

TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE

1 Samuel 15:1-35

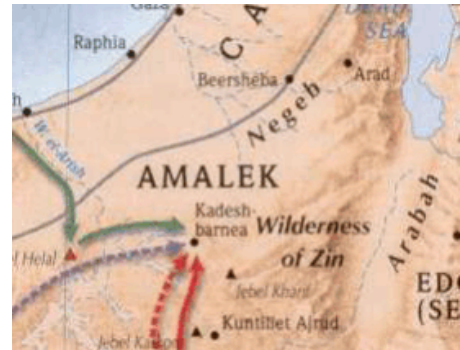
Key Verse: 15:22

But Samuel replied: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

As we learned from the previous chapter, Saul disobeyed God’s words at Gilgal and God declared he would replace the king with a man after his own heart. Still, God used Saul to deliver his people from the hand of their enemies. In this passage, God gives Saul a mission to punish the Amalekites. Saul could have taken this as an opportunity to show his repentance by obeying the word of God absolutely. However, he disobeys the word of God again. He even gives a pat on his own back, thinking he did a good job by keeping some animals to offer to God. Samuel tells him that to obey is better than sacrifice. May God help us to know this truth and apply it to our personal life of faith and mission!

First, God gives a mission to Saul (1-9). One day, Samuel came to King Saul to deliver a message from God. To get his attention, Samuel first reminded Saul that he was the servant of God who had anointed him king over Israel. As Saul’s spiritual advisor and shepherd, Samuel had listened to the king time and again. Now it was Saul’s turn to listen to him. He said to Saul, “So listen now to the message from the Lord” (1).

Look at verse 2. *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.”* The Amalekites were descendants of Esau who lived in the lower, desert part of the Negev. As soon as the Israelites came out of Egypt, these Amalekites made a long journey south to ambush them. They attacked the Israelites who were weary and worn out, targeting especially those who were lagging behind (like the elderly and children). They had no fear of God (Dt 25:18). As descendants of Abraham, they should have known God’s promise for Israel, but the Amalekites continued to harass and terrorize Israel even after they settled in Canaan. God wanted to bring his judgment on these people who deliberately opposed God and his people.



So God gave Saul a mission to punish the Amalekites. Look at verse 3. *Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.* Notice that God’s instructions for him were very specific. God told Saul to attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything, not sparing anyone including women and children and even infants. There was no room for a liberal interpretation. He was to kill all people and animals, period. From a human point of

view, this was a difficult mission. He had to fight and defeat the Amalekites that had been Israel's formidable enemy for a long time. He had to devise a good war plan and execute flawlessly. In addition, he had to overcome his sense of morality and ethics to kill the innocent people, including women and babies. Sin brings judgment on the world like this. Even the innocent have to suffer in the judgment. During the WWII, President Harry Truman had to make a difficult decision. In order to avoid a prolonged war with much civilian causality, he decided to drop atomic bombs on the two Japanese cities. His decision indeed cut short the war. But it resulted in the deaths of many people including women and children. Occasionally, obeying God's word requires us to overcome our own moral and ethical standards. Especially leaders have to make difficult decisions to obey the word of God absolutely. To do this, we must have the basic faith in God that he is a loving God and he knows what he is doing.

How did Saul carry out his mission? He mustered 210,000 men, went to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the ravine (4-5). After allowing the innocent bystanders (the Kenites) to move away from the war zone (6), Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur to the east of Egypt. He destroyed all people and things, except the king of the Amalekites (Agag) and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good (7-9).



Basically he destroyed everything that was despised and weak, but kept the animals of top value and the enemy king as his war trophy. In other words, he obeyed God's words but only selectively. He obeyed only the part that he liked to obey. He had no problem with killing women and children, but then spared the enemy king and their best animals—things that were valuable to him. It was mission incomplete.

Second, the Lord said, "I am grieved" (10-19). When King Saul returned from the battle triumphantly, people probably welcomed him as a hero. The Hebrew Times ran the headline that screamed, "King Saul Does It Again; He Defeats the Amalekites." But God had a different view of Saul. Look at verses 10-11. *Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.* God's heart was broken. He was grieved that he had made Saul king. Why? It was because King Saul had turned away from God. He did not carry out God's instructions. Saul had obeyed the word of God selectively, only the part he liked. God's instructions had been specific. Saul knew what he was told. Still, he decided to do his own thing. (This is like a disciple who is told by Jesus to feed his sheep, but he does so only when he feels like doing it.) Saul's proud and rebellious heart broke God's heart. Samuel was also troubled. Knowing how serious Saul's rebellion against God was, Samuel cried out all night for Saul and his people. Samuel was a true shepherd.

Meanwhile, what was Saul doing? After a night of crying-out prayer, Samuel went to see Saul in the morning. But he was not there. He had gone to Carmel to set up a

monument in his own honor. Saul thought the victory was all his doing. He didn't even thank God for granting him the victory. He was full of himself. He became an ugly man before God's eyes. A proud man is ugly.

When Samuel caught up to him at Gilgal, Saul said, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions" (12). He didn't hide his self-confidence. He had obeyed God's words in his own terms, but was confident that he had done enough. He bragged about his victory. He even twisted the Lord's instructions to justify what he had done. He thought he was pretty good before God (How many of us think this way?). He was like Cain who brought an offering to God and demanded God to appreciate it, even though his offering was not accompanied with his thankful heart.

But Samuel said to him, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?" (14). Saul said it was the soldiers who brought them from the Amalekites (15), as if trying to say, "I am only their commander. They did their thing." Saul also said to Samuel that the soldiers spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord "your God" (15). He called the Lord "your God" as if he had nothing to do with God personally. This was the second time Saul made an excuse, instead of repenting.

Look at verse 16. *"Stop!" Samuel said to Saul. "Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night."* How did Samuel rebuke him? *Samuel said, "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. And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.' Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?"* (17-19) These words of Samuel should have given Saul a moment to reflect on his deeds. But Saul would not listen to Samuel. He repeated his excuses, blaming his soldiers and calling God "your God" again (20-21). He insisted he obeyed the Lord. He defended his actions. On the surface, what he did appeared that he followed God's instructions. But he did not obey the word of God from his heart. God sees our hearts. Saul had a form of obedience, but not the obedience from his heart.

Wouldn't it be nice if we can obey the word of God selectively, choosing to obey only the part we agree with? What about the parts we don't like or agree with? Can we call ourselves law-abiders if we selectively obey the law? No. We become traffic law offenders if we obey all the traffic laws except the speed limit. Saul assumed that sparing the best of the animals was okay as long as it was done on the pretext that they were for offering. But this showed his disrespect of God and his word. Saul became proud before God and Samuel. Pride goes before destruction (Pr 16:18).

Third, to obey is better than sacrifice (22-23). Let us read verse 22 together. *But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. To obey the word of God is better than sacrifice. Why does God prefer obedience over sacrifice? It is because true obedience comes from the heart. And*

God wants us to love him from our hearts. The Pharisees were excellent in offering sacrifices to God, but their hearts were far away from God. Jesus told them to go and learn what God meant when he said, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Mt 9:13). The roots of disobedience are rebellious hearts and arrogance. They happen when we reject the word of God. Rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance is like the evil of idolatry (23).

In history, God used men and women of obedience to advance his redemptive work. God told Noah to build a huge ark when he lived miles away from sea and there was no sign of flood anywhere. It didn't make sense. But the Book of Genesis repeatedly tells us that Noah did everything just as God commanded him (Ge 6:22; 7:5). God preserved mankind through Noah even as he sent his righteous judgment on the sinful humanity. Abraham showed what it means to obey God when he took his only son Isaac to a mountain, intending to sacrifice him as a burnt offering (Ge 22:1-19). Acts 13:22 says about David's obedience: “After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: ‘I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.’” When a young girl named Mary obeyed the word of God, she became a servant God who helped to bring the Savior Jesus into this world to save us from our sins. Our missionaries are here because we decided to obey Jesus' world mission command: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20).



To obey is better than sacrifice. Now some of you may ask the question, “Is sacrifice bad then?” No. Obedience leads to sacrifice. We do our 1:1 Bible studies faithfully, pray for our Bible students and spend time with them to be their friends. We share the word of God with them because Jesus commands us to take care of them (Jn 21:16). But sacrifice without the heart is meaningless to the Lord. So we need to study the word of God humbly and struggle to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This requires a disciplined life of constant devotion and struggle on a daily basis, which is far more difficult than doing some religious rituals. In addition, if we offer our sacrifice to glorify ourselves, not God, it is self-serving and dishonors the name of God.

Fourth, repenting sin before God versus before people (24-35). Samuel declared to Saul, “*Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king*” (23b). These words of Samuel caught King Saul's attention. He finally began to listen. He realized that his kingship was at stake. The Lord chose him king and the Lord could certainly take the throne away from him. *Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord”* (23-24). Saul now admitted that he violated God's command. He also told a reason why he disobeyed the word of God. He said, “I was

afraid of the people and so I gave in to them.” This does not make sense since he was the king and the commander-in-chief of the army. It sounds like another poor excuse. Still, he said all the right things, like “I have sinned,” “forgive my sin” and “come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord.”

However, was Saul’s repentance genuine? Apparently, Samuel did not think so. He said to Saul, *“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!”* (26) As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe and it tore (27).

Samuel said to him, *“The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors--to one better than you. He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind”* (28-29). God did not change; Saul changed. He had been a humble man, but since he became king, he changed into a proud man. Power corrupted him.



Then, in his desperation, Saul said to Samuel, *“I have sinned. But please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God.”* Saul repeated the words, “I have sinned,” again. Clearly, however, this was not a true repentance before God. It was repentance before people. He said, “I have sinned. But please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel” (30). His heart was far from God. He had a form of repentance, but not a real repentance of his heart. It was just a show. In contrast, David’s repentance would be different. When David confessed his sins before God, this is what he said, *“The sacrifice of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”* (Ps 51:17). David knew that the sacrifice God wants from us is our broken hearts.

We know that Saul’s repentance was not real because he didn’t change. He said many right things but there was no real change in his life. He didn’t have any fruit of repentance. How about our repentance? Do we repent to make us look good before people or do we really turn our hearts to God? Do we bear the fruit of repentance in our lives? Do we have a complete U-turn in our life as a result of our repentance? Of course, such change might not happen overnight, even if we try very hard. We need God’s help. From Msn. Isaac’s presentation on prayer last week, we learned that forgiveness is a process, not a one-shot deal. I think repentance is also a process in that when we confess our sins before God and turn around, the Holy Spirit works in us to change us. The process may take a long time for some people. After sharing my personal testimony with Josh last week, I felt frustrated about my repeated repentance and lack of fruit in one aspect of my life of faith—prayer. I was moved once again by Samuel who said, *“Far be it from me to sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you”* (12:23). I had repented my lack of prayer many times in the past. Still, I found myself offering only short prayers

here and there, with the excuse that I was trying live a “prayerful life” even though I lacked the getting-down-on-the-knees and pouring-the-heart-out kind of prayer. I ask the Holy Spirit to continue to work in me to change me.

Samuel still listened to Saul. He went back to Gilgal with Saul and Saul worship the Lord (31). Samuel also wanted to finish the mission that Saul had failed to complete. He asked Agag king of the Amalekites be brought to him. Agag was confident that his life would be spared. He was wrong. Samuel said to him, “*As your sword has made women childless, so will your mother be childless among women*” and put him to death before the Lord at Gilgal (33).

Then Samuel left to go home to Ramah and Saul to his home in Gibeah. This was the last time Samuel would see Saul. He mourned for Saul. Why did he mourn for him when he was not dead yet? To Samuel, Saul was dead when he rebelled against God and God rejected him as a leader for his people. And the Lord was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel. Grief is a strong feeling. The Lord grieved also when he saw man’s great wickedness. In his grief, he decided to wipe out mankind with a flood (Ge 6:6).

Today, we learned that to obey is better than sacrifice. God wants each of us to listen to him and obey his words wholeheartedly, not selectively. The real sacrifice God wants from us is our broken hearts. May God also help us to bear the fruit of our repentance!