

1st Samuel

Lesson 31

(d) Sparing of Agag and Livestock

We come to the sparing of Agag and the livestock. Verse 9.

“But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.” (15:9)

The LORD had told Saul to destroy everything. Instead, Saul and his soldiers decided to put a value on the spoils of Amalek. They separated everything into two piles, the best and good and the despised and worthless. Then they destroyed the despised and worthless but kept the best and good. In addition, they did not kill the king, Agag. As for the rest of the people of the Amalekites of Havilah, we are told that they were all totally destroyed, every man, woman, boy, and girl. But for sure, the best and good livestock was spared. However, Saul did not fulfill the command of the LORD because he only killed the people in Havilah, but not all the Amalekites in the whole land. Amalekites will still be present in the land in the coming days of David, Hezekiah, and Isaiah.

(i) What the LORD Said

Samuel was not camped with Saul at the time of this task at Havilah. We do not know where Samuel was, probably at home. Nevertheless, he was not so far away that the LORD could not find him. We now hear what the LORD said to Samuel. Verse 10a.

“Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, ‘‘I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.” (15:10a)

Our translation uses the word *regret*. “*I regret that I have made Saul King...*” Today, we define the word *regret* as an *emotion of wishing that a different decision had been made in the past*. But that is not what the word *regret* means in this verse. The Hebrew word is *nacham*, and it expresses the LORD’s sorrow for what Saul had done. As Keil and Delitzsch’s Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament states about this verse, “... this does not express any changeableness in the divine nature, but simply the sorrow of the divine love at the rebellion of sinners...” When we get to verse 29 in this chapter, we will hear Samuel prove that the LORD does not change His mind about anything and does not need to when Samuel says, He “... *will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.*” The LORD knew what Saul would do. He knew he would be disappointed by Saul. The word *regret* in our English does not express the proper definition of the LORD’s meaning. The LORD is sorry that the king He chose to be the first king of Israel did not carry out the LORD’s command. As parents, we know our children. We know their nature. We know the way their mind works. We know how they will react and what they will do when presented with specific circumstances in life. Human nature is funny. Because we know how our children are wired, we rarely rejoice when the child who always does right does right. Oh, at the beginning of their lives, we rejoiced when they did right, but as time passed, right became expected and assumed. However, we also knew the scenarios where we could expect to be disappointed by them. When all the stars aligned in their lives, and they made the wrong decisions, we were disappointed. The disappointment brought sorrow and pain to our hearts. Yet, we knew all along how they would probably respond if faced with certain opportunities and facts. We should not be surprised. We are never really surprised. In fact, if perhaps they made the right decision when we expected them to make the wrong decision, then we would be surprised. I cannot tell you how many stories I have heard in my office where parents came to seek counsel as to how to help their children, and their story began with the words,

"It did not surprise me, but my child" A literal translation of the Hebrew would be better translated, *"I am deeply sorrowful King Saul has turned his back from following My commandments."* That statement shows the intent of the LORD better in the English version.

Before moving on, let me interject that the LORD told Samuel much more than just this. We will hear about the rest of the conversation between Samuel and the LORD when we reach verse 16.

(ii) What Samuel Did

The LORD was deeply sorrowful that King Saul did not follow His commandment. Now we come to what Samuel did. Verse 10b.

"And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night." (15:10b)

May we say here the words of the LORD are not always comforting. We think of the Bible as being a book of comfort to the soul, presenting words that soothe and heal the soul, and the Bible does do that; however, the Bible is also filled with words from the LORD that are meant to churn us within, distress us, grieve us, and therefore, move us to act appropriately as the LORD directs. In this case, the words of the LORD to Samuel distressed him all night long. Notice that the writer tells us that Samuel *"cried out to the LORD all night."* What did Samuel do? He prayed with the LORD all night. I imagine that he could not sleep a wink.

(iii) What Samuel Learned

We come now to what Samuel learned. When the sun arose, Samuel arose. Verse 12.

"Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, 'Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal.'" (15:12)

When the writer tells us that *"Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul..."* it means that Samuel arose from his bed and traveled to visit Saul about his actions. Samuel was more than likely at his home in Ramah. Ramah sat directly on the road from Havilah to Gilgal. Saul should have passed through Hebron, then Ramah, then on to Gilgal. But instead, Saul took the long way around Hebron and Ramah. Instead of taking the regular road through the country, Saul must have taken his men east when they passed through Beersheba to a less traveled road that took him to the eastern side of the mountain range that ran south to north and included Hebron, Ramah, Jerusalem, etc. He was on the downward slopes of the mountain range, which ran into the Dead Sea to the east of the range. He took his men to a town eight miles southeast across the mountain range from Hebron. The town was called Carmel. Do not confuse this Carmel with the Carmel about seventy miles to the north that sat on Mount Carmel. The Carmel in this story is southeast of Hebron and many miles south of Ramah and Gilgal. There, in the village of Carmel, Saul stood a monument, a stone pillar probably, to express his victory. Then, he and his men took the rugged less traveled road that *"proceeded down to Gilgal."* This wording is important. We do not live there. We do not know the terrain. However, the Israelites of Samuel's day knew the landscape, and so will all the Israelites throughout the rest of the Old Testament time. This phrasing in this verse tells us that Saul traveled the rugged road on the edge of the mountain range to the east of Hebron, Ramah, and Jerusalem until he could see Gilgal down the mountain slope in the area east of Jericho. Saul had gone way out of his way to stay away from the home of Samuel. To make matters worse, Saul had dragged along the king of the Amalekites and all the captured Amalekite livestock and had them with him at Gilgal.

(iv) What Saul Said

So, Samuel left his home, heard that Saul was at Gilgal, and met him there. We come to what Saul said to Samuel. Verse 13.

"Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, 'Blessed are you of the LORD! I have carried out the command of the LORD.'" (15:13)

Do you ever just sit back and watch the ways of a sinner? I do. I am always amazed at how sinners posture themselves after committing acts of sin. Saul is a perfect example. To Samuel, Saul said, *“Blessed are you of the LORD!”* Let us pause for a moment and think about the word “blessed.” Do you know what it means? We use the word “blessed” or “blessings” often, but what does it really mean? The word *“blessed”* has two meanings – one when associated with the LORD and one when associated with man. When associated with the LORD, as in this verse, it means *“praised.”* It is an expression of approval, admiration, gratitude, or devotion. All of those words express the meaning behind Saul’s words to Samuel. All four words express how the LORD feels about Samuel. Samuel, you are approved by the LORD, you are admired by the LORD, the LORD has gratitude for you, the LORD is devoted to you. When associated with man, the word means *happy or favored*. *Blessed is the man* means *happy is the man, or favored is the man*. In this verse, Saul speaks of the first definition where Samuel is blessed by the LORD with approval, admiration, gratitude, and devotion. How does this fit with the acts of a sinful man? Sinful men seem to always begin their defense for doing something wrong with flattery. Saul was flattering Samuel when he said, *“Blessed are you of the LORD!”*

After the flattery comes the self-centered statement. *“I have carried out the command of the LORD.”* Watch out for the flattery because the following statement will contain a lot of non-truth-telling. Saul did not tell the truth. He did not carry out the command of the LORD.

(v) What Samuel Said

Samuel was not impressed with Saul’s flattery or his statement. Samuel was not moved in his purpose of addressing Saul because what he heard from Saul’s mouth did not match what he heard in the distance behind Saul. We come to what Samuel said. Verse 14.

“But Samuel said, ‘What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?’” (15:14)

In other words, “if you carried out the command of the LORD, why am I hearing the sounds of the livestock behind you?” The livestock should have been dead.

(vi) What Saul Admitted

Samuel had caught Saul in a half-truth. A half-truth is still a full lie. Remember when we discovered that Saul was a blame-shifter in character? Nothing has changed. He is still a blame-shifter two decades into his reign. Saul was caught. We now hear what Saul admitted. Verse 15.

“Saul said, ‘They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed.’” (15:15)

They, they, they! The people did it. *“... the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen...”* The people did it, not Saul. Then notice what all sinners do when they are caught in a lie. Saul did it the last time when he was blame-shifting. Saul was like all sinners. He tried to turn his sin into a good thing, and the way you do that is by interjecting the name of the LORD your God. Saul’s excuse was that the people did it because they wanted to do something godly with the spoils. It was all their fault. It was all their thoughts. It was all their ideas. Oh, but Saul was not through with his excuse; he had one more thing to add. *“... but the rest we have utterly destroyed.”* Notice that Saul included himself in destroying what was destroyed. *“... we have utterly destroyed.”* Saul was not part of the saving of the best for a good godly religious thing, but he was part of destroying the rest as he was ordered to do. When you see a sinner using flattery, a false statement, blame-shifting, and then taking credit for a partial fulfillment of the LORD’s command, watch out. A sinner is a sinner, no matter how much of the command was fulfilled. If any part of the command is unfulfilled, the commandment is unfulfilled and left undone.

(vii) What Samuel Proclaimed

Samuel was not persuaded by Saul's lie at all. He knew more about the situation than Saul did because the LORD told Samuel all about it the night before. We come to what Samuel proclaimed to Saul concerning what he had learned from the LORD the previous night. Verse 16.

"Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Wait, and let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night.' And he said to him, 'Speak!'"¹⁷ Samuel said, "Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the LORD anointed you king over Israel,¹⁸ and the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.'¹⁹ Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD?" (15:16-19)

The LORD had prepared Samuel fully for this meeting. *"Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel?"* Samuel did not let Saul answer, but the answer was yes.

"And the LORD anointed you king over Israel, and the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.'" Samuel did not let Saul answer, but the answer was yes.

"Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD?" Samuel paused at the end of this question to wait for Saul's answer.

(viii) Who Saul Blamed

It was time for Saul to speak. We hear who Saul blamed. Verse 20.

"Then Saul said to Samuel, 'I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites.'²¹ But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal.'" (15:20-21)

Once again, Saul was a blame-shifter. He shifted the blame to the people. He held his ground. He doubled down. It was the people's fault, not Saul's.