

TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE

1 Samuel 15:1-35 (Key verse 22)

But Samuel replied: "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."

In today's passage, the Lord sent Saul to a holy mission; to attack and totally destroy the Amalekites. This mission was special because Saul would be the hand of God that brings judgement against the wicked, and Godless generation; the Amalekites. For this reason, Saul needed to carefully meditate on the words of God, and listen ever so attentively. However, Saul did not obey the Lord's instruction. He was not thoughtful nor mindful of the word of God. He was much more concerned about gaining glory for himself and making his name great. He thought to himself that it is okay to offer sacrifices to God, and not take heed nor obey God. Even though we call ourselves Christians, and doing many 'church' activities, we find ourselves sympathising with sin, and not absolute regarding sin. Instead of calling out sin, we rather keep quiet. Instead of repenting, we rather only feel sorry and not repent. Instead of honouring God, we rather honour ourselves. Instead of taking heed of the word of God, we rather offer sacrifices to God. I pray that as we go through this passage we can learn what it means to obey God, and how we should obey God.

Attack, and totally destroy everything!

The Lord gave Saul a mission. Look at verse 2-3. ***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. 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.'*** The mission was to attack and totally destroy the Amalekites. This was a difficult instruction. I am sure many can be alarmed at the reading of this verse. *'How can God instruct for the destruction of an entire nation?' 'How can God kill even the children and infants?'* However this was not an ordinary mission, it was a holy mission. This was the very act of God against sin; against the wickedness of the Amalekites. They were a very Godless nation who did not fear God. When the Israelites came up from Egypt, worn out and weary, they came from behind the Israelites and attacked all who were lagging behind. They killed even the weakest of the people; the children, women and those who were old. They attacked the people of God. However, the Lord didn't forget this evil. Many years have passed until now. They haven't repented even though the Lord did not completely destroy them in the past. But this time around, it was the time for their judgment. The Lord God now instructed Saul to attack, and totally destroy them. Now we can understand why the Lord God was so severe against the Amalekites. Even though God is all loving, patient and merciful, His righteousness does not leave sin and the sinner unpunished. Many years might pass, but at the right time the Lord will judge against sin. Yes, I can sin secretly and not be noticed by anyone, however God sees all, even the hidden motives in our hearts. At the right time, God will reveal all wickedness in His light, and judge against sin. So, for this reason, we all need to attack and completely destroy everything that has the seed of sin. Amen!

How did Saul respond to God's instruction? Look at verse 4-7. ***So Saul summoned the men and mustered them at Telaim—two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand from Judah. 5 Saul went to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the ravine. 6 Then he said to the Kenites, "Go away, leave the Amalekites so that I do not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites moved away from the Amalekites. 7 Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, near the eastern border of Egypt.*** Saul set himself up; summoned and mustered his men. He attacked the Amalekites. The Kenites, who lived among Amalekites were however spared. They received the mercy of God for showing kindness to all the Israelites when they came up of Egypt. This kindness showed their fear of God, and for this reason they received the mercy from God.

Even though Saul attacked the Amalekites, he didn't fully obey God. Look at verse 8-9a. ***He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. 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.*** The Lord God clearly commanded Him to totally destroy the Amalekites, but he spared Agag king of the Amalekites, and took as plunder the best sheep and cattle, the fat tasty and fresh calves and lambs. Why would Saul disobey God? I thought since he has started so well in attacking the Amalekites, he'd finish up the mission of God with flying colours. But he didn't. Why? Look at verse 9 again. ***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.*** Saul didn't obey God because he lost sight of what pleases God, but rather focused on what pleases him. He kept everything that was good in his eyes. He was unwilling to completely destroy everything that was

despised and weak according to his own understanding and sight. Basically, Saul turned away from the Lord, and turned towards himself. So what can we say? To obey God means to carry out the heart of God being fully led and motivated by what pleases Him. It is impossible to obey God using our own wisdom, power and understanding. For this reason, I pray that the Holy Spirit of God work in our hearts to make us hate our own understanding, but be so much moved and fuelled by the heart of God. Amen!

How did God feel about Saul's disobedience? Look at verse 10-11. ***Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the LORD all that night.*** The Lord God was grieved, and heartbroken. He was disappointed by Saul who disobeyed Him, and turned away from Him. God wanted to bless Saul so much through carrying out this holy mission successfully. But Saul failed to obey God. Samuel was also grieved by Saul. He must have cried out to the Lord all night in prayer, praying for him. But, Saul who was prayed for had even moved further away from God. He was so locked into himself; having lost sight of God.

So Samuel came and rebuked him for this terrible sin of disobeying God. Look at verse 12. ***Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, "Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal."*** However, where was Saul? Saul has gone to Carmel and there he set up a monument in his own honour. I thought honour is earned and given by people. Saul has set himself up above God. This self interest has so much blinded him that he was totally oblivious of his sin. Look at verse 13. ***When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions."*** He lied to Samuel that he has carried out the Lord's instructions. Or did he actually believe that he obeyed God fully? But Samuel asked him a very simple question so that he realize what a terrible thing he has done. Look at verse 14. ***But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"*** As Saul was lying, there were sounds of bleating sheep, and lowing cattle. He has not destroyed them as commanded by God, but brought them back to Israel camp. What was his excuse? Look at verse 15 and 21. ***Saul answered, "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." The 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.*** Saul brought them back; the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord. Saul was quick to not obey God, but instead quick to sacrifice to God. How absurd! What was Saul thinking? Samuel couldn't listen to this nonsense anymore. He told him to shut up!

To obey is better than sacrifice.

This brings us to today's key verse. Let's read together verse 22. ***But Samuel replied: "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.*** Samuel earnestly prayed for Saul, and carefully analysed his spiritual condition. Samuel found out that Saul is not mindful of the word of God. What does it mean 'to obey is better than sacrifice'? I am sure that many of us are impressed with sacrificial people. We feel like they do great things for the Lord. However, something that delights the Lord the most is obedience. Without the heart condition being in tune with God, sacrifices become nothing but mere works of man trying to entice God. That is why Saul could so much lie, and actually think he was impressing God with his sacrifices. We can be like Saul, *'the Lord bless you man of God, yes I know I have an unresolved sin problem, but look, I gave a lot of tithe today, look I am singing so well for God, look I came to church today, look I am suffering for carrying out the will of God'*. The Lord does not delight in these sacrifices. He delights in absolute and God focused obedience.

Here is the best way to impress God; to obey God with sincerity and careful mindfulness of the word of God. To obey God is to obey Him with the heart of God. Here, there is no room for obeying God just for the sake of it; it becomes absolutely important how one needs to be so much in the same wavelength with God; believe and share in the same Spirit and passion of God. The self is corrupt and nothing good comes from it, no matter how great the sacrifices are. God delights in absolute obedience above anything else. To obey God means to submit oneself to the Lordship and sovereignty of God. However, if one is not submissive to God, he easily becomes a god unto himself and uses God. That is what Saul did. He turned the tables with his sacrifices; he was contesting with God for glory. Instead of glorifying God, he was on a quest of glorifying himself using the name of God. Now I can understand why God delights in obedience above sacrifices. Obedience always glorifies Him. Sacrifices, however, disregard God and try to pacify God. Do we think we can do enough to blind sight God? Do we think God cannot see that He is pacified by our religious acts and sacrifices? By no means! The Lord is God. He sees and knows everything. The Lord is God, worthy of our faith and honor. The Lord is God. He is much more than worthy of our trust, and submission to Him. For this reason, we take heed when we hear His word. When He instructs us to wage war against our sinfulness, we do not calculate the cost of not sinning, but rather we consider His heart to obey and please Him. Look at verse 23a. ***For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.*** Saul rebelled against God when he disobeyed God in this way. God instructed him to things by the way of God, but he rebelled and chose his own way. That

way is likened to witchcraft; a terrible sin of distorting the ways of God, and used for gaining personal glory. Saul became arrogant when he did not obey God. He so much thought of himself as great above anything else, even God. This sin is the same as the sin of idolatry; where one neglects God and becomes a law unto himself. But, who are we, mere mortals that we raise ourselves above God? We are nothing. But we are something when we honor God and submit under His Lordship. We can truly be a great people of God when we humble ourselves before God; silence ourselves and simply obey God with sincerity of heart and absoluteness. Amen!

However, this was not the case with Saul. He continued to slight down and being much more concerned about himself than God. Look at verse 23b. **Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.** As a result of his disobedience, God rejected Saul as king. God did not reject Saul nor give up on him, but He rather rejected his office; the one thing that Saul seemed to value above God. This is the one thing that hindered Saul's heart from giving glory to God. It was the hope of God that when he hears of this, that really he open his heart and sincerely repent before God. But what did he do? Saul didn't repent, rather he was only sorry. He was much more concerned about his appearance and being honoured than sincerely repenting before God. He must have thought about the many privileges that he'd lose now that he is no longer king. Look at verse 24-25. **Then Saul said to Samuel, "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. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD."** He was much more hurt by being stripped off his kingship than being sincere before God. But Samuel saw his heart, and was not going to be party to this. Samuel stood by the word of God. He was not moved by the fake lip services of Saul, and because he was not repentant, he further stood strong and reaffirmed the word of God to Saul. Look at verse 26. **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!"** Saul was not going down without a fight. Because he so much thought that he can force things and God to oblige, he, in grandstand style, tried to force God to reverse His decision. Look at verse 27. **As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore.** Imagine such a tall man almost on his knees getting hold of hem of Samuel's robe. Samuel remained resolute on the word of God. Look at verse 28-29. **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. 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."** Because of his unrepentant heart, God did not change His mind.

Samuel ended up going with Saul back to Gilgal so that he might worship the Lord and to perhaps have a change of heart as he worships God. Moreover, Samuel went with Saul so that he can obey the instruction of God. Even though this command was directed at Saul to fulfil, Samuel understood the heart of God. He so much wanted to honor the mission of God and completely destroy and put to death the Amalekite king Agag, as the Lord commanded. Agag thought that surely the bitterness of death is past. If King Saul didn't kill him, he thought that this man of God was not going to do anything. He'd get away with his sin. He undermined God and His righteousness. Little did he know what would happen to him. Look at verse 34. **But Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so will your mother be childless among women." And Samuel put Agag to death before the LORD at Gilgal.** Samuel obeyed the word of God with absoluteness and the fear of God. We learn from him what it means to obey God, and how to obey His word.

In conclusion, I am sure when we reflect on this passage we realize that we are in no way different to Saul. We are so like him and disobey God as he did. What shall we do? I pray that the Holy Spirit touch our hearts and inspire us to be filled with the passion and the desires of God. Yes, we might lose heart and think there is no way that we can be any different from Saul. But, here are the good news. We can come to our Lord and Saviour Jesus; the Shepherd of our souls who is always ready to mend our hearts and draw us to repentance. Let us not be like Saul who saw himself above God, but rather, let us be like Samuel who humbled himself before God and obeyed by faith and a contrite heart. May we be encouraged to break down and totally destroy anything sinful in our lives, and in humility come before God to save us. Amen!