

A Serious Blow to Self-Esteem: God Says No

1 Samuel 15

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

Now turn with me to 1 Samuel. And first of all before we read together chapter 15, we need to pick up just a few verses at the end of chapter 14. They were verses that we didn't cover the last time we were together, at the end, I think, of November. When we were looking at 1 Samuel 14, we ended then at verse 46. Now as you can see in verses 47 through 52, we have an account which reads a little like an obituary. Saul was taken — “When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side” — there's a list of them — Moab, the Ammonites, Edom, Zobah, kings of Zobah, against the Philistines. “Wherever he turned he routed them. And he did valiantly and struck the Amalekites and delivered Israel out of the hands of those who plundered them.”

And then there's a few verses telling us he married, a lass called Ahinoam, that he had three sons — the most famous of whom was Jonathan. He had two daughters. He put Uncle Abner in charge of the military, that all of his life he was surrounded by invading Philistines, and wherever he went and saw anybody that was strong and could fight he requisitioned him for the military. And it's all very positive. It's like when I take my dog for a walk and he meets someone whom, or another dog I should say, that he feels is invading his personal space, I have to say “Be nice.” And it looks as though the author here is inserting, we're not finished with Saul by any means, but this reads almost like an obituary notice and it's the author being nice about Saul because the next chapter, chapter 15, the chapter we're going to examine tonight, tells us about another failure — a catastrophic failure as it turns out — on Saul's part.

Now before we read this chapter together, it contains several thorny, difficult issues. Before we read the passage, we need the help of the Holy Spirit in order to understand it. Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for the Bible. We thank You for all of it, from Genesis to Revelation. We thank You again that holy men wrote, as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit. And tonight we ask again for the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Come down, Eternal Dove, and enable us in our minds and in our hearts to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest, and all the glory be that of the Lord Jesus. And we ask it in His name. Amen.

1 Samuel chapter 15:

And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over His people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. 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.'"

So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah. And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. Then Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. 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 was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

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." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the Lord all night. And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal." And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord." And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" Saul said, "They have brought them for 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." Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the Lord said to me this night." And he said to him, "Speak."

And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And the Lord sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' 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?" And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. I have gone on the mission

on which the Lord sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal." And Samuel said,

"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. 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."

Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the Lord." And 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." As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for He is not a man, that He should have regret." Then he said, "I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the Lord your God." So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the Lord.

Then Samuel said, "Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites." And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, "Surely the bitterness of death is past." And Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women." And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that He had made Saul king of Israel.

Thus far God's holy and inerrant Word.

"To obey is better than sacrifice." What does that mean? I was emailing back and forth yesterday with Sinclair Ferguson. He was telling me what he was preaching this spring, beginning a new series of sermons. He asked me what I was preaching on tonight. I said, "Well, I have this fearful text in 1 Samuel 15 and it's been a concern of mine all week. What does, I mean apart from anything else, what does Samuel mean, 'To obey is better than sacrifice'?" I said to him, "Who was it who said that if you can distinguish law from gospel you are a theologian?"

He replied, and I quote, “Luther. Not Lex Luthor from Superman, but he of the 16th century.” He also said in *Tabletalk* that “It is the supreme art of the devil that he can make law out to be gospel.” I want you to think about that.

Let's get this nasty business with the Amalekites out of the way first. The Amalekites as you will remember in the story of the exodus and the period of the wilderness wanderings, the Amalekites were mean and nasty people. They reconnoiter to the back of the Israelites and picked off the stragglers. You remember they were without morals or ethics in warfare. They are castigated here as sinners and they are to be, yes, devoted to destruction. It's a very graphic Hebrew word, “*herem*” — a scorched earth policy. Saul, as king of Israel, is to do an unusual thing. The Israelites, as a rule, they were not to execute war. They were to defend themselves but rarely were the Israelites involved in executing a war. In this case, they are to go out against the Amalekites and destroy them and destroy them wholly — men, women, children, animals, livestock, everything to be just devoted to destruction. You remember a similar command was given at the time of Jericho. You remember Achan took of the Babylonish garment and the shekels of silver and the wedge of gold, you remember, and was killed as a consequence. This is a jihad. This is a holy war, instigated not by Samuel, not by Saul, but by God.

It raises some ethical issues doesn't it? This is ethnic cleansing. This is God's decision and we may respond to it in a number of ways. We may say we are more enlightened. This is an example of primitive religion. We may say that this is why we don't believe the Old Testament. This is why we don't believe the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God. We may react at number of levels, but for those of us who do believe that the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God, to believe what Jesus believed about the Old Testament, that's the point. Jesus believed the Old Testament, including this passage, was the infallible, inerrant Word of God. It cannot be broken, He said.

What do we make of this? Is this an example, as some commentators say, “the provisional ethics of the Old Testament?” Well, it's important to try and understand it within the context of the history of redemption. We can't, you see, read a passage like this and say, “Well, you must be like Saul. You must kill your enemies and not spare them.” This is God bringing to pass, in space and time, divine judgment. It's bringing to pass in space and time a symbol of the Day of Judgment against a people who had showed no mercy to the Israelites. God may do that. We can't do that. We can't exercise this policy, not as the United States, not as NATO — which wouldn't anyway. Only God can do this, a God who is wholly just and wholly righteous, and it was a test. It's a test, I suppose, in belief in the Bible's inerrancy. It will test you - men, women, and children, and all livestock. That will test you. Do you believe God's holiness is like that? Because men and women, on the Day of Judgment, if you're not in Christ, it will be like that for men and women and children and errant, defiant creation itself. It will be burned up.

But it was a test of Saul's obedience and one in which he failed. He spared Agag despite the fact that he kept saying "the people spared him." It was Saul that spared him. He was king, after all — and the best of the sheep and the best of the goods. That was the problem, you see, with holy war - a war in which everything was devoted to destruction - there were no spoils of war for the soldiers. He offered partial obedience. This is saying on the large scale, on the big scale of things, this is saying, "Saul failed. Only Jesus will do." That's what it's saying on the big scale. Looking at it from a distance, it's showing us the failure of earthly kings and earthly leaders. Only Jesus will do.

In the 19th century there was a philosophy called transcendentalism. Its leaders were those men, Henry David Thoreau and Emerson, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Its motto and theme was self-reliance. Self-reliance is the greatest virtue. Emerson once wrote, "I call on you to live for yourselves. I call on you to live for yourselves." After all, doesn't the Bible say God helps those who help themselves? No, it does not. It was Aesop.

You see, on the micro level, Saul is saying, however difficult we may find the ethics of God's dealings with the Amalekites, on the micro level, Saul is saying, "I know better than God." To devote to destruction everything — there's beef here. There's fine lamb cutlets here. That would be a waste. Saul is saying, "I know better than God. My way is a wiser way than God's way. My friends, isn't that a symptom of a disease that affects us all, when we question God's command or we question God's way?"

And then in verse 10 and 11, God speaks to Samuel and He says privately to Samuel in verse 11 and it's repeated again right at the end at verse 35 — "I regret that I have made Saul king. I regret that I have made Saul king." What is this? God regrets? Was God taken by surprise by Saul's failure? Doesn't God know all things, the end from the beginning? Aren't all things ordered by the sovereign providential hand of God? How can He regret making Saul king? What is this? Are the Bible writers naïve, perhaps? Well no, they are not. Samuel, after being angry and probably angry with God, and spending the night in prayer, asserts in verse 29 that "the glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for He is not a man that He should have regret." It almost sounds as if Samuel knows his catechism and in a moment of crisis, and sometimes the greatest crisis we have is in here, he's asserting his catechetical answer. God does not regret. But it says God regrets. No, no! God Himself says, "I regret."

So in come the Free Will Theists, the Open Theists, and they say "There you have it. God doesn't know the future." Our friend Greg Boyd writes, "Common sense tells us you only regret a decision if the outcome is other than you expected." Duh! Of course! So God cannot know the future. The future is open. It caught Him by surprise. What kind of God is that? Tell me — where the future is open. Whether it's a little of the future or half the future or three quarters of the

future or ninety-nine percent of the future, you can be certain about nothing, so you are wasting your time being in here tonight thinking that you are guaranteed heaven by trusting in Jesus only, because you cannot be sure of it. God Himself isn't sure of it.

So what do we have here? Well, you have the doctrinal answer. You have the *Catechism* answer. God does not regret. But God isn't like the god of Plato. God isn't like the god of Immanuel Kant, who, if he exists, he's impossible to know. He's in the numinous. He's up there, out there, beyond space and time and he cannot penetrate in the here and now. He knows nothing about me.

Calvin would say — he didn't write a commentary on Samuel — but Calvin would say “This is just an example of God accommodating Himself to the paucity of our tiny, finite little minds.” You see, we do not have a High Priest who is not touched with the feeling of our infirmities. God is not some blind force out there, but He's touched with our finitude. He comes to Samuel and He says — it's an extraordinary thing — He says, “I regret. I regret making Saul king.” It says what an extraordinary God we have, who's intimately involved in the time, day to day, second to second emotional fluctuating lives that you and I live. And He says, “Yes, I'm right there, imminent, in your midst. Never forget. Never forget that.”

And then we have something else here, what I would want to call tonight the morphology of obedience or in this case, the morphology of disobedience. Mark Dever says about Saul that “he's the archetypal, self made man — he listens to God's word and then he reshapes it and says, ‘Well that's better, isn't it?’” What's he doing in verse 12? Setting up a monument for himself. Now there's an eye opener. What's he doing in verse 13? After seemingly repenting — it's not; it's a half hearted repentance — but he says in verse 30, “I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people.” He's concerned about his image. He's desperately concerned about his image before the people — typical politician you might say. “Look,” he says, “I've done everything that God asked.” And then this one liner — it's a beautiful thing. Samuel says, “What's all this bleating of sheep and the lowing of oxen that I hear?” Take a look at what Samuel calls Saul's so-called obedience — “divination,” verse 23, “iniquity and idolatry.” That's what it was — idolatry.

What did Calvin say? “Man's mind is a perpetual factory of idols.” What did Mark Dever say about Saul? “He takes God's Word and he refashions it and he says, ‘Well that's better.’” He's made a little god-let in his own image. It's a half-hearted obedience at best. It's an obedience that said, “I know better. This is my doing. This is my effort.” And Samuel says to him, he says to him, “To obey is better than sacrifice. To obey is better than sacrifice. You may build your monuments. You may say that you want to offer these oxen and these sheep as a sacrifice to the Lord, but what I want is your heart.” All of your singing of the *Gloria Patri* and your saying of the Apostles Creed and your singing of the hymns and psalms, it's all worthless if your heart isn't in it. “If you love Me,” Jesus says, “keep My

commandments.” You do it because, not because you’re trying to earn God's favor, not because you’re trying to wrest from God an unwillingness, an unwilling love. You do it out of gratitude. You do it because you’re so in love with Him. You do it because you've experienced mercy. Grace has touched your heart.

Now let's be clear about this. “He who knows the difference between law and gospel is a theologian.” Let's be clear about this. God expects His people to obey. Let's be absolutely clear about that. He expects His people to obey. It's the James 2:14 principle. “If a man says he has faith but he has no works, will that faith save him?” That's what James asks. “If a man says he has faith but has no works, will that faith save him?” No. No, it will not. It will not.

But the obedience that God wants is the obedience of faith. It's the obedience that springs from the Gospel. It's the obedience that springs from a heart that is in love with Jesus Christ. To obey is better than sacrifice. To obey, even if you fail; to obey, even as the catechism was reminding us, the child's catechism, was reminding us tonight — we can never offer perfect obedience. Only Jesus can offer perfect obedience. But all the sacrifices are of no avail unless our hearts are right with God, unless the motivation is right.

Ah, my friends, there is so much here. There's so much in this passage. And perhaps the greatest challenge of this passage tonight is — Are we prepared tonight to believe in a God who is so sovereign, so holy, so righteous, that He can say at a definite and unique moment in the history of redemption, “Slay all of the Amalekites,” and for us to say that was right, that was right? Because it's a little glimpse, it's just a little glimpse of what will happen on the Day of Judgment to those who are outside of Christ, to those who do not believe the Gospel, to those who haven't taken Jesus and Jesus only for their salvation.

Our Father, we bow in some degree of solemnity. These are difficult passages. They're difficult because our hearts are all out of shape. Our sense of right and wrong is molded and fashioned by the news media and the opinion writers of the world rather than by the ethics and the morality of revealed religion given from heaven. Our Father, we thank You tonight for the Lord Jesus. We thank You that He endure that judgment and all of its severity in Himself, crying on the cross, 'My God, My God! Why have You forsaken Me?' and it was for me. It was for my sin. It was for my failures. It was for my half hearted obedience. Lord, we love You and we want to obey You with all of our hearts, but tonight we take refuge that if we confess our sin, You are faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Hear us, O Lord, we cast ourselves upon You in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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