
The King's Rejection

1 Samuel 15¹⁴

Russ Kennedy

What if the people are wrong? The problems with democracy...

What if the leader is wrong? The problems with autocracy...

Developing tensions in the story

The monarchy of Israel is under the Word of God...

Subject to the Law of God...

Subject to the prophet of God...

The king of Israel is growing in strength, fear and folly...

He is consolidating his political power and military strength...

He is increasingly struggling with the fear of man...

He is growing more foolish and disobedient as pride and self-centeredness take hold in his heart...

All of this comes to a head in our story. 1 Samuel is a book about the great reversals that God's wisdom, power and providences bring. Here is a sad reversal that begins a long, sad, tragic downfall.

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The Clear Assignment

(v.1-3)

God sends Samuel with a task for Saul.

¹ 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. 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.' "

As One Who must Listen to God

Samuel reminds Saul of the reasons he was asked for and the reason God appointed him king. He was anointed by Samuel. He is under God and God's Word. All through this chapter Saul is commanded by and responsible to God's Word. So Saul is not free to pick his own enemies and his own battles. God is the over Saul who though he is king serves at the pleasure and for the purposes of God.

As One Who must do What God Requires

Saul is sent to execute the judgment of God in the Amalakites. They were descendants of a son of Esau. They had fought against Israel from the beginning of their return to the land. They have been allowed to live up to this point even though they were bent on the destruction of Israel. Now it is time for them to receive the just and righteous sentence of God against their wickedness.

Saul is to utterly wipe out Amalek from the face of the earth. We shudder at the words here. We will see this phrase several times in this text, "devote to destruction." One writer has put it this way:

"Devote to destruction" is one word in Hebrew. It is almost a technical term, sometimes referred to as the "ban," whose precise meaning is much discussed. In this context the term refers to the destruction involved in divine judgment. No one was to be "spared." There was to be no escape. (Woodhouse, p. 261)

This is a great and devastating judgment. It is horrible in our eyes. It amounts to total annihilation of a people group. But God has reached the end of His patience and now His righteous judgment will fall. We must not minimize this.⁵ The Old Testament acts of judgment against nations are there not only actually judge this nations, but also to powerfully teach us how terrific the judgments of God are. No, we as Christians in this age do not execute God's judgment like this. Nevertheless, God does so.

An example of this would be God's judgment on many of the ancient civilizations that now lie in devastated and total ruin. You can see this across Africa. We know what happened to the native peoples of the Americas at the coming of the Europeans. Many of those people groups practiced the most vile sex acts and human sacrifice. So God continues to judge evil nations and people groups even in this age. But again, this is not the responsibility of the church or of God's people. In of the present and future judgment, we take the gospel into all the world to bring about the obedience of faith.

So God has made Saul king and Saul must carry out this mission.

The Incomplete Obedience

(v.4-9)

How will he do? Will Saul do what God has told him to do?

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. 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.

Gathering an Army in Obedience

Saul gathers up an impressive army in order to accomplish his mission. He is serious about bringing overwhelming force in to defeat Amalek. He encamps around the Amalekite fortress.

Warning an Ally in Kindness

Living among the Amalekites are a people called the Kenites. They were the people of Moses' father-in-law, Jethro. They had supported Israel when she came through on their way to Canaan. They had helped provision them and not opposed them as the Amalekites did. So Saul warns them to depart before the attack begins. In this way, he spares their lives.

Sparing an Enemy in Covetousness

He "devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword." Annihilation. Destruction. Total. All. Not just the military but the civilians as well. The hillsides and plain from Havilah to Shur are strewn with the baggage and bodies of the Amalekites. All that was useless and worthless the Israelites destroyed.

Except... Saul, leading the people, spares the Amalekite king and the best of the flocks and herds. Hebrews scholars point out that this is not Saul going along with the people. This is the people going along with Saul.

So Agag is taken captive and awaits a uncertain doom. The prime sheep and oxen, best goats and cattle are rounded up and penned. This had to have been a vast herd. And so, disrespect for God's Word in the heart becomes disobedience to God's Word in action.

The Prophetic Confrontation

(v.10-21)

God sends Samuel to confront Saul with his sin.

With A Heart Breaking Mission

(v. 10-12)

¹⁰ 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."

What a remarkable and disconcerting sentence. God regrets, repents, is grieved that He made Saul king. And notice verse 29: *"29 And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret."* And finally verse 35, *"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. "*

It seems to me that God Himself is saying something that He understands can be misunderstood by Samuel and Saul, and certainly by the readers of the book. From these three verses we learn several important things about God.

He is deeply involved in His creation and in the events and people in history. God is grieved, saddened over the disobedience of people. His engagement with us is real and affects Him so that He is emotionally (but never sinfully) responding to the events His purposes and providences have set forth. God does not change in His character, His person, His essential being. But He is happy, delighted, sad, angry, jealous – these words all have no meaning if they are not a response to us. And if they have no meaning, then neither does His love. He loves us – and that includes he experiences the emotions associated with love.

God's regret or grief is not that He has made a mistake or chosen the wrong person or wrong path. It is sadness over the wrong choices and paths His people makes. It is like being saddened by the wrong choices that our children make when we are certain that they will make those choices.

God's regret is not repentance in the sense that He changes His essential purposes or plans. No, they are the reality of His relational interaction with His people *along the trajectory of His predetermined purposes and plans.*

Contra the open theists, these statements are not proof texts that God (1) only knows all possible futures, (2) is moving along with (not in) history as choices are being made and (3) only this makes explanation makes sense of this language. Open theists are not worshipping the God of the Bible. Their god is a figment of their vain imaginations. It is a kind of idolatrous paganism.

Samuel's anger here is most likely against Saul. There is a contrast being drawn. God is grieved and Samuel is angry. Fueled by that anger, he prays all night. And then rises early to obey God.

Along the way to where Saul is, he encounters more sad evidences of Saul's self-centeredness, pride and presumption. As he inquires as to where Saul is, he is told about the monument Saul erected to himself in Carmel. Sigh... Finally at Gilgal Samuel comes to Saul's encampment.

In a Heart-Piercing Dialog

(v.13-21)

The confrontation takes the form of accusatory questions and self-justifying answers.

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."

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."

This text drips with irony.

"I have fully obeyed the Lord."

"Yeah? What's with the all the animal sounds"

"Oh they kept back the best for the Lord."

"Stop talking and listen."

"Okay, speak..."

"When you were small in your eyes, God made you big in the people's eyes. Now, your pride has led you to disobedience. Why have pounced like a lion on the herds?"

"The people wanted to and made me do it. It's their fault... And they did it to offer sacrifices to... **your** God."

Classic manipulation, self-congratulation and blame-shifting. Except Samuel is neither amused nor fooled at all.

The Divine Condemnation

(v.22-23)

Samuel's final question drips with the judgment of God.

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."

Samuel condemns Saul based on three things that true about God.

God Delights in Obedience

Which is better: (1) obey God or (2) offer sacrifices when you have disobeyed? Which one does God enjoy more? God delights in the obedience of His people. This is not saying that we should not deal with our sins. But it is saying that we must not think of God as taking more delight in our confessing of sin than in walking in holiness. Even prescribed religious activity cannot compensate for not believing God's Word in His promises and precepts.

Look at an important connection that Saul has missed. One must *listen* to God **before** one can *obey* God. All through 1 Samuel and particularly in the last 3 chapters we have seen the importance of hearing and heeding the Word of God. For Saul that meant the Scriptures plus the prophetic ministry. For us it simply means the Word of God. Only there does God speak with life-transforming power.

God Denounces Rebellion

Saul's disobedience is rebellion. His rebellion is like witchcraft. It is aligning himself with Satan, the great rebel against God. Saul's sin is no small thing. His presumption is like iniquity and idolatry. The point here is to get across just how bad Saul's sin is. He did not see it as a big deal. And maybe the sin itself was not so big a deal. But sin is always rebellion because it is not believing God's Word in an obeying way.

God Dethrones Saul

Since Saul has rejected God's Word, God has rejected Saul. This stood as a warning to Israel. They must hear and heed God's Word. They must believe in an obeying way. But so must King David when he comes on the scene. And so will the final king.

From this moment on, Saul is a caretaker king. His monarchy is no longer legitimate. Some think that Saul at this point should have abdicated the throne. What happens next in the Scripture is anointing of David. Saul's clinging to the throne and David patience to wait on God sets up the long running conflict between them.

Why is this such a serious situation that it invokes this kind of judgment? Remember the basis on which the Saul's kingship was conditioned.

If you will fear the Lord and serve him and obey his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well. But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king [or fathers]. (1 Samuel 12:14, 15)

"Fear the Lord." But Saul had "feared the people." "Obey his voice." But Saul had "obeyed their voice." ... This whole king business began with the people demanding a king (1 Samuel 8:19) and the Lord's direction to Samuel to "obey p 275 their voice" (1 Samuel 8:22). Now we see where "obeying the voice of the people" has led. The king who was appointed by "obeying their voice" has failed precisely because he "obeyed their voice" (1 Samuel 15:24). (Woodhouse, pp. 274-275)

The Vain Regret

(v.24-31)

Saul responds, not in genuine repentance but in vain regret. It is important to read the whole paragraph together.

In a Professed Repentance

(v.24-25)

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." ²⁶

He is taken alone this sounds like genuine repentance.

He acknowledges his sin. He has disobey the Lord and words (sound) of the prophet.

He asks for pardon, release from the guilt and condemnation of his disobedience.

He seeks to be restored to Samuel and to bow down before the Lord.

These are the right words and the right sentiments.

With the Prophetic Refusal

(v.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."

But Samuel responds with a refusal to return with Saul. Notice that there is clear and compelling reason:

Saul has rejected the Word of the Lord.

God has rejected Saul.

For us, this seems to present a dilemma and raises some questions?

Is every profession of repentance from sin to be accepted as genuine?

Are we allowed or possibly even required to evaluate whether the words of repentance reflect a genuinely repentant heart?

Let me address these questions with some principles to consider.

This text is telling us what happened. It does not tell us what we ought or ought to do. We must be very careful with uniqueness of Samuel as prophet. We are not prophets like Samuel with his role, rights and responsibility.

We must always be poised to forgive the offender. Too often, we are poised to question the repentance and confession because we are not willing to forgive. So our own evaluation ought first to be aimed at our own unforgiving hearts.

There are evidences in the text that Saul was not genuinely repentant. Other than his words, everything he does belies genuine repentance.

He demands the public approval of Samuel.

He wants to preserve his standing before the people.

He refuses to accept the consequences of his sins.

The assessment of Samuel is that Saul's profession of repentance is still a rejection of God's Word. God's rejection of Saul still stands. There is no going back, There is no recovering the monarchy. It is gone.

By the Consequences Rejected

(v.27-31)

That Samuel is right is graphically displayed next.

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.

There is a violence in this scene. Samuel turns and starts to stride away. Saul grabs the lower part of Samuel's robe and jerks with such force that it tears the robe.

Samuel's robe is an interesting highlight in the book. While still a boy, he was brought a new robe every year woven and sewn by his loving mother. His robe becomes a symbol of the kingdom ripped from the clutches of Saul. And finally, it is how Saul recognizes Samuel in the dreadful act of divination in the last hours of his life (1 Samuel 28:14). And Saul will have the embarrassing moment of having his robe cut as evidence of the integrity of another. Does all this have some bearing on the untorn, uncut, one piece of the Lord's robe which was gambled away at the foot of the cross?

You can feel the desperate anger and force of Saul. I can see Samuel just straighten up and turn. Saul stands with the torn piece dangling from his hand. Samuel's eyes flash and his voice thunders with the power of the Word of God. "God has ripped the kingdom from you. God has given to someone else who is better than you." A better and greater will come. He will receive the kingdom. No, it is not Jonathan. No it is not David or Solomon. It will be the best man, the God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ. He has brought

the kingdom which we will receive. Sad news for Saul. Glorious news for the world. When the prince of this world is judged, then kingdom will be delivered into the hands of the Son of Man. Ah, what a stunning, amazing, glorious, incomprehensible, joy filled, song inspiring, worship lifting, suffering enduring day it will be.

The Judgments Executed

(v.32-35)

But first, there must pass many dark hours and times and sunsets of judgment. Two judgments are executed just before the dawn of a newly anointed king.

Against the Condemned Gentile King

(v.32-33)

³² Then Samuel said, "Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites." And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, "Surely the bitterness of death is past." ³³ And Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women." And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

Samuel completes Saul's undone act of judgment. Agag thought he was safe. Saul had spared his life. And now he was going into Samuel's presence. His heart is lifted from bitterly contemplating his death to happily hoping for his release.

Standing there is the prophet of God, robe torn, righteous gaze on this wicked, condemned toad of a king. God has declared the verdict: guilty. God has passed the sentence: death. Now, the king's sword that has made women childless will make his mother childless. Samuel hews Agag into pieces. The wicked king is judged. What God commanded is finally done.

This is difficult for us in our culture, in our New Covenant age. It is even more difficult when we know that some Muslims and Hindus preach and practice this against Christians. Just as God has and will judge the nations like Amalek, He has and will judge individuals like Agag. It is not the role of Christians to do this. Our warfare now is spiritual to pulling down of stronghold of lies, errors and false teaching so that the gospel and truth of God will run free. But make no mistake, there is a dark and dreadful day coming. The High King will execute His righteous judgment against all those who have not believed and bowed to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Against the Rejected Jewish King

(v.34-35)

A second judgment is executed.

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.

Here is a kind of spiritual death. Here is the separation of God's prophet from Saul. Saul is left without the prophetic ministry of the Word. Yes, Saul will have the Scriptures. But he is increasingly isolated from God and from His word. And down, down Saul will go till he pursues Samuel beyond the grave.

Reflect and Respond

Unlike Saul, we want to walk in the obedience that is pleasing our Father:

To worship Christ as the truly obedient King

To obey the Word as fully as possible

To guard against using half-truths to excuse half-obedience.

To guard against pride, self-importance and defensiveness

This text is a telescope that allows us to see some features of the gospel.

God will show mercy even in the midst of judgment.

God will deal with sin and sinners while saving His people.

God's chosen King will delight in obedience and sustain His Kingdom.

Notes

⁵ Moments like this in the pages of the Old Testament must not be avoided. They must not, of course, be lifted out of context and caricatured. Sometimes such terrible Biblical incidents are condemned as "genocide" or "ethnic cleansing." This is to measure the events by modern moral categories, while disregarding the Bible's own evaluation of them. These episodes should remind us that God always has been and still is "the Judge of all the earth" who does only what is just and right (Genesis 18:25). Israel or Israelites could find themselves falling under this judgment (see Deuteronomy 13:12-18; Joshua 7:10-15), just as those to whom this judgment came could seek and find mercy (see, for example, Joshua 6:25). (Woodhouse, 2008, p. 261)