

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel

Lesson 8: Saul Rejected for Disobedience -- 1 Samuel 15:1–35

There is a moment in this chapter that should make every one of us go quiet. Samuel comes looking for Saul, and before the prophet can say a word, Saul greets him cheerfully: “Blessed be thou of the Lord: I have performed the commandment of the Lord” (1 Samuel 15:13). He believes it. He has obeyed, mostly. He has won the battle. The only trouble is the bleating of sheep and the lowing of oxen that Samuel can plainly hear in the background, animals that were supposed to be gone. Saul’s mouth says full obedience while the evidence says otherwise. That gap, between what we tell ourselves and what is actually true, is where so many of us live.

This is the lesson where Saul’s story turns from warning to verdict. The man who once hid among the baggage, too humble to be king, now stands tall in his own eyes. God had given a clear command through Samuel. Saul kept the parts that pleased him, spared King Agag, kept the best of the spoil, and then dressed up his partial obedience in spiritual language: he had saved the best to sacrifice to the Lord. It sounded generous. It sounded worshipful. But God was not impressed, because God had not asked for it.

Then comes the verse that has searched hearts for three thousand years: “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry” (1 Samuel 15:22–23). Here God strips away every excuse and names the heart of the matter. We cannot trade obedience we owe Him for offerings we choose to bring. We cannot make up in religious enthusiasm what we lack in simple submission.

This chapter is heavy, and it should be. A man who began with such promise ends rejected from the kingship, and Samuel mourns for him. Yet we do not study Saul to feel superior; we study him to be warned and changed. Partial obedience, self-justification, blame-shifting, fear of people, these are not Saul’s private sins. They live in us too. As we walk through this passage, let it press the searching question into our own hearts: am I truly obeying God, or only the parts of God’s will that suit me?

Group Discussion: Where do we, like Saul, tend to call partial obedience full obedience, and what makes that gap between our words and our actual lives so hard to see in ourselves?

Personal Reflection: Is there a command of God you have been keeping mostly, while quietly sparing one “Agag,” one thing you were told to surrender but have kept back? What is it?

Read 1 Samuel 15:1–35

Study Questions

1. What does God's command and Saul's partial obedience in sparing Agag and the best of the spoil (1 Samuel 15:3, 9) reveal about how seriously God regards full obedience to His word?
2. When have you obeyed God in the large, visible things while quietly keeping back one small thing He told you to give up? What did that reveal about your heart?
3. How does Saul's self-justification and blame-shifting, "the people spared the best... to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God" (1 Samuel 15:15, 21), expose the way the human heart defends its disobedience?
4. Where are you tempted to dress up disobedience in spiritual language, telling yourself you kept something back for a good or even godly reason?
5. What does Samuel's statement that Saul, "little in thine own sight," became proud (1 Samuel 15:17) teach us about how a humble beginning can drift into a hardened heart?
6. In what area has God's past blessing on your life quietly tempted you toward pride or a sense that the rules bend for you?

7. How does Saul's fear of the people, "I feared the people, and obeyed their voice" (1 Samuel 15:24), warn us about whose approval we live for?
8. Whose opinion do you fear most right now, and how is that fear shaping your obedience to God?
9. What does "to obey is better than sacrifice... rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft... thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, and he hath also rejected thee from being king" (1 Samuel 15:22-23) teach us about the deadly seriousness of rejecting God's word, and how does it square with God's justice and patience?
10. Name one specific area where the Lord Jesus is calling you, through this passage, to move from partial obedience to glad, complete obedience to His word.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: 1 Samuel 13:13-14, on the earlier warning that prepared the way for Saul's rejection; Psalm 51:16-17, on the broken and contrite heart God truly desires; Micah 6:6-8, on what the Lord requires beyond sacrifice; John 14:15, on love for Christ proved by keeping His commandments; Hebrews 3:12-14, on guarding against an unbelieving heart that departs from the living God.

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