

TORN AWAY

1 Samuel 15:24-35

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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" (1 Sam. 15:26).

There is a passage in the Book of Hebrews that sheds a great deal of light on the situation of King Saul at the end of 1 Samuel 15. The writer of Hebrews is greatly concerned that his Jewish Christian readers not fall away from Christ under persecution. To this end, he recalls Israel's exodus generation, which departed from Egypt with Moses but died in the wilderness because of unbelief. Elaborating on this danger, the writer warns:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm (Heb. 6:4-6).

This is an accurate description of the exodus Israelites, who experienced first-hand the Lord's power, goodness, and glory, yet still did not believe. It is also a good description of King Saul, on whom the Spirit of God had come to equip him for kingship, who was shown the light of truth, tasted God's gifts, and personally encountered divine power. Yet at no time in the long account of Saul's reign do we find that he trusted himself to the Lord for salvation. As a result, the time came when Saul was no longer able to be brought to repentance, so that the Lord turned his back on the man Israel had demanded as king. The judgment that had long been warned finally fell on Saul, and even as he tore the skirt of Samuel's robe, the prophet declared to Saul: "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” (1 Sam. 15:28).

SAUL’S SUPERFICIAL REPENTANCE

Having failed to obey the Lord on an earlier occasion (chapter 13), Saul was given a new opportunity. Samuel had brought him God’s command to exact the Lord’s vengeance on the Amalekites. The entire nation was to be devoted to destruction, with all the people and livestock slaughtered and destroyed in a just, divine judgment. Saul attacked the Amalekites, and then congratulated himself and went at Gilgal to await Samuel’s praise. But the prophet arrived amidst the bleating of sheep and lowing of oxen, which along with the captured Amalekite king proved Saul’s failure to obey God’s instructions. When Saul pleaded that he had spared the choice livestock to make an offering to the Lord, Samuel memorably replied, “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22).

In the face of Samuel’s blistering rebukes, Saul realized that he must confess his sin. “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. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the LORD’” (1 Sam. 15:24-25). On the surface, we might be satisfied to note most of the essential elements of true repentance. Saul said the key words, including the straightforward confession, “I have sinned.” He admits that he had “transgressed the commandment of the Lord,” and he pled for pardon and restoration.

Yet for all these positives, there remains doubt as to the sincerity of Saul’s repentance. One clue is that neither Samuel nor the Lord seemed to accept it as genuine. Augustine commented, “While to the human ear the words were the same, the divine eye saw a difference in the heart.”¹ John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteous-

¹ Augustine, “Against Faustus, a Manichaeon,” in John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT vol. IV (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2005), 258.

ness.” But Saul’s confession receives neither praise nor forgiveness. This suggests that his repentance was superficial and insincere.

Another bad sign is that Saul did not confess his sin until Samuel’s insistent accusations had left him with little choice. He confessed because he was caught – the bleating sheep and the Amalekite king provide irrefutable evidence of his disobedience. This circumstance does not necessarily invalidate Saul’s confession – after all, David confessed and was forgiven after being confronted by the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 12:13) – but it is not the best start to a true repentance. How much better is any confession when it is prompted by inner conviction rather than public exposure.

A third bad sign is that Saul shows a strong orientation to Samuel and his opinion rather than a focus on God. “I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words,” he tells Samuel (1 Sam. 15:24). Likewise, Saul’s plea for forgiveness and restoration is made to Samuel, not to God: “Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the LORD” (1 Sam. 15:25). In contrast, David prayed to God, “Against you, you only, have I sinned” (Ps. 51:4). This does not mean that David denied the harm his sins had done to other people. But he was so consumed with his offense to God that nothing else could be considered before confessing to the Lord.

Fourth, note that even as Saul confesses, he makes excuses for his conduct. The unfortunate event happened “because I feared the people and obeyed their voice” (1 Sam. 15:24). In contrast, when David confessed his sin he added that God was “justified in your words and blameless in your judgment” (Ps. 51:4). “I deserve to be condemned” may not be easy for us to say, but those who truly confess their sin acknowledge their personal guilt before God.

Finally, note that Saul lacks concern for God’s offended honor and the practical harm of his sins, but focuses only on his own restoration to honor and authority. This comes through clearly after Samuel has rejected Saul’s empty confession, and Saul replies, “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” (1 Sam. 15:30). Cyril Barber comments: “The confession... was not so much the result of inward conviction as it was an evidence of Saul’s fear of

losing the acclaim of the people.”² Contrast Saul’s plea with that of the penitent son in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal, who argues for his loss of status rather than his right to retain it: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants” (Lk. 15:18-19).

The point of this analysis is not that we should practice how better to perform repentance, in order to increase our odds of being forgiven and restored by God. Instead, the point is to show what constitutes true and genuine repentance, which is the only kind that God accepts. True repentance is motivated not merely to escape the consequences of sin but by conviction over the sin itself. True confession is made to the Lord himself and seeks God’s forgiveness by the blood of Christ, believing God’s promise of salvation (1 Jn. 1:9). Genuine repentance makes no excuses for the sin, but pleads only to be restored, without concern for worldly honor and positions that might have been lost by the sin. Proverbs 28:13 advises us as to the benefits of such true repentance: “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

SAUL’S FINAL REJECTION

Samuel, speaking for both himself and the Lord, categorically rejected Saul’s superficial confession: “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’” (1 Sam. 15:26). After Saul’s first disobedience, the Lord denied him the prospect of a long-lasting dynasty. Jonathan, his son, would not become king because of his sin (1 Sam. 13:13-14). But now Saul is himself rejected as one who serves on God’s behalf as king over Israel.

As is true throughout the Bible for those who do not know God’s grace, it is Saul’s own words that condemn him. He says, “I feared the people and obeyed their voice” (1 Sam. 15:24). But that is precisely the opposite of what God’s kings were supposed to do. During Saul’s commissioning in chapter 12, Samuel warned him to

² Cyril J. Barber, *The Books of Samuel*, 2 vols. (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1994), 175.

“fear the Lord,” yet by his own admission, Saul had “feared the people.” Saul was to “obey his voice” (1 Sam. 12:14), but instead he “obeyed their voice.” Thus, as Benjamin Franklin remarked: “He that cannot obey, cannot command.”³

Having rejected Saul, Samuel turned to go away. But Saul, desperate, “seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore” (1 Sam. 15:27). We can imagine the tragic scene. The same Saul who only recently was going about building monuments to the glory of his kingdom now clings to the robe of the prophet who has just removed him from office. Samuel saw the tearing of his robe as highly appropriate to the occasion: “Samuel said to him, ‘The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day’” (1 Sam. 15:28). Numbers 15:38-39 commanded Israelites to weave tassels into the corner of their garments, to remind them to “remember all the commandments of the lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes.” By tearing off one of these tassels from Samuel’s robe, Saul “dramatically symbolized his breach of the Lord’s command.”⁴ Having torn away God’s command, Saul would now be torn away by God’s hand, which is precisely what Samuel had earlier warned Saul against (1 Sam. 12:15).

Not only would the kingdom be torn from Saul but it also would be given to another, “a neighbor of yours, who is better than you” (1 Sam. 15:28). These words form a transition in 1 Samuel, as from this point forward the narrative will focus on the calling and rise of “the man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14), who is “better than” Saul, namely, king David. Samuel says that David is “better than” Saul after he has earlier explained that obedience is “better than” sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22). As we will learn, David was far from a perfect man, but he was a man of obedient faith, and this made all the difference between David and Saul.

There is another difference between Saul and David, namely, the source of their kingship. Saul was anointed king when the people rebelled against God’s rule through the judges (1 Sam. 8:8). But David, in contrast, is a king whom God provides for himself (see 1

³ Cited in Barber, *1 Samuel*, 175.

⁴ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 174.

Sam. 16:1). This difference is probably reflected in the statement that Samuel adds: “the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret” (1 Sam. 15:29). In the previous study I pointed out that here Samuel argues that while God could regret having made Saul king, God’s remorse is not like human regretting. God is not a man, that he should change his mind or repent, even though the Lord did respond to the situation of Saul’s kingship with holy remorse – the very sentiment it deserved.

But verse 29 seems to refer most directly to Samuel’s declaration of David’s kingship. Unlike Saul’s reign, which originated in the word of men and thus did not endure, David’s reign originated in the sovereign will of God and therefore God’s commitment to David’s house will be unshakable. Whereas Saul’s human-based kingship remained conditional before God depending on Saul’s performance, the “Davidic kingship would rest on God’s unconditional commitment.”⁵ This statement is born out in 2 Samuel 7, when God grants his covenant to David, promising to “establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:13). As Psalm 132:11 states, “The LORD swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back.”

We might see Saul as representing the principle of God’s law and of works. Set forth by the voice of the people, Saul would be accepted by God so long as Saul obeyed God’s commands. David, on the other hand, speaks for God’s gospel grace, and is thus upheld not by his own performance but by God’s grace. Jesus speaks similarly of anyone who comes to God not by the law but by means of his gospel: “everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him [will] have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:40).

Saul responded to this news in characteristically worldly fashion: “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’” (1 Sam. 15:30). Knowing nothing of God’s grace, Saul sought only to shore up his public appearance. Samuel relented at this plea, either having compassion on wretched Saul or having concern for the power vacuum that might occur was

⁵ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 408.

Saul was deposed before the new king was revealed. “So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the LORD” (1 Sam. 15:31).

SAMUEL’S EXAMPLE OF FAITH AND GODLINESS

Samuel was cut out of an entirely different cloth than King Saul, as is made plain at the end of this chapter. Whereas Saul concerned himself only with his own public reputation, Samuel looked to the Lord as “the Glory of Israel” (1 Sam. 15:29). This reminds us of God’s promise to a later generation: “I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the LORD,” of faithful Jerusalem, “and I will be the glory in her midst” (Zech. 2:5). This same idea should be evident among God’s people today: the glory that men and women should see in the church is not the glory of the preacher’s ability or the fund-raising prowess of the church, but rather the glory of God amidst his people in the power of his Word that is believed and obeyed.

It was with this view of God in mind that Samuel called for the Amalekite king to be brought before him. Whereas Saul had torn off the tassel of Samuel’s robe that symbolized obedience to God’s law, Samuel showed his spiritual commitment by tearing apart the Amalekite king in fulfillment of God’s command. Agag, Samuel’s victim, had hoped that passions had now cooled: “Surely the bitterness of death is past,” he reasoned (1 Sam. 15:32). Samuel reminded him not merely of his peoples’ ancient guilt, but also his personal sins: Agag had “made women childless,” and now “shall your mother be childless among women.” With these words, Samuel hacked Agag to pieces – revealing the terror facing all who face God’s judgment without being forgiven. Agag was violently judged only after a long period in which repentance and faith was held out to him. Likewise God is giving sinners a long age to repent and believe in Jesus Christ for their salvation. Yet when Jesus returns in an hour known only to God, “then his throne of judgment will be set up” (Mt. 25:31-32).

The chapter concludes with information that shows the grace in Samuel’s character. Saul was rejected by the Lord, so the Lord’s prophet no longer sought Saul out. According to verses 34-35, Samuel went his way to Ramah and Saul to Gibeah. Despite the close

proximity between these towns (less than ten miles), “Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death” (1 Sam. 15:35). Yet still “Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Sam. 15:35).

This tells us where Samuel’s heart had been all along. The prophet had never been rooting for the king to fail. He shows us that the true servant of God grieves over those who remain lost in sin, even while sincerely laboring for their future salvation. Gordon Keddie writes, “No true messenger of God loves to bring a message of judgment.”⁶ With Samuel grieving was the Lord himself: “And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel” (1 Sam. 15:35). This shows that it is Christians who look on the lost with compassion and love, eagerly extending God’s message of salvation to sinners, who most truly represent the heart of God to the world.

SAUL’S WRETCHED END

This episode in which Saul is finally rejected shows how wretched the king had become because of his persistent unbelief. We can gauge Saul’s lost condition by comparing his words to Samuel with the words of Pharaoh to Moses after the wrath of God had fallen on Egypt. The Lord’s plagues had temporarily broken Pharaoh’s will, so that he begged the man of God to call off the Lord: “I have sinned against the Lord your God, and against you.” Pharaoh then begged Moses to forgive his sins and asked Moses to plead with God to remove the plague (Ex. 10:16-17). But at no point does Pharaoh plead with God for forgiveness, nor does it occur to Pharaoh to pray to the Lord at all. Similarly, when the angel of death had slain all the firstborn sons of Egypt, including Pharaoh’s, the Egyptian king met with Moses urging him to leave the land. Then, he added, “bless me also!” (Ex. 12:32). Pharaoh had learned the rather obvious point that Israel’s Lord is the true God, but at no point did he surrender himself to the Lord, worship him, renounce his false gods, or even ask the Lord to forgive and bless him. Rather, Pharaoh merely hoped that the men who knew the Lord might arrange a blessing for him.

⁶ Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 149.

Consider, in that light, Saul's words to Samuel. He asks the prophet, "Please pardon my sin," and urges Samuel to come to be with him when he goes through the rituals of worship again (1 Sam. 15:25). Saul begs Samuel to honor him before "the elders of my people" and thus to allow Saul to again "bow before the Lord your God" (1 Sam. 15:30). Saul speaks of "my people" and "your God". He was a calloused politician but not a believer with a personal relationship with the Lord.

Many observers wonder if Saul is an example of a believer who falls away and loses his salvation. The answer is that Saul was never a believer – at no point is there any clear evidence that Saul came to saving faith and knew the Lord – and thus for all his remarkable privileges and experiences he never received salvation, which always comes through faith alone. Saul fell away, not from salvation, but from his outward position of privilege. He thus serves as an illustration for us of the principle taught in Hebrews 6:4-6.

Because he would not confess his sin sincerely, because he would not humble himself before God seeking forgiveness and grace – wanting instead only to redeem his reputation – Saul placed himself in the dreadful condition of apostasy. Saul had seen but rejected the light, had tasted but not taken the heavenly gift, had shared in the Holy Spirit but not been renewed, had tasted the goodness of God's Word but not obeyed it, and had experienced the powers of the age to come but not relied upon the saving grace of God. Hebrews tells us that "it is impossible to restore again" such a person "to repentance" (Heb. 6:4-6), and Samuel thus does not expend any further effort seeking to do so with Saul.

This presents a dire warning to all who profess Christianity but presume upon God's grace. In *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan depicts a man in an iron cage, who once was an outward professor of religion but now was locked in despair. When Christian asked how this happened, the man replied: "I laid the reins on the neck of my lusts. I sinned against the light of the word, and the goodness of God. I grieved the Spirit, and he is gone. I tempted the devil, and he

came to me. I provoked God to anger, and he left me. I hardened my heart so that I cannot repent.”⁷

But what about the eternal security of believers? Did not Jesus say that believers “will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn. 10:28)? But this security is only for believers. Those who do not believe have no such grounds for assurance of salvation. But did not Paul write that “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6)? Yes, but this is only true of a work begun by God. Saul’s reign was a work begun by unbelieving Israel. God’s preserving grace is promised to those who are born again to a true and living faith. The Saul who refuses to treat with God, who excuses his sin, and who wants only the worldly benefits of what religion can give him is not and never was a believer, and therefore is not saved.

We need the Bible’s teaching of the assurance of salvation for those who believe. But we also need the warning of King Saul, lest we harden our hearts against the gospel and give full vent to our sinful passions. Just as we need to hear Jesus say that “I will lose nothing of all that [God] has given me” (Jn. 6:39), we also need to read the apostle’s Paul exhortation that we are saved only “if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Col. 1:23). Great promises of eternal salvation are given to the elect of God, but the mark of the elect is faith in Christ and his gospel. None who harden their hearts in unbelief may take refuge in the biblical teaching of assurance. Instead, they should heed the grave warning of King Saul, and the commentary of Hebrews 6:4-6: “It is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened... and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance.” Above all else, then, let us never harden our hearts against whatever light God has given us.

Cyril Barber tells of meeting a woman at a church where he had been the visiting preacher. She told him all about how incredibly active she was in the church and then shared her distress over her spiritually lax husband. She also confided to having been attracted to another man she had met at her children’s school. “He’s a Christian, a

⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 31.

widower,” she explained. “I’ve seen him a few times and cannot but think how happy I would be if... well, you know... if I were married to him instead of Stan.” Being the visiting preacher enabled Barber to be direct: “Have you been sinfully involved with this man?” he asked. “Yes,” she admitted, then recounted all her active service in the church which surely ought to grant her the right to this one, understandable indiscretion. Barber sought to reason with her from the Scriptures as to the folly and sin of her thoughts and actions, but without effect.

Years later, Barber returned to the church and he asked the pastor about the woman. It was a sad story. She had divorced her husband and married the widower. Stan and their children stopped going to church and had a very difficult time in the years that followed. Meanwhile the woman and her new husband had joined a different church where they sang in the choir. It lasted a few years, until her new husband divorced her. This led to her disappearance from church and a drunken car accident that took her life. Her original husband and children came back to the church to have a quiet and private burial service.

What was the key moment in this terrible progression? It was when this Christian woman saw and understood the Word of God but hardened her heart to reject it. She had her reasons and her motives. So she rejected the truth that God had shown her and fell into a depravity from which she found no repentance.

Is it ever too late for someone to repent? Clearly it was for Saul, just as Hebrews says is possible for those who reject the light that they have seen. But the Scriptures hold out the promise of forgiveness and salvation for all who come to Christ with their sins. The promise stands, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). John exhorts us, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9). But do we repent? On this question hinges our eternal destiny. The Christian faith is not a religion for people who do not sin. But it is also not a religion for those who will not repent.

Samuel knew – perhaps by God’s revelation – that Saul was too far gone, so he reached out to him no more but only grieved. We do not know this about anyone. So we must continue to extend gospel grace

to hardened hearts. Paul urged Timothy, “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25). He writes in Galatians, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). This is our lesson from Saul’s wretched end. As the writer of Hebrews urges, “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:12-13).