

Saul's Partial Obedience in Failing to Destroy the Amalekites

1 Samuel 15

1 Samuel 15 - *"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. 2 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. 3 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.'" 4 So Saul gathered the people together and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand men of Judah. 5 And Saul came to a city of Amalek, and lay in wait in the valley. 6 Then Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart, get down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the children of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. 7 And Saul attacked the Amalekites, from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is east of Egypt. 8 He also took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. 9 But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed. 10 Now the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, 11 "I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments." And it grieved Samuel, and he cried out to the LORD all night. 12 So when Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, it was told Samuel, saying, "Saul went to Carmel, and indeed, he set up a monument for himself; and he has gone on around, passed by, and gone down to Gilgal." 13 Then Samuel went to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD." 14 But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" 15 And Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed." 16 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Be quiet! And I will tell you what the LORD said to me last night." And he said to him, "Speak on." 17 So Samuel said, "When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the LORD anoint you king over Israel? 18 Now the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go, and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' 19 Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do evil in the sight of the LORD?" 20 And Saul said to Samuel, "But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. 21 But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." 22 So 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 heed than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king."*

²⁴ Then 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. ²⁵ Now therefore, please pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD.”

²⁶ But 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.” ²⁷ And as Samuel turned around to go away, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore. ²⁸ So Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. ²⁹ And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.” ³⁰ Then he said, “I have sinned; yet honor me now, please, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD your God.” ³¹ So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul worshiped the LORD.

³² Then Samuel said, “Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me.” So Agag came to him cautiously. And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.” ³³ But Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hacked Agag in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal. ³⁴ Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house at Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵ And Samuel went no more to see Saul until the day of his death. Nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul, and the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.”

Background Notes

When we read an Old Testament passage like this, usually the first question that comes to mind is, “Why did the Lord want the Amalekites to be totally destroyed? Why not just defeat the army of the Amalekites? Why not keep the women and children alive? Why kill all the animals – after all, they didn’t sin?”

What’s the answer? Well there are a number of reasons why God commanded the total destruction of this enemy nation:

1. God didn’t want the idolatry and immorality of the Amalekites (or any of the pagan peoples of the Promised Land) to infiltrate and corrupt God’s people through intermarriage and other cultural ties. Little Amalekites grow up to be adult Amalekites! Deuteronomy 20:16-18 says, “*But of the cities of these people.... you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them.... just as the LORD your God has commanded you, lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God.*” And Deuteronomy 7:2-4 says, “*and when the LORD your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the LORD will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly.*”

2. Because of the Amalekites’ past sin when they attacked Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 17), this command of God was a just and righteous punishment. In Deuteronomy 25 and here in 1 Samuel 15, we learn that the Amalekites attacked Israel from the rear. They ambushed Israel, and picked off the stragglers. The Amalekites were the terrorists of the day, and Agag was the “Hitler” of the day, as we see from what Samuel said to him before he executed him, at the end of 1

Samuel 15. By the way, I think that you can build a pretty good biblical case that the Amalekite babies who were killed (as well as all who die as infants) will be in heaven. So, death as an infant could be considered an act of mercy, because the Amalekites, including the babies, were “under the ban” (that is, they were “devoted to destruction” by God).

3. Let’s not lose sight of the spiritual picture that we have here! All of the Old Testament battles against the enemies of God’s people picture the spiritual warfare that believers fight today. The enemy, Amalek, illustrates our enemy -- the “flesh,” or the sinful nature in a believer’s life. As the Amalekites attacked Israel from the rear and continued to harass Israel over the years, so the sinful nature wars against us, and we must continually battle the flesh as believers. Read Galatians 5 in this connection.

As Israelis were not to compromise with the Amalekites in any way, but were to utterly destroy them and everything associated with them, so we must not make any compromises with our sinful nature -- in any way! The “knife” of the word of God must be “put to the flesh.” Our sinful nature must be kept in the place of death, and it must not be nurtured in any way. Read Colossians 3 in this connection.

Doctrinal Points

1. Obedience is better than sacrifice.

Saul defeated the Amalekites, but he didn’t utterly destroy them (v7-9). He kept King Agag alive, and he kept all of the best animals in the flocks and herds alive. This was partial obedience, or selective obedience. And then King Saul had the audacity to tell Samuel that he had obeyed the Lord!

Notice three things about Saul’s comments to Samuel. First, he said to Samuel, “The Lord your God” – he didn’t say “the Lord **our** God.” Second, Saul shifted the blame from himself to the people. Third, the idea of “giving the animals to the Lord” was just an excuse for disobedience. The real reason why Saul wanted to keep the animals was that flocks and herds were the money and wealth of the day.

This same kind of self-justification is so typical of believers who are not walking with the Lord. They try to shift the blame away from themselves, and try to mask their materialistic desires by saying things like, “If I make more money, I can give more to the Lord’s work.” (Did you ever hear that excuse before?)

Samuel gave his well-known response in verse 22: “*to obey is better than sacrifice.*” This biblical truth is just as true today as it was then - obedience is better than sacrifice. Going to church on Sunday, but cheating on your job during the week does not make points with God. Giving money to the Lord’s work that has been acquired dishonestly by cheating a customer, or an employee, or the government, is disobedience to the Lord. To obey is better than sacrifice!

2. Obedience is better than repentance.

As a result of Saul's disobedience, Samuel told Saul once again that God had rejected him as king over Israel. Saul repented, but it was "too little, too late." Obedience is better than repentance. Saul would not be restored to his former position no matter how much he repented, because Saul had disobeyed the clear word of the Lord. Saul was certainly sincere in his repentance, and we see that Samuel did allow Saul to save face somewhat by joining him in a public worship service to the Lord. But it was too late for restoration to the place of blessing.

Many Christian leaders today whom God once used greatly have been set aside from their position of leadership and place of blessing because of disobedience in a moral area, or in some other area in their lives. Many have repented, and they have been restored to the Lord, but not restored to their former position of leadership and place of special blessing. Obedience is better than repentance.

Practical Application

Don't build monuments to yourself.

After Saul's victory over the Amalekites, he built a monument for himself. Talk about pride! As if partial obedience wasn't bad enough! Pride was Saul's basic problem, and pride can be our basic problem as well. Building a monument for himself was just one of many indications of Saul's pride.

Do we build monuments to ourselves by what we say about ourselves or what we write about ourselves? Do we seek recognition for every little thing we do? Are we looking for others to see our names in print in the church bulletin? "Self-made monuments" are an indication of the sin of pride. Let God build your monument! Don't build monuments to yourself!