

Two Elephants: The “Ban” and “Regret” of God (1 Samuel 15:1-11, 29, 35)

There is no clear indication of how much time has progressed from the end of chapter 14 and beginning of chapter 15. Regardless, Samuel now joins the narration following his departure from Gilgal (13:15).

Samuel is going to give Saul specific directions (v.3). The LORD has appointed and made Saul king. Consequently, Saul is to answer the LORD through His prophet, Samuel. Saul is not the true king of Israel; the LORD is (9:16; 10:1, 24).

1. The “Ban”

- The “LORD of hosts” is a designated title for the LORD in Scripture that denotes His power, which is often times expressed through His holy war (1:3, 11, 4:4, 17:45; 2 Sam. 5:10).
- Amalek was a grandson of Esau (Gen. 36:12). His descendants were the first people to oppose the Israelites after the Exodus (Ex. 17:8-16; Judg. 3:12-14, 6:3-5, 33, 7:12). They were a nomadic people who predominantly lived in the Negeb and Sinai, as well as in small numbers throughout Ephraim (Judg. 12:15) and the valley of Jezreel (Judg. 6:33). After the victory at Rephidim, the LORD promised to blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven (Ex. 17:14). That promise became a command for Israel (Deut. 25:17-19).
- The Amalekites, during Israel’s wanderings in the desert, attacked the “tail;” the injured and sick, along with women, children, and nursing infants.
- The day of reckoning for the Amalekites has arrived (v.2): they have been placed under “the ban.” This was the practice of dedicating the enemy and valuables to the LORD by killing and destroying everything, and everyone, unless specifically directed by the LORD to do otherwise.
- Before Saul attacked the Amalekites with the 210,000 men, he warned the Kenites of the impending battle. The Kenites were a nomadic tribe with whom the Israelites had friendly dealings (Judges 1:16; 4:11). Saul warned them to evacuate the area and was kind to them, as the Kenites were kind to the Israelites when they came out of Egypt (v.6). Saul did not want the Kenites to be collateral damage over the large swath of territory.
- When the Israelites came to a city, they would offer terms of peace, and give the people an opportunity to surrender (Deut. 20:10-16). However, not all cities and pagan nations were given the terms of surrender (v.17-18).
- The “ban” was issued to Jericho. Rahab and her family were spared only because she had hidden the spies (Josh. 2; 6:16-19). The valuables were to be taken to the treasury at Jericho (gold, silver, iron and bronze). Everyone and everything were to be destroyed. Achan was stoned to death because he disobeyed the “ban.”
- The “ban” was issued to the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:3). Unlike Jericho, there are no exceptions. No treaty is offered because the Amalekites are under the “ban.”

- Is “all people” literally “all people”? Yes (v.8). Saul’s disobedience to the decree of the LORD has forfeited his kingdom (v.19, 26); everyone and everything were to be destroyed. Instead, he kept King Agag alive, along with the best of the sheep and oxen.
- The Amalekites are later mentioned (1 Sam. 27:8-9). They survived.

2. The Immutable One Who Has Regret (15:11, 29, 35)

- Some translations render v.11 as: “I am sorry,” “I repent,” or “I regret.” This verb occurs 29 times in the Old Testament, yet never loses its sense of emotion.
 - Anthropomorphism (attributing human forms and characteristics)
 - Anthropopathism (attributing human feelings or emotions to God)
- The LORD has “regret.” However, His regret is not over an unanticipated or unforeseen detail. He does not have regret because of a lack of foresight and foreknowledge.
- This is a marvelous window into the heart of God: the LORD is not cold, indifferent, or apathetic to our sin. Our sin, in a real way, stirs Him.
- We have regret and remorse only after discovering or acquiring more knowledge in any given situation. We experience this because we have an innate handicap in knowledge, foreknowledge, and power. God is not limited as we are. Not only does he know the future, but he has planned it.
- God’s regret is not like man’s regret. He not only has full knowledge of what would, could, and will happen under any given circumstance or situation, but He has efficacious control over everything that happens in the world, including the “free” actions of His creatures (Gen. 45:5-8; Deut. 3:22, 32:39; Joshua 24:11; Judges 7:22; Psalm 33:11, 65:9-11, 115:3, 135:6-7, 147:15-19; Prov.16:9, 21:1; Isaiah 14:26-27, 41:1-4, 43:11-13, 44:28, 46:8-11, 55:6-11; Dan. 4:35; Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23, 17:26; Ephesians 1:4-5, 9). While people freely choose to sin, they are no less under God’s control.
- Saul’s actions were predetermined. However, this reality does not release him from moral responsibility before the LORD. Saul disobeyed because he wanted to.
- Jonathan truly could have become the next King, but Saul’s willful disobedience at Gilgal forfeited that (12:14-15; 13:13-14). Saul could have remained king if he obeyed the LORD. Instead, Saul forfeited both his future and present kingship.
- God had “regret” or “grief” over Saul’s disobedience as the LORD grieved over the great wickedness of the earth (Genesis 6:7). We see a great movement in the heart of God which has a suffering and emotional pain that is likened to human pain, yet different. His regret is in light of Saul’s own volition to disobey. God has remorse over that which He has already predetermined.
- While God regrets (15:11, 35), He doesn’t in the same way that a man does (v.29). There is a regret of God that is unique and distinct to Him. If we cannot fully understand Him, we must adore Him.