

A King Rejected - 1 Samuel 15

Date: 11 June 2023, 1st ordinary Sunday

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Seeking a King

Texts: 1 Samuel 15

Repentance is one of the hardest things we have to do as human beings. No one likes being found out when you've done wrong. No one likes admitting guilt. We like to be right. We try to justify ourselves. We try to hide, to minimise responsibility. And yet in a marriage, between siblings or friends, when you've wronged another, there remains a rupture in the relationship until you turn back, you say sorry, you make amends. That of course needs to be met with forgiveness for there to be reconciliation and healing. But with a real and genuine repentance, one where you're sorry not just for getting caught, but for what you've done, there is hope and life.

Today we're continuing with the story of Saul. Last week we saw him become Israel's first king. Today we see his fall from grace. Not only does he disobey God, he does not turn back to God and so God rejects him as king. His story is an all too human story of a man tragically failing to own his sin and trying instead to save his skin. I did have a whole section on chapter 13-14, which are a terrific read, but that meant the sermon was far too long, so we're going to dive straight into chapter 15. We'll look at 2 points - the Ban, and to obey is better than to sacrifice.

Last week we left Saul as a young man, winning a great victory over Nahash of the Ammonites. Chapter 13 skips forward to Saul in middle age with his son Jonathan as a young man. Jonathan is daring, confident in the Lord. Saul remains hesitant, unsure of himself, always looking for divine assurance, making rash decisions and sticking to them instead of admitting his mistakes and choosing the path of wisdom. It's a prelude for chapter 15.

The Ban

Chapter 15 opens with Samuel coming to Saul with a commission.

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. **3** Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."¹

¹ 1 Samuel 15.2-3

This command, which scholars call “the ban”, in Hebrew *herem*, remains one of the most difficult things in the Old Testament for us to comprehend, along with the similar commands in law of Moses leading to the conquest of Canaan. Our objections are twofold. First, is this a licence for ethnic cleansing and genocide? Second, how can a God who claims to be a God of love command this? I don’t have all the answers and remain uncomfortable with the ban, but let me offer a few reflections.

A licence for ethnic cleansing and genocide?

Let’s take the first objection. Is this a licence for ethnic cleansing and genocide today? The answer is no. In no way. To do so is to misread the text, and to justify grave evil. Even the ancient Israelites understood that this was a unique, once off, never to be repeated command. The law of Moses itself outlines rules for war, recognising war as a tragic reality in a fallen world, and it prohibits targeting non combatants. The ban is a unique exception rather than the rule.

What does this say about God’s character?

But the more substantial question is what does the ban say about God’s character? The Scriptures give 2 reasons for the ban. The first is to preserve Israel’s spiritual and moral purity. So Deuteronomy 20.18 says that Israel is to completely destroy the Canaanites in their conquest of the land, *Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the Lord your God.* These detestable things included child sacrifice. The true and living God, who made people in his own image, does not want us to worship him or anything else by child sacrifice.

This leads to the second reason given for the ban, namely it is God’s judgement, enacted through Israel, on these peoples for their sin. In fact in Isaiah God uses the language of the ban to describe the destruction of Jerusalem and exile as his judgement on Israel because of her sin.² Judgement is the reason given here in 1 Samuel 15.

I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt.

We can read about this event in Exodus 17. In Deuteronomy 25 we read,

“Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. **18** When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and attacked all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God. **19** When the LORD your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to

² Isaiah 43.28

possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"

Israel is repeatedly told to care for the foreigner and refugee, because this is what they were when they fled Egypt. Refugees are one of the 4 categories of vulnerable people Israel is instructed to take special care of. The Amalekites attack on Israel is a paradigmatic violation of that command. And in the intervening years the Amalekites had repeatedly attacked Israel. Now the time has come to make good on this promise to bring them to justice.

To make clear that the ban is an act of God's judgement, Israel were not permitted to take any plunder. The word means "devoted to God". Everything had to be devoted to destruction. If a person did take plunder they would come under the ban themselves. And this is the grave disobedience in 1 Samuel 15. Saul and his troops take the best of the plunder, with Agag their king as a trophy for Saul.

We'll come to that shortly. But for the moment, what does the ban say about God's character? That he is a God who is utterly committed to justice. He will bring justice to those who attack children and refugees. As Samuel says to Agag before executing him,

As your sword has made women childless,
so will your mother be childless among women.

As he judged Agag in the past, so on the day when Christ returns to judge he will bring to justice all those like Agag who think they can get away with wickedness and murder. We may find it troubling and confronting, it may not sit easy with us, but we cannot have God's justice without his judgement.

To Obey is better than to Sacrifice

Having considered the ban, let's now turn to Saul. According to the Bible, the fundamental task of governing authorities is to administer justice. In Romans 13.4 we read,

the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

Saul's job as king is to listen to God's word, to defend God's people and administer justice. And so the command to punish the Amalekites. And Saul begins well. He warns the Kenites who had shown kindness to Israel when they came up out of Egypt, and he meets with success as he fights Amalekites. Indeed back in chapter 14 we read.

He fought valiantly and defeated the Amalekites, delivering Israel from the hands of those who had plundered them.³

³ 1 Samuel 14.48

But in victory he fails to follow through on God's command.

But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs – everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.⁴

Enacting God's judgement has become for Saul and his army an opportunity for greed, and indeed pride. We read in verse 12, Saul sets up a monument to himself at Carmel.

And now we hear those fateful words from God. He says to Samuel,

I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.⁵

As the chapter unfolds we see how Saul repeats the pattern of behaviour of our first parents, a pattern repeated so often in Israel's own history, a pattern each of us know so well - turning away from God and disobeying his word.

When Samuel reaches Saul, Saul says, with the full flush of victory, "The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions."⁶ It's a half truth designed to hide the lie. But Samuel is having none of it. There's a tragic comedy in his response.

"What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"⁷

Now Saul tries the next trick we use when found out - shift the blame.

"The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest."⁸

"Enough!" Samuel says, "Here's the truth of the matter."

'Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. **18** And he sent you on a mission, saying, "Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; wage war against them until you have wiped them out." **19** Why did you not obey the LORD? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD?'

Saul continues to protest his innocence and stick to the lie, and he tries to turn his disobedience into an act of piety.

But I did obey the LORD,' Saul said. 'I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. **21** The

⁴ 1 Samuel 15.9

⁵ 1 Samuel 15.11

⁶ 15.13

⁷ 15.14

⁸ 15.15

soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal.’

But Samuel says

‘Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD?

To obey is better than sacrifice,
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is like the sin of divination,
and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has rejected you as king.’⁹

This is the heart of God’s call on our lives. To hear God’s word and to obey. To be a Christian is not just to go to church or to pray. It is to offer the whole of our lives to God in worship. To say to him, in every part, not my will, but yours be done. We study the Scriptures, we come to church to learn more of God’s will, to recentre our lives on him so that we can worship him with all of our lives. This is what Paul writes in Romans 12:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. **2** Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

God’s abundant mercy to us in Christ is the ground for our obedience to him. And so when disobey, as we all do, we are to come clean, to turn back to God, not to turn away from him like Saul. To confess straightforwardly rather than to try and wriggle out of admitting guilt, through hiding, minimising, blaming or whatever.

Now Saul at last comes clean, and confesses, acknowledging some of his motivation.

‘I have sinned. I violated the LORD’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them. **25** Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD.’

But even in this confession, and their subsequent exchange, it’s clear that Saul is more concerned about the negative consequences for himself than his offence against God. True repentance involves contrition. That is being sorry for the sin itself, not just the negative consequences that we may experience because of our sin. To just be sorry for the consequences, means that the self is still at the centre, rather than God. Without contrition,

⁹ 15.22-23

we'd do it again if we thought we wouldn't be caught. Contrition is grieving that I have sinned against God and my neighbour. Without contrition we've not really repented. Here, Saul continues to try and save face. He may have confessed, but he has not wholly turned back to God, and yet he wants Samuel to turn back with him to save face in front of the elders of Israel.

But Samuel said to him, 'I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!'

27 As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. **28** Samuel said to him, 'The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbours – to one better than you. **29** He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind.'

30 Saul replied, 'I have sinned. But please honour me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD your God.' **31** So Samuel went back with Saul, and Saul worshipped the LORD.

Samuel allows Saul to save face in front of Israel. But the deeper, more important relationship, the relationship with God remains broken. Saul's repentance has not gone deep enough. He has not turned back to God, but remains turned away from him. The chapter closes with the ongoing sign of that rupture.

Then Samuel left for Ramah, but Saul went up to his home in Gibeah of Saul. **35** Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

We wait wondering what will come of Samuel's words to Saul in chapter 13, the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command.¹⁰

This sermon I realise has had a melancholy tone, but that is because there is a great sadness in this chapter. With Samuel we mourn when someone turns away from God and only turns back in a half hearted way. As we reflect on Saul, God invites us to consider how we try to wriggle out of a true and genuine repentance. His calls us to hear and obey his word, even, and perhaps especially, where we find it confronts and challenges us. And when we fail, he invites us to keep short accounts with him. To turn back to him with true contrition in repentance, that we may experience his full and free forgiveness in Christ.

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 13.14