

There are two themes that we will be looking at tonight.
The regret of God and the hearing of Saul.

Let me start by saying something about those themes.

We just heard Samuel say:

“The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.”
“And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.”

It’s not like one verse is in the Old Testament and the other is in the New Testament.
It’s not like some of the challenging issues comparing Proverbs with Ecclesiastes!

It’s verse 29 and verse 35 of 1 Samuel 15.

The same author – in the same context – saying something that appears directly contradictory!

It’s the same word in Hebrew – “*naham*” – which is used four times in the chapter:

Verse 11 – where God says “I regret that I have made Saul king.”

And then again twice in verse 29

where Samuel says that the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret –

and then again in verse 35,

where the author tells us that the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king.

What does it mean for God to *regret* doing something?!

Plainly it doesn’t meant the same thing as when *we* regret doing something!

(And that’s Samuel point – “God is not a man, that he should have regret!”)

God’s regret is not the *same thing* as our regret –

it’s not that God says “oops – I shouldn’t have done that!”

But God’s regret signals a major turning point in what he is doing in history.

Second – the theme of hearing (or obeying – it’s the same word in Hebrew):

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,

as in obeying [hearing] the voice of the LORD?

Behold, to obey [hear] is better than sacrifice,

and to listen than the fat of rams.

We cluck our tongues at Saul,

shocked that he did not obey God.

God had been perfectly clear.

He had given Saul a direct, specific command.

And yet Saul thought he knew better than God.

Have you ever thought that you knew better than God?
Has God *really* said that . . . ?
Wouldn't God prefer it if you did this instead?

Saul's rebellion is especially poignant because it is based on such good intentions.
His first error, which we saw last time,
was that he offered the sacrifices, instead of waiting for Samuel.
He was worshiping God!

His second error, which we are looking at tonight,
was that he did not totally destroy the Amalekites,
but brought some of their flocks for a sacrifice.
Again, *he was worshiping God!*

We see this over and over in scripture.
The Israelites tried to worship Yahweh through a golden calf.
But God was not pleased!
Ananias and Sapphira tried to worship God but lied about the percentage they were giving.
But God was not pleased!

If you would worship God – then you must *hear* his word and *do what he says!*

Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

1. Rebellion (15:1-9)

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.

The opening verse of the chapter highlights this central issue of obedience.

The command of Samuel to Saul is:

"now therefore *listen* to the words of the LORD" –
but the verb *shama* is better translated *hear* (or sometimes *obey*).

This verb will come back several times in this chapter:

v4 – the verb form means "to cause to hear" or "to summon"

v14 – where Samuel "hears" the bleating of sheep

v19 – "why did you not hear the voice of the LORD?" (implied "obey")

v20 – Saul answers "I have heard the voice of the LORD"

v22 – The verb "shama" is translated twice as "obey" ("to hear is better than sacrifice")

v24 – Saul acknowledges his sin of "obeying" (hearing) the voice of the people.

Whose voice do you hear?

Well, whose voice do you obey?

That is the voice that you hear!

Hear the word of the LORD! And if you hear it – obey it!

Saul has been exalted as king over Israel.

Will he humble himself before the LORD's prophet?

Will he listen? Will he hear *and obey* what God tells him?

(In Psalm 40, David will say "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted,
but you have given me an open ear.

[or, literally, but "ears you have dug for me."]

David is quoting from 1 Samuel 15 – and saying that *unlike Saul*,
he is the one who hears and does what God says.

That's why Hebrews puts Psalm 40 into the voice of Jesus –

because our Lord Jesus is the one who finally does what God said!!)

In verses 2-3 of chapter 15 we hear God's command to Saul through Samuel.

² *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. (This is recounted in Ex 17:8-16 & Dt 25:17-19)*

³ *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.'"*

I have argued that 1-2 Samuel is not anti-monarchical,
it is anti-Israel.

Israel has failed to do and to be what Israel was called to do and to be.

So God has rejected Israel, and has called the king to do

and to be what Israel was supposed to do and to be.

Israel had been called to devote to destruction the seven nations of Canaan.

Israel had failed.

Now Israel's king is given a similar command.

Destroy Amalek.

Some have thought that God is commanding genocide –
the eradication of a whole people group based on ethnicity or religion.

The 20th century was rightly horrified by numerous cases of genocide throughout the world.
Genocide is a horrific and wicked practice in the modern world.

We rightly condemn it today,

because no nation today has the prerogatives of the Son of God.

What exactly is God commanding?

The word translated "devote to destruction" is the Hebrew word "*herem*."

It means to utterly destroy in an act of worship.

"*Herem*" warfare is a holy war.

It is a war in which the Son of God brings the judgment of God

in destroying a nation that has utterly rejected the word of the LORD.

Israel had been commanded to destroy the seven nations of Canaan,

because Israel was the son of God who was to bring justice to the nations!

And that justice includes both God's blessing and God's curse.

In *herem* warfare, God's final judgment is proclaimed in advance.
It is an eruption of God's last days judgment into history,
as a warning to all nations of what lies in store for them in the future.

And *only* the Son of God has the right to bring God's final judgment against a nation.
And even that, *only* when God commands it.

Israel *had been* the Son of God, and so was supposed to be God's instrument of judgment.

Now, as King, Saul is called to be the instrument of God's final judgment against Amalek.
He is the Son of God.
And God is testing him.
Will he succeed where Israel failed?

⁴ So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah. ⁵ And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. ⁶ 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. ⁷ And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.

So Saul summoned the people of Israel
(and notice that the author separates out the number of men from Judah,
foreshadowing both the rise of David and the division of the kingdom).

And Saul attacked the Amalekites,
first sparing the Kenites who lived among them.
(The Kenites were related to Moses's father-in-law,
and had settled in the Negev with Judah—a region bordering the Amalekites)

In other words,
Saul starts off well.
He proves merciful to those who are not under God's wrath,
and he is the agent of God's wrath against those whom God has judged.

⁸ And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. ⁹ 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.

And the telling line:
All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

Later, in verse 21, Saul explains the motive for this:
*the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen,
the best of the things devoted to destruction,
to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.*

Saul and the people mask their greed with piety.

“What is the difference between devoting to destruction,
and offering as a sacrifice?
Either way, it is still offered to God!!!?”

What is the difference?

The worshiper gets to partake of the peace offering!
As the Israelite army is slaughtering the Amalekite flocks and herds,
they are thinking, “mmmm, I could go for a good juicy steak!”

Now there is nothing wrong with enjoying a good juicy steak!
Unless God told you that that steak was his!

If God says, “that side of beef belongs to me” – then *don't eat it!!*

2. Regret (15:10-11)

Samuel is miles away.

*But the word of the LORD came to Samuel:
I regret that I have made Saul king,
for he has turned his back from following me
and has not performed my commandments.*

And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night. (v10-11)

Now, if God is sovereign,
and he knows all that is going to happen–
indeed, if God foreordains whatsoever comes to pass,
then how can God say “I regret that I have made Saul king”?
Does God regret what he himself ordained!?

There is only one possible answer:
yes!

God regrets that he made Saul king.
That doesn't mean that God was surprised at what Saul did.
It means that he regrets making Saul king.
And it's okay to say that!
After all – *God said it!!*

What does it mean?
Let's keep going!

3. Rejection (15:12-23)

¹²*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.”*

We saw last time that Saul set up his first altar after his victory over the Philistines.
Now we hear that Saul has set up a monument to himself (v12).

Power is a dangerous thing.

Not only has Saul begun to act like a king of the nations,
building monuments to himself,
but he still thinks that he is pleasing God!

¹³ And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD.”

Maybe he hasn't finished killing all the flocks and herds yet,
but he is about to, when he offers the sacrifices...

¹⁴ And Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?”

Saul thinks that he has a good answer for this:

¹⁵ Saul said, “They have brought them from 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.”

Saul cloaks his rebellion in piety.

What is particularly ingenious about this is that God had said in the Law
that sacrifices should be from the best of the flocks,
and never from the weak and lame.

So Saul is just taking the principle of the law and applying it here, right?!!

¹⁶ Then Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night.” And he said to him, “Speak.”

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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.’

¹⁹ 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?”

Why did you not hear? Why did you take the spoil and do evil in the sight of the LORD?

Saul is perplexed.

²⁰ 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. ²¹ But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.”

Haven't we done what the LORD said?

Why does it matter whether we slaughter it in the field, or at Gilgal?

Wouldn't it be better to offer it as a sacrifice?

What is wrong with what we did?

²² *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.*

It's easy to point to how “others” do this.

But my task as a preacher is not to congratulate you for not being like other people!
My task is to show you that you are *just like* other people!

You are just like Saul!

You twist God's word to your own advantage,
making it say what you want it to say!
And you offer your little sacrifices in order to please your own appetites!
You give your 10% in order to spend the rest of your money on your pleasure.
You enjoy looking good in the eyes of others,
but you do not want to listen too closely to what God says—
because it just might convict you of sin!

Samuel says that Saul's bringing the Amalekite animals as sacrifices to Gilgal
is as iniquity and idolatry!

²³ *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.”*

When you think about the message of the prophets,
you can see how Samuel's words to Saul function as the foundation of the prophetic movement.
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Hosea—
the prophetic approach to sin and idolatry
is rooted in Samuel's identification of rebellion and idolatry.

To reject the word of the LORD is idolatry,
because it means that you are saying that you know better than God.

And you need to repent of that!

4. Repentance (15:24-35)

²⁴ *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 bow before the LORD.”*

Saul acknowledges his sin.

Saul here reveals his idolatry.

Saul is the King.

He is the one who has been chosen by God to be what Israel had failed to be.

In chapter 14 we heard that the people were wiser than Saul—

they were the ones who ransomed Jonathan from Saul's foolish oath.

Now we hear that Saul feared the people.

He was supposed to fear *God*.

He was supposed to obey *God's* voice.

But instead he feared the people and obeyed their voice.

We need a king who will fear God and obey his voice!

We need King Jesus.

Jesus is the one who will hear the voice of his Father,

and do what he hears from his Father.

Jesus is the king, the Son of God, who will do what Adam, and Israel, and Saul all failed to do.

He will fear God.

He will obey God.

And so we, in Christ, are called to fear and obey our heavenly Father.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

If you fear God more than you fear others,

then you will be a wise and faithful leader.

What about you, O husband, do you fear your wife?

Are you more concerned about what she thinks, or about what God thinks?

This is a problem in every relationship.

We let what others think of us dictate what we say and what we do.

Saul's fear of the people is revealed even more in his repentance than in his sin!

Not only does he acknowledge his fear of the people in verse 24,

but he goes on to demonstrate it further in verses 25-30!

It is implicit in his request to Samuel—come with me that I may worship the LORD.

It sounds good, after all, his offering sacrifices without Samuel in chapter 13

was considered rebellion!

But watch!

Samuel says No.

²⁶ 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."

Samuel turns to go,

and Saul tears a corner of Samuel's robe.

(Remember this—because David will do the same to Saul!)

And Samuel replies:

²⁷ As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret."

Wait a second!

I thought God said that he regretted making Saul king!
Now Samuel says that God does not have regret!

What do we do with this?

There are several passages in the OT that use this word of God.

In Genesis 6:6-7, God says that he regrets making man!!
And so he brings a flood to destroy humanity.

Plainly, “regret” does *not* mean “I wish I had never done that!”

And what you see in the Flood is a seismic shift in God’s purposes for history.
So God’s “regret” (some translations say “repentance”) about making man
means that God is now going to bring about
a fundamental change in covenant history!

The next time we hear this word “regret” – is in Exodus 32,
after the sin of the golden calf, the LORD says that he will destroy Israel –
and make a great nation of Moses – but Moses begs him not to –
and the LORD “repented” (same word).

In Numbers 23:19, Moses says that God is not a man that he should repent (regret).
(This is what Samuel is quoting here in 1 Samuel 15).

And then in Deuteronomy 32:36 and Judges 2:18
the LORD “regrets” or “repents” over the suffering of his people.

So what does it mean that God *repents*? Or *regrets*?

Think about it this way:

In Genesis God creates Adam and Eve to be the glory of his creation.

They rebel – and so God sets a different course.

In Exodus God delivers his people from Egypt and brings them to himself.

They rebel – and so God nearly sets a different course –

but Moses intercedes, and so God stays the course.

In Joshua, the LORD brings his people into the promised land.

They rebel – and so God hands them over to their enemies –

but he remembers his promises – and so he regrets their suffering.

He does not make a major change of course.

Now, in 1 Samuel, which is it going to be?

Is this going to be a major change of course

where God turns from one way of doing things to another?

Or will he relent and stay with Saul?

Will Samuel intercede for Saul – like Moses interceded for Israel?

No.

Saul is a dead end.

Saul is like humanity before the Flood.

We need a Noah!

(actually Noah is given his name because this one will “comfort us” – the word “comfort” is the same word translated “regret” here – just in a different stem that has the meaning of “comfort”!)

Saul is like the wilderness generation that had to die in the wilderness before Israel could enter the promised land.

We need a Joshua!

In other words,

We need a David.

We need a man after God’s own heart.

One who will *hear* and *obey* what God says.

So when Samuel says that God is not a man that he might have regret, Samuel is explaining God’s regret.

God has said that Saul is rejected as king.

That is not negotiable.

There is nothing that Saul can do in order to change God’s mind.

God is not a man who says something lightly.

If God says that you are rejected, then you are rejected.

The decision has been made.

I said earlier that Saul continues in his fear of man – and does not truly turn back to the LORD. This is what verse 30 says:

³⁰ *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.”* ³¹ *So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the LORD.*

Saul still fears the people.

If they see that Samuel is not with him,

they will know that he is “in trouble” with the LORD.

So Samuel goes with him,

but *not* in order to make things easier for Saul!

Samuel then says,

³² *Then Samuel said, “Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites.”*

Samuel had retreated to the background in order to allow Saul to serve as God’s anointed.

But with the demise of Saul,

Samuel returns to prominence.

And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.”

Agag, meanwhile, is getting cheerful.

If he hasn't been executed yet, then perhaps he's safe!

³³ *But Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women."*

And then comes one of the great lines in the Bible:

And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal.

You need to have the picture here.

Samuel is an old man—a prophet.

We have no indication that Samuel had ever fought in battle before.

But now Samuel does what Saul had failed to do.

It is not just that Samuel cut off Agag's head.

He "hacked him to pieces."

All Israel was treated to the picture of the aged prophet doing what the strong young king would not do

³⁴ *Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵ 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 over Israel.*

The Glory of Israel is not a man that he should have regret.

He is not wishy-washy in his judgments.

He will not change his mind.

But he did regret making Saul king—because Saul did not obey his voice.

Brothers and sisters,

you have heard the word of the LORD.

What will you do with it?