

The Outpouring of Divine Wrath, Graphically Illustrated 1 Samuel 15

This morning we're going to look at one of the most tragic figures in all the Old Testament, King Saul.

Here was a man who had every imaginable advantage and received every conceivable privilege, yet squandered them all in the most hard-hearted, tragic way.

People always ask if Saul was a true believer, a redeemed man. I don't know. I'm inclined to think not. It is true that the Spirit of God once came upon him so that he prophesied, but that is also true of Balaam's donkey. Scripture also says in 1 Samuel 10:9-10 that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Saul and changed his heart, but in the context this seems to describe the sort of change where Saul went from being a timid, naive youth, to a state of mind where he was bold and kingly. It does not seem a reference to the sort of "new heart" that God gives people when he regenerates them.

Listen to Ezekiel 36:25-27:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Whatever happened to Saul when he was anointed as King, it does not seem to have been the kind of regeneration that Ezekiel describes. Saul's whole life is one long spiritual decline, from a state of tremendous advantage, to a state of

disobedience, demon possession, and disgrace. Ultimately he committed suicide in battle.

You'll recall that when Saul was chosen as the first king of Israel, he was chosen according to human criteria, not because of his spiritual qualifications. He was the people's choice, not God's choice. God gave the people of Israel exactly what they asked for: a king like the pagan kings. He was very impressive to look at, but he was not, like David, a man after God's own heart.

Some of you have memorized 1 Samuel 16:7, a famous and familiar verse: **"The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."**

Do you remember the context of that verse? God spoke those words to Samuel when Samuel went to anoint one of Jesse's sons to be king of Israel. Scripture says Samuel saw Eliab, David's elder brother. Eliab must have been a distinguished-looking, powerful-looking man, because 1 Samuel 16:6-7 says--

he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is before him."

7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."

God's choice for king was for David, a man after His own heart. God's criteria for the man who would be king over His people was not stature, or appearance, or a glib tongue, or any of the kind of things that typically impress those who look at the outward appearance. God was concerned about the man's heart. David was *God's* choice. Saul was the *nation's* choice.

You'll remember that the people of Israel went to Samuel and demanded a king. First Samuel 8:

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah

5 and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations."

6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the LORD.

7 And the LORD said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them."

Samuel reported to the people what the Lord had said, and warned them again. What was the people's response? Listen to 1 Samuel 8:18-19. Samuel warned the people that a king would only take advantage of them, and he said this:

in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the LORD will not answer you in that day."

19 But the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel. And they said, "No! But there shall be a king over us,

20 that we also may be like all the nations.

So Saul was their choice. When God told Samuel to anoint Saul, he was giving the people exactly the kind of king they requested.

Why did Saul fit their criteria? Because of his external appearance. First Samuel 9:2 says he was "**a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he. From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.**"

Those were Saul's main qualifications for heading up the kingdom. It's fitting, I think that the most memorable foe he faced during his reign was a giant, Goliath, who was even bigger than Saul, and ultimately Goliath was killed by the youth who was *God's* choice to lead the nation. That is one of those poetic turns of divine Providence that reminds us God is in charge even when it seems like His will is not being accomplished.

At first, Saul seemed to start well, but the older he got the more it became evident that he was *not* God's man for the king's role. He began to default spiritually in numerous ways, and many of his failures are familiar to you. There was that famous incident when he consulted the medium at Endor. He chased and persecuted David. He let anger control him so much that he ultimately became demon-possessed. And on and on. Virtually every episode of his life was tinged with failure, and in the end he died at his own hand and horrible disgrace.

There's too much in Scripture to do a full biographical study of Saul, so what I want to look at this morning is the episode that became the turning point in Saul's reign when the Lord rejected him. Here we see in microcosm the full story of Saul's spiritual failure, and it's therefore as good an account as any to help us get an understanding of his life and failures.

First Samuel 15. You may remember when our pastor did a message on this chapter called "Hacking Agag to Pieces." If you have not heard that message, you need to get the tape. Or read *The Vanishing Conscience*, in which that message appears as a chapter. John MacArthur used it as a picture of the Christian's duty to mortify sin, to do all we can to put sin to death in our own lives without mercy. I think that's a fitting lesson to draw from this account, and I'll show you why.

But it was while I was editing *The Vanishing Conscience* that I became fascinated with this passage of Scripture. It's not an easy one to teach from. It poses a number of difficult questions, such as why God Himself would deal so mercilessly with people that he would order a whole tribe, including infants, put to death.

It's not an easy chapter to read, especially if you want to be comfortable with the image of God as an always-benign, grandfatherly figure. Here we learn just how fearful it can be to fall into the hands of the living God, both for

the pagan Amalekites, and for a disobedient, professing believer like Saul.

First Samuel 15, and I'll read this account, beginning at verse 1:

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.

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.

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.'"

Now let me pause there and comment on a few things in those verses. First of all, it is clear from Samuel's words that God was giving Saul a test of obedience. There's no hidden agenda here. Samuel prefaced his comments by charging Saul to hearken to the words of the Lord. The instructions were explicit, and Saul's duty was outlined for him in a point-by-point fashion that he could not possibly miss.

Second, God commanded Saul to have no mercy on the Amalekites. He was to kill men and women, and even babies and livestock. The entire tribe was to be utterly put to death. No prisoners were to be taken, and no life was to be spared. God is a God of supreme mercy, but there are times when His judgment is without mercy--especially against those who have shown no mercy. And this is one of those times. Let me underscore this for you: when God withholds His mercy, He is *always* right to do so.

Third, I want to be honest about the difficulty this passage poses. Let me say plainly that God was not unjust to issue a command like this, and I'll show you why. But still, from our human perspective, this is an extremely harsh command, which may seem difficult to reconcile with our notion of God's boundless mercy. Psalm 145:9

says, "**The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works.**"

I think it was in the early 1990s when I first became acutely aware of how big a problem it is for mainstream evangelicals to grasp the reality of God's wrath. I was participating in a forum for theological discussion on the early Internet. A man who was an associate pastor in a very famous church in England (a church that is perceived as one of the great bastions of evangelicalism in the Anglican community) wrote a post on this forum saying that he could not believe God really commanded Saul to kill the Amalekites. This guy wanted to affirm the infallibility of Scripture, so he had concluded that Samuel was lying to Saul, or that Samuel was mistaken about commanding Saul to utterly destroy all the Amalekites. And his rationale was this, in his own words: *"I cannot picture Jesus killing babies. The same God who said suffer not the little children to come unto me is the same God who said thou shalt not kill. . . . [Therefore I cannot] accept that Samuel was in God's will when he demanded that Saul destroy all the Amalekites."*

Now let's be honest. This passage does pose a challenge to what we normally think when we think of God's mercy, and especially His mercy to little children.

But you can't write it off as a lie, or even a mistake on Samuel's part. Look down at verses 10 and 11. After Saul failed to do what God commanded, "**The word of the LORD came to Samuel: 'I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.'**" This cannot be twisted to mean anything other than that the Lord *commanded* Saul to carry out this slaughter.

Let me give you about five points that will help as you try to understand this passage. (By the way, This is not going to be the main thrust of my message. So the five points I'm going to give you here are just introductory; this

is not the outline of my message. This might be a long introduction. But I think it's essential to look at this incident from God's perspective, and this is not an easy passage to deal with, so I want to be careful not to just jump over the questions I know many of you have.)

So here are five introductory points:

First, its OK to be shocked and appalled by this. What you're seeing is divine judgment in action, and judgment is *supposed* to be terrible--in the King James sense of that word. It's supposed to strike us with a certain sense of dread, and fear, and horror. Psalm 47:2-3: "**For the LORD, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. He shall subdue the people under us, and the nations under our feet.**" Psalm 66:3: "**Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you.'**" Verse 5: "**Come and see what God has done: he is [terrible] in his deeds toward the children of man.**"

Second, we are not permitted to discard portions of Scripture just because they offend us. The fact that this is a difficult passage is a reason to study it that much closer. It is not justification for setting it aside or doubting this portion of God's word. If you reject passages of Scripture because they offend you, you have in effect made your own thoughts a higher authority than God's Word. Scripture should mold our thinking, not vice versa.

Third, it is a serious mistake to suppose that God's judgment of the Amalekites in any way contradicts His love. If that were the case, you could ultimately conclude that *all* judgment contradicts love and therefore God cannot be both loving and the judge of evil. That kind of thinking is precisely the rationale being used to attack the biblical doctrine of eternal punishment in the so-called evangelical movement today. But God's judgment and His righteous anger over sin are in no way a contradiction of His love. It is a serious mistake to set God's love against His righteousness as if they were incompatible. The two attributes are both essential facets of His glory, and when our minds are no longer clouded by our own sin, we will admire God's judgments without any suspicion that they somehow detract from His goodness. In the meantime, we have to remember that it is sinful for us to doubt God's goodness just because at times He executes righteous judgment.

God is a God of immeasurable mercy and love, but there are many times when He expressly authorizes human agents to carry out His judgment *without* mercy. For example, when a policeman uses deadly force to kill a criminal in the commission of a crime, he does so with God's express approval. Romans 13:4: "**He is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.**"

So an officer of the law can kill a rapist if necessary to stop him in the act, or a judge can sentence a murderer to death. Nothing obligates them to show any mercy--and in some cases it would be unrighteous to do so. The "turn-the-other-cheek" rule deals with petty personal offenses, not situations where an agent of divine judgment is called upon to "**[carry] out God's wrath on the wrongdoer**"--in the words of Romans 13.

In the case of the Amalekites, God had *already* showed amazing mercy and restraint, and that is why so many generations passed between the time of Moses, when God first swore He would judge them, and the time of Samuel, when He finally carried out that threat. **"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but [He] is patient"** (2 Pet. 3:9). So don't imagine that God's delays signify apathy; and don't imagine that His righteousness contradicts his love.

Fourth, this was a righteous judgment, and more than deserved by the Amalekites. The Amalekites were nomads who descended from Esau, according to Gen. 36:12. They lived in the southern regions of Canaan, and they were openly hostile to the Israelites. This was the tribe that attacked Israel at Rephidim in the book of Exodus. That was the battle when Aaron and Hur had to hold up Moses' arms (Exod. 17:8-13).

The Amalekites ambushed Israel from behind, so that they could massacre the people who were most feeble. This was a cowardly and savage thing to do. If you remember the account of that battle, God supernaturally intervened, so that the Israelites routed the Amalekites. After that, God swore to Moses that He would **"utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven"** (Exod. 17:14). In fact, in Deuteronomy 25, God actually wrote it into the Mosaic law that after Israel inhabited the promised land, they would totally destroy the Amalekites. This command was part of the law given at Sinai:

**17 Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt,
18 how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.
19 Therefore when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the**

memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.

The Amalekites were an absolutely wicked tribe. They started wars for sport, and they were utterly vicious in the way they treated their enemies. They used to harass Israel by moving through the cropland with a whole entourage of tents and animals, and they would wipe out everything in their path. Judges 6:5 says, "**they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number--both they and their camels could not be counted--so that they laid waste the land as they came in.**" Evidently they did this on purpose, with full knowledge. God's wrath was so enflamed against the Amalekites that even Balaam, the evil prophet, was forced to prophesy their doom in Numbers 24:20.

So when God commanded Saul to destroy all the Amalekites, He was only fulfilling the vow He swore to Moses. Saul and the armies of Israel were supposed to be an instrument of God's righteous judgment.

And fifth, the thing that made this slaughter of the Amalekites justifiable was that the Israelites had an explicit commission from God to carry it out. We would not conclude that wide-scale slaughter is *always* justifiable in war. Often it is wrong, and that's why we recognize war crimes.

(But just as an aside, let me say, that sometimes in war, non-combatant civilians, including women and children, are justifiable casualties. This was the case in the first Gulf war, when Saddam Hussein placed women and children in military bunkers in Iraq. Women and children were also killed when the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were used to bring World War II to an end. Now I know that some people argue that the a-bombs were unjustifiable, and I don't want to get into that argument. But I will point out that whole cities were leveled, and at the time, given the circumstances, neither world court nor popular opinion at the time deemed it unjust.)

The slaughter of the Amalekites was a similar act of war, but it was even more clearly justifiable, because Saul had an express command of God ordering him to carry it out. The extraordinary wickedness of the Amalekites simply called for extraordinary measures, and God not only *authorized* Saul to destroy the whole tribe, He *commanded* him to do so. This was an act of divine judgment, not merely an earthly nation's human wrath against their enemies. And so we need to keep those things in mind.

Now, let's move on with the account of what happened. 1 Samuel 15:5, if you've lost track of where we are:

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."

[There was nothing wrong with his doing this, By the way. The Kenites were friendly to Israel. This was the tribe from which Jethro, Moses' Father-in-law came. God would not have rebuked Saul for giving this warning to the Kenites.] **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.

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. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

Now we arrive at the main part of my message. I knew I would have a long introduction this morning, so I have kept the rest of the message very brief. I have three points, and they all describe the deficiency of Saul's obedience. If you're taking notes, these will be easy to jot down: Here's the outline: Saul's obedience was *incomplete*, it was *hypocritical*, and it was *half-hearted*.

Now let me quickly look at these, one at a time:

1. HIS OBEDIENCE WAS INCOMPLETE

Saul's obedience was only partial. It is tragic too, because he easily had within his reach the means to obey the Lord's command to the letter. He was in the midst of a stunning victory. He was easily winning against the Amalekites on every front (v. 7). He was in the process of destroying the Amalekites when something made him stop and pursue his own plan.

Now he certainly fulfilled *most* of what the Lord commanded, but verse 8 says "**he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive**" (v. 8).

Look at verse 9: he also spared the *best* of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good. what he destroyed were the things that were despised and worthless.

Now, on a sheer percentage scale, Saul certainly did a majority of what God commanded him to do. There were tens of thousands of Amalekites, and he slaughtered all but Agag and a few stragglers. But there were enough stragglers to keep the tribe alive, the very thing God had commanded Saul to make sure did *not* happen.

How do we know there were stragglers who escaped the judgment Saul was supposed to mete out? Because we learn from 1 Samuel 30:1-5 that only a generation or so later, the Amalekites had repopulated their tribe enough to be causing the Israelites trouble again. During David's reign as king, a group of Amalekites raided Israel and took

captive several women and children captive--including members of David's own family.

When David tracked down these terrorists, they were celebrating their symbolic victory over Israel. Here's how the Bible describes the scene in 1 Samuel 30:16-17:

"behold, they were spread abroad over all the land, eating and drinking and dancing, because of all the great spoil they had taken from the land of the Philistines and from the land of Judah. And David struck them down from twilight until the evening of the next day, and not a man of them escaped, except four hundred young men, who mounted camels and fled." So it's clear (isn't it?) that by this time in David's reign, just one scant generation after Saul's disobedience, the Amalekites had regrouped and become a significant guerilla-style terrorist force. *That's* why God ordered Saul to wipe them out completely.

Listen to what John MacArthur says about this incident:

The Amalekites make a perfect illustration of the sin that remains in the believer's life. That sin--already utterly defeated--must be dealt with ruthlessly and hacked to pieces, or it will revive and continue to plunder and pillage our hearts and sap our spiritual strength. We cannot be merciful with Agag, or he will turn and try to devour us.

What we learn from this episode of the Old Testament is that partial obedience is tantamount to disobedience, and like any sin, it has severe consequences. The Amalekites' threat remained for many generations in Israel, just because Saul obeyed only partially.

That's point one in the reasons for Saul's downfall: His obedience was partial. Here's point 2:

2. HIS OBEDIENCE WAS HYPOCRITICAL

Let me read more of the account. Look at 1 Samuel 15:10 (and I'll read all the way through verse 23):

The word of the LORD came to Samuel:

11 "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night.

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."

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."

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

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."

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?"

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."

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."

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."

Now, I want you to see Saul's hypocrisy in this account. First, it is obvious from the way he chose what to destroy and what to keep that he was at least partly motivated by covetousness. Verse 9 says they kept all the best possessions of the Amalekites. They were collecting the spoils of victory. This was the very thing God had forbid. They were willfully disobeying the Lord's instructions. This was the very same sin Achan committed, but this time it was a conspiracy that started with the commander-in-chief himself!

Saul's first response is a lie, verse 13. He tells Samuel, "**I have performed the commandment of the LORD.**" But he had not obeyed fully, and he knew it.

Samuel also knew better. I like his line in verse 14. I used to use this one on my kids sometimes: "**What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?**" Saul was trying to hide from Samuel the fact that he had not obeyed completely, but there were so many animals that he could not keep them hidden, and Samuel could even hear the noise of them!

Samuel has caught Saul in a lie. But Saul's response is typical of so many liars: he simply puts a different spin on things and quickly alters his story. *Oh*, he says, *You mean those sheep! I meant to save these to sacrifice them to*

the Lord (v. 15). Yeah, yeah . . . That's it! These were for sacrifice!

Like most liars, Saul was very good at thinking up excuses on the spot, and concocting excuses to explain away his own inconsistencies. Have you ever caught someone in a lie and had them do this? Then they want to talk forever about the minutiae, so they can convince you that they did not really lie.

There was no reason for Saul to save animals for sacrifice here. God had not commanded it. In fact he had clearly forbidden it. Matthew Henry says this:

That which was now destroyed was in effect sacrificed to the justice of God, as the God to whom vengeance belongeth; and for Saul to think the torn and the sick, the lame and the lean, good enough for that, while he reserved for his own fields and his own table the firstlings and the fat, was really to honour himself more than God.

This was sheer hypocrisy on Saul's part.

Notice verse 20. Saul again *insists* that he had completely obeyed the Lord. Now he blames others for the disobedience: "***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. 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.***"

This is a cowardly hypocrisy! Saul is caught in a flagrant act of disobedience and all he can do is make excuses and blame others. Real repentance humbly admits wrong. True repentance makes no excuses and lays no blame. This is sheer hypocrisy.

God wastes no time with Saul. God, who knows the heart, knew that this was a lie. All of this stuff about wanting to sacrifice to the Lord was merely pretense. It was hypocrisy. Saul did not care what the Lord wanted, and he

proved that by his impartial disobedience. Now Saul was only compounding his sin with hypocrisy.

Like most sinners, Saul acted as if he could escape the judgment of God by justifying himself. The truth is that the only way to escape God's judgment is by judging ourselves. **"If we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged"** (1 Cor. 11:31).

Don't miss the significance of 1 Samuel 15:23: To us, Saul's sin looks like partial obedience, tainted with hypocrisy. God plainly calls it what it really is: Rebellion. And he compares it to the sin of divination--witchcraft. Sorcery. The black arts. This sort of sneaky disobedience was so serious that God immediately deposed Saul and his family from the throne of Israel forever. **"Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king."**

Let me quickly move on to my final point. Three reasons for Saul's downfall: 1. His obedience was partial. 2. His obedience was hypocritical. Here's point number 3:

3. HIS OBEDIENCE WAS HALFHEARTED

Reading now, starting at verse 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 worship the LORD."

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."

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."

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.

I have only enough time to point out that Saul is only going through the motions here when it says he worshipped the Lord. This is a half-hearted, mechanical *show* of worship, just as Saul's obedience to the Lord had been half-hearted and incomplete from the beginning.

Here you can really see the indifference of Saul to the things of the Lord. If you read the rest of the chapter you'll discover that Samuel completed the judgment against Agag. Verse 33 says "**Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal.**" I'll let you read for yourselves John MacArthur's comments about that in *The Vanishing Conscience*. Let's just say this was a perfectly just and justifiable act. It was a righteous sentence of divinely-ordered judgment against an unbelievably wicked man.

And if Saul were not so spiritually lukewarm, he would have done this himself. Instead of grabbing Samuel and begging him to reverse God's judgment, he *should* have grabbed Agag and reversed his own disobedience. But it is obvious from this account that Saul's only concern was the loss of his kingdom, not the loss of God's favor *per se*.

Verse 35 says Samuel mourned for Saul. Saul mourned the loss of his kingdom. The rest of his life is a sad tale of unbelievable spiritual decline.

Let me wrap up by saying that halfway obedience is rebellion, and as a sin it is equal to the worst kind of satanic sorcery.

We sometimes salve ourselves (don't we?) with the reassurance that we have *mostly* obeyed God. Some of us comfort ourselves when we take stock of our lives because we think our sins are "little" sins. We reassure ourselves like pharisees that 90 percent obedience is better than the *disobedience* of the publicans and sinners.

Saul's life is proof that the willful kind of *partial* obedience can have the same deadly consequences as full-scale rebellion--especially when it comes from a life that has been blessed with an abundance of spiritual privilege.

All of us have been blessed with incredible privilege, just by virtue of the fact that we can attend a church like Grace. We need to remember that to whom much is given, much shall be required, and ours will be an even greater condemnation if our obedience is only partial, hypocritical, or halfhearted.