

'The Rise of the Kings Series'

Sermons in the Book of 1 Samuel

Message 23 - 'Two Looks at Repentance' 1 Samuel 15:11; 24 - 35



It is here that we encounter some incredibly deep considerations concerning the workings and actions of God, as well as the sinfulness and stubbornness of man. Repentance is a key aspect here and we are confronted with a two-fold look at the concept. The chapter depicts both God and Saul repenting. In both there are problems, we have a paradox when we consider the situation concerning the great God of heaven, and we have superficiality when we consider the repentance of Saul. We need to answer the following questions:

Does God repent? (v11; 29; 35b) - It needs to be made clear, that when we speak about repentance in this context, we are certainly not speaking of the Lord repenting over a committed sin, rather a repentance over His will and deeds. For the words 'regret' and 'relent' used in both those verses we are directed to the Hebrew 'naham'. The wisdom as shown in Deuteronomy 29:29 is also something which is helpful in many circumstances, *'The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.'* This is such a wise principle, in that we are to deal with those things that have been revealed to us, and to live in the light of them, for the Lord's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are high above. The first comment needs to be made with regard to the word 'naham'. This word is used 29 times in the Old Testament in relation to God. One of the consistent factors, despite varying nuances, is that the word never seems to lose an emotional element, for example, sorrow or regret. Think on the time it first appears in the Old Testament, Genesis 6:6, *'And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.'* The over-eager theologians begin to rub their hands upon hearing such a text and begin to question how God could be grieved in this way if he truly is God, and knew that it would happen. This has given rise to the different schools of thought including 'open theism'. The concept that God is reactionary to the actions of individuals is not in any way biblical. God does not repent over the fulfilment and completion of His sovereign purposes. The next step is to introduce the term anthropomorphism (it's a mouthful!). What is this? It is the attributing of human forms or characteristics to God. Not only that, but some would throw in anthropopathism. What is this? It is attributing human feelings to God. In other words, the Scriptures sometimes use the limited words of humanity to communicate truth about the eternal God, sometimes the Bible stoops to use human categories to tell the truth about a God far beyond all our categories. This is all fine, but the danger with any discussion like this is the point that we lose sight of the reality of the Scriptures and the message of the text for us in the here and now. As one commentator explains, *'we so focus on the form in which the truth comes that we neglect the truth that comes.'* What was the wise principle I mentioned from Deuteronomy? Deal with that which has been revealed to us and leave the secret things as unto the Lord. Let God be God and man be man. For example, think on the verse I read from Genesis, did we really grasp the whole of the verse where it speaks of the Lord being grieved in His heart? Did we sense the intensity of the sorrow of God over human sin? Look at the text we have before us in v11, shouldn't we be seeing past the theological edge of the verse and coming to the truth at the heart. There is so much tragedy in v11 in Saul's refusal to follow after the Lord, and we see this in the grief and regret that the Lord displays. The verse is not in any way suggesting a view that God looks on the situation and expresses to Samuel that it hasn't quite worked out in the way He wanted, and to suggest such would be completely dishonouring and against the Scriptures. God is not impartial, He is not nonchalant, and the point of v11 is not to cause questions in our mind about fickleness, or altering wills, it is to highlight God's sorrow over sin. The Lord is not frustrated with a lack of foresight, no, He is grieved over Saul's sin and disobedience. For God to say, "I feel sorrow that I made Saul king," is not the same as saying, "I would not make him king if I had it to do over." God is able to feel sorrow for an act in view of foreknown evil and pain, and yet go ahead and will to do it for wise reasons. And so later, when he looks back on the act, he can feel the sorrow for the act that was leading to the sad conditions, such as Saul's disobedience. God's commitment to his promises hangs on his not repenting like a man. In other words, God's promises are not in jeopardy, because God can foresee all circumstances, he knows that nothing will occur that will cause him to take them back. What wonderful assurance that gives to the believer!

(Please look at Page 2 for a consideration of the question, 'Is Saul's repentance genuine?')



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Is Saul's repentance genuine? (v23 – 35) - In response to the Lord's pronounced rejection, Saul makes some confession of sin and it seems that he repents. Saul does confess his sin, but then look at the request in v25 and it sheds much light on the situation, but it seems so easy. Repentance is more than just glibly saying a quick sorry, its feeling remorse, and sadness from sin, realising the extent of the offence to God, feeling convicted, and being brought to the end of oneself. It is only at this point that a person can experience the glorious peace, relief, and assurance of grace. In v30, Saul's request makes perfect sense, if Samuel's judgement and conduct with regards to Saul's rejection become highly visible, there could be real consequences for Israel, unrest, confusion, disorder. Yet, really to dig a little deeper is to see Saul's words expose the real priority in his heart. It is almost as if he takes Samuel to one side, and with the smooth words of a politician, reasons in a way to preserve himself. *'Look Samuel, I admit I have done wrong, but we have got to think of the greater good, we can't be seen to be in opposition, imagine the consequences, it is for the good of the country.'* The concern in some respects is a right one from Saul, but the problem is that it is the dominant factor in his thinking, his concern is to keep the support of men, to the extent where preserving his standing in the immediate is more important than seeking reconciliation with God. It is his reputation that concerns him most, and as we have seen from the beginning with Saul, image, status, pride are the things that are treasured, and even in the face of stern judgement, this is the reality. Saul's repentance is not genuine, yet before we become very cutting, let us remember the many times when we have been amongst those who love the praise of men more than the upholding of God. John 12:43, *'for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God.'* The Lord's communion with Saul with Samuel is now broken, there would be no more direction of the Word for Saul, no more counsel or instruction, no more encouragement. The withdrawal of Samuel from Saul's life in the sense of the proclamation of God's Word, leaves Saul dwelling in an unbearable silence. Saul will long to hear the Word of the Lord in future chapters. Why did Samuel engage in public worship with rejected Saul? Samuel was put in a very difficult position, and the decision he made, did hold a deeper motive for the glory of God. After the worship, (how Saul was in a position to worship we can only surmise) Samuel called for Agag, the Amalekite king, and the prophet would fulfil God's command, the command in which Saul had failed. Agag's confidence that the 'bitterness of death' had passed was dashed by the righteous words of the prophet and then with the sword. Samuel was faithful in his fulfilment of the Lord's command to His glory.



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