at the end of his earthly ministry, he could give a report very different from King Saul's. Jesus prayed to the Father, "I have glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (Jn. 17:4). Perfect obedience was the memorial that Jesus erected to his

¹² Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 147.

life. This is why God accepted Jesus and his ministry on behalf of those who trust in him. The writer of Hebrews explains:

When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" (Heb. 10:5-7).

For Jesus, to obey really was better than sacrifice – this is why Jesus needed no one to die on his behalf – and it was obedience that enabled him to sacrifice for us. Our Lord presented himself in the glory of his perfect obedience, to which God responded: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). Therefore, sinners who trust not in Saul but in Christ have a Savior, a king in whose name we find salvation. Represented by Christ, we now are called to “the obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5; 16:26), so that by faith we might be in Christ “whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

What, then, do we give in gratitude to the God who already has everything? Does God need sheep or oxen from us? Does he need money or songs or prayers? We should indeed offer these to God in thanks and love. But if we really want to please God – and what could be more worthwhile in all of life? – we will do his will, as it is written in his Book, in the name of Jesus Christ, the true and perfectly righteous king who offered no other sacrifice to God than his own obedient life, shedding his own blood for our sins.