

1 Samuel 15:1-35

Introduction

Christmas should be a time of celebration rather than sorrow. The decorations are up. The church is looking amazing. And we want to celebrate. Yet our passage this morning has an overwhelming sense of sadness.

After a short summary of his successes at the end of chapter 14, we're, once again, confronted with Saul's failure.

And what I've found most saddening, as I've studied this passage during the week, is that in Saul's failure I can very clearly see my own.

So, let's look at it together.

And I've put as our first heading: Saul's disobedience.

Saul's disobedience

God's word comes to Saul through his prophet Samuel.

Please look down at verse 1 with me.

Samuel said to Saul, 'I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD. 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.'"

Those words are troubling to our ears today. They sound like ethnic cleansing. And it's passages like this that can cause us to look with suspicion on Israel's dealings with its neighbours in the times of the Old Testament.

It's worth pointing out that God's people, Israel, in the Old Testament is not the same thing as the political nation of Israel that exists today. God's purposes for Israel in the Old Testament all find their fulfilment in Jesus. So, the New Testament is clear that the true Israel today is Christ's people, the church, in which Jews and Gentiles alike are united in him. That means we should avoid drawing lines between what we read about Israel in the Old Testament and what we read about modern Israel in the world today.

But more importantly for our study of this passage this morning, we need to understand that, here in 1 Samuel, Saul is being called to be an agent of God's judgement. This isn't ethnic cleansing but God's judgement coming upon his enemies.

And to understand that we need to know the back story.

In the book of Exodus, we're told that the Amalekites were the first enemies the Israelites encountered on their way to the promised land, after their rescue from Egypt. As they grew weary from their journey, the Amalekites attacked those who were lagging behind, and a long battle ensued.

We read about it in Exodus 17.

Moses stands on top of a hill with the staff of God in his hands, while Joshue, his second-in-command, leads the army. As long as Moses holds up his hands, the Israelites are winning. When his hands grow tired, Aaron and Hur stand either side of him and hold them up for him. And in this way, Joshua defeats the Amalekites.

When the battle has been won, the Lord tells Moses to record it on a scroll as something to be remembered. By attacking God's people, the Amalekites had waged war against God himself. Therefore, God promises that he will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. God himself is now at war with the Amalekites. (Exodus 17:8-16)

A whole generation later, as the Israelites are on the verge of *entering* the promised land, Moses reminds them what the Amalekites had done. And he reminds them that, when they have settled in the land, they are to do what God had spoken of: they are to blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven. "**Do not forget!**" he says. (Deuteronomy 25:17-19)

Here in 1 Samuel, Saul is being commanded to do *that*. He is to bring God's judgement on the Amalekites. This isn't ethnic cleansing. The Amalekites are not to be destroyed because they are Amalekites. They are to be destroyed because they are sinners.

And that should trouble us deeply. Not because it's unfair. But because it *is* fair. And because we too are sinners.

This is what we deserve.

The total destruction of the *Amalekites* is a picture of what *all* of humanity deserves in its sin and rebellion against God.

It's a foretaste of the coming day of judgement. And when God's judgement comes it will be total. God's enemies will be utterly defeated.

That's what's being pictured here in the destruction of the Amalekites.

That's why Saul's disobedience is so serious.

And as we read the verses that follow the extent of his disobedience becomes apparent.

Sparing the Kenites is laudable. But Saul fails to do as he had been instructed concerning the Amalekites.

God says, **“...put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.”**

But, in verse 8, we’re told that Saul **took Agag king of the Amalekites alive.**

God says, **“Do not spare them...”**

But, in verse 9, we’re told that **Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs – everything that was good.**

God says, **“...totally destroy all that belongs to them.”**

But in verse 9, we’re told that Saul and his army **were unwilling to destroy** what was good. Instead, they destroyed only what **was despised and weak.**

Rather than living under the authority of God’s word, Saul has stood over it. Rather than submitting to God’s word, he has judged for himself what should be obeyed and what should not. He has put himself in the place of God.

It’s a temptation we all fall prey to when we pick and choose which parts of the Bible to obey and which to ignore.

We might all see something of ourselves in Saul.

And that extends to the excuses he makes, which is our next heading: Saul’s excuses.

Saul’s excuses

In verse 10, the Lord informs Samuel of Saul’s failure to carry out his instructions, and Samuel is angry. The next morning, he goes to confront Saul, but Saul isn’t there. He’s gone to set up a *monument* to himself. What a great victory he has won. He wants the honour. Being king has gone to his head. Clearly, he thought that this was his victory rather than the Lord’s.

And when Samuel finally catches up with him, he’s full of himself.

Look at verse 13.

When Samuel reached him, Saul said, ‘The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD’s instructions.’

‘Oh! Have you?’ Samuel says. ‘Well, that’s funny... why, then, can I hear the bleating of sheep? Why is the lowing of cattle ringing in my ears?’

'Oh, that!' Saul says. 'That wasn't me. That was the soldiers' idea. They thought that the best of the animals would make a nice sacrifice for your God, Samuel. Everyone was doing it. I just went along with it.'

And very often that's our first impulse too: to point at others.

'Yes, I may have been driving over the speed limit, but everyone was doing it.'

Have you ever said that? Or thought it?

I know I have.

But Samuel has no time for excuses. God measures our actions against his commands not against what everyone else is doing.

The bottom line is that Saul has failed to obey the Lord.

So again, Samuel asks Saul why.

Verse 17.

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; wage war against 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?'

'Well...' Saul says, 'I may not have carried out the Lord's instructions to the "t" but look at what I did do! Granted... I may not have killed Agag... And I may have allowed the soldiers to bring back a few animals. But I did everything else.'

Again, we can hear our own excuses, can't we?

'Yes, I may have driven over the speed limit on that small stretch of road, but I was well within the speed limit the rest of the time.'

I can certainly hear *myself* saying that.

But partial obedience is still disobedience.

And once again, Saul blames the soldiers.

Verse 21.

'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.'

It seems so reasonable. They were doing it for God after all. They had such good intentions. And we too can make similar excuses on the basis of our good intentions.

‘Yes, I might have broken the speed limit, but I didn’t want to be late for the church prayer meeting...’

It’s not an excuse I can use very often, as our prayer meetings are just over the road from my house. But I *would* do... because I’m a sinner like everyone else.

And again, Samuel will have none of it.

What God wants is obedience not excuses.

He hadn’t wanted sacrifices from Saul, he had wanted his obedience.

And Saul had failed.

He had rejected the word of the Lord, so the Lord rejects him as king.

Look at verse 23.

‘For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.’

One rejection is met by another.

Finally, Saul acknowledges his sin. But again, he offers an excuse.

Verse 24.

The 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...’

Let’s keep going with the driving example...

‘I know I was driving above the speed limit, but I had a queue of cars behind me, and they were getting impatient with me...’

There are many situations in which we fear people’s disapproval. We crave people’s acceptance. Yet fear of others is no excuse for disobeying God.

So, when Saul suggests that Samuel forgives and forgets, Samuel will have none of it.

Saul continues, in verse 25: **‘Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD.’**

‘Come on, Samuel, it wasn’t a big deal. Let’s forget about it and move on.’

It doesn't sound like genuine repentance. True repentance stops making excuses and takes responsibility for sin. It doesn't try to sweep sin under the carpet. And Samuel won't let the seriousness of sin be minimised. He won't let Saul excuse it or blame it on others. He refuses to go back with Saul and repeats the Lord's rejection of him.

As he turns to leave, Saul grabs his robe, which tears. And Samuel announces to Saul that the Lord has torn the kingdom away from him and given it to another.

And at that point, Saul makes one last plea. He pleads with Samuel to go back with him to honour him before the elders of Israel. Here is his main concern. It's not repentance over his sin but anxiety about his reputation.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Samuel deals graciously with Saul and grants his request. He goes back with him.

He does what Saul had left undone and puts Agag to death.

And then Samuel leaves. Their relationship as prophet and king is over.

Verse 35.

Until the day Samuel died, he did no go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

Samuel's mourning and the Lord's regret signal that this is a dark and tragic moment. It underlines the seriousness of sin.

And the tragedy of it for me is that I can see myself in Saul. I can see *my* disobedience in *his* disobedience. I can see *my* excuses in *his* excuses. And I can see *my own* rejection by God in *his* rejection.

Sin destroys our relationship with God.

It brings us under God's judgement and condemnation.

This is a sad and painful chapter.

But there is hope.

And, perhaps oddly, that's to be found in the statement about the Lord's regret. That's what we need to think about lastly.

So, I've put as our final heading: The Lord's regret.

The Lord's regret

The chapter ends with sadness.

Verse 35.

And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

And that's repeating what had already been said in verse 11.

The Lord says there: **'I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.'**

What's challenging about that statement is that we're told twice in verse 29 that God does not do that.

Verse 29.

'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.'

The Hebrew word that's translated here as 'change his mind' is the same word that's translated as 'regret' in the other two verses.

So twice we're told that this is something God *does* do. And twice we're told that it's something God *doesn't* do. There's an obvious tension here.

We need to remember what we learned from Hannah's prayer.

She taught us that God is the God of reversals. He exalts the humble and humbles the proud.

God does that consistently. He doesn't change.

The person who has changed is Saul.

He had started well.

In verse 17, Samuel said that he was once small in his own eyes. He was humble, and the Lord exalted him.

In chapter 11, before he was confirmed as king, he was portrayed as a kind of Super-Judge. It seemed that he would be a good and godly leader.

But then, when he was made king, he changed. As we've seen this morning, kingship went to his head. He became proud and self-exalting.

Most significantly, he had turned away from God.

It's not God who has changed. It's Saul.

And God is always the same. He consistently exalts the humble and humbles the proud.

So, now, Saul comes under his judgement and condemnation.

And that's the cause of the Lord's regret.

The Hebrew word carries a sense of sadness.

God is a just and holy God. He is grieved at sin and cannot relent from punishing it. He must punish sin. That will never change.

Yet, at the same time, his heart is full of love and mercy, and he yearns to forgive.

That's the tension here.

God must punish sin. Yet he yearns to forgive.

It's a real tension that runs throughout the Old Testament.

And that tension won't be resolved until the cross.

At the cross, God the Father did not relent from punishing sin. At the cross, he punished the sins of his people fully and finally.

Yet, amazingly, he bore that punishment himself, in the person of his Son.

And now, because the penalty for sin has been paid, his people stand forgiven.

At the cross, mercy triumphed over judgement.

And this is where hope is to be found.

God is a God of reversals.

If we will acknowledge our sins and humble ourselves before him... If we will take responsibility for our sin and put an end to our excuses... If we will repent and turn back to God and allow his word to shape our lives... Then, because of the cross, he will delight to forgive us and lift us up.

God humbles the proud and exalts the humble.

True repentance is met with mercy at the cross.

And that's the good news that we're celebrating this Christmas, as we celebrate the coming of our Saviour and our true King.

That's why Christmas is a time of celebration rather than sorrow.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, we acknowledge our sin before you. But we thank you and praise you for your mercy to us through the cross of Christ. Please help us genuinely to repent of our sin. To stop excusing it. And to take responsibility for it. And, this Christmas, please help us to rejoice in the coming of our Saviour, your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.