

To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice

1 Samuel

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Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as we look to your word, we again would ask that you would grant us the grace to hear not the words of men but the words of God; that we would hear Christ speaking to us; that our hope would not be in men or the wisdom of men or the words of men but in you. And we ask, Lord, that you would bless us with the grace to hear and believe. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Please be seated.

Oh, this is a bittersweet, bitter bittersweet chapter. It's bitter for the obvious reasons, we see the rejection of God and God's rejection of the king. It's sweet in that it all the more points us to our need of a king who is better than Saul and that king is obviously Jesus. But this morning as we want to look at this, I want to begin by saying that one of the key thoughts here is the need to hear. We need to hear the word of the Lord. We need to hear the word of the Lord concerning vengeance and we need to hear the word of the Lord in terms of the priority of obedience. But the word "to hear," the Hebrew word "sh'ma" which you might recognize from Deuteronomy 6, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one." Hear, O Israel, sh'ma, or shema, maybe you've heard it pronounced that way, occurs at least eight times in the first 24 verses of 1 Samuel 15. The key idea here is to hear, to hear something about God and to hear something about how we must respond to doing his will, and the consequence for failure to do so.

As one writer put it, that a covenant king's first priority, he must submit to Jehovah's will, and he went on to say this is the matter of this chapter. In order for us to have a king over the people of God, he must be one who submits to the will of God, and when you think of the Gospel records of the life of Christ, remember the magi come and say, "Where is he who is born the King of the Jews?" And Jesus teaches the parables of the kingdom and how often Jesus will say of himself in the Gospel of John, "I only say that which my Father has told me to say. I only do that which I see my Father doing." He says, "My meat and my drink is to do the will of my Father." And so what we have here is the beginning of a beautiful historical narrative that shows us how important leadership is but that we for the sake of our souls, for the sake of our families, for the sake of this

congregation, we need not a smart man, a wise man, a good-looking man, a handsome man. I'm all those things and more. No, we need somebody who is flawlessly obedient to God. Christ must be the King of our soul. Christ must be the King of our family. Christ must be the King of this church for no one else is fit, no one else is able, no one else is capable to do that which is necessary to redeem, preserve, protect, and defend the souls of the people of God.

So I want to highlight for you the use of the word "hear" or "listen." It's translated several different ways in this chapter, some of which you would naturally pick up in just your regular English translations, especially in verse 4, but in verse 1, "Samuel said to Saul, 'The LORD sent me to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore, listen,' listen, shema, "listen to the words of the LORD." Here it is God's will for Saul to hear and to listen. Now by listening he is not simply saying hear it physically. It does include that, but even we, and this will help us with some of the other translations of this word that are coming, we in English talk about hearing in ways that go beyond just the physical thing of hearing words. You know, maybe a parent has instructed the child to do something and say, "Would you please go clean your room," or whatever, and the kid doesn't move. The kid is only three feet away from mom or dad, "Would you please go pick up your room," and the kid doesn't move and after a few moments the mother or the father turns, "Did you hear me?" The question really isn't, "Did you physically hear me," but "Did you understand me?" Because if you heard and understood, you would know to get your sorry rear end out of that seat playing that video game and go pick up your room, right? "Did you understand?" And the evidence that you heard and understood is that you have obeyed. So there's a linkage to this word, hearing and obeying. You can't say, "I've heard and understood," if you have not obeyed. As a friend of mine used to say, "To know and not to do is not to know." To know and not to do is not to know. To hear and not to obey is not to have heard and understood, again not physically but with our hearts and our souls.

Now this word "to listen" or "to hear," it comes again in verse 4 and it's the third word in my translation, "Then Saul summoned the people." It's the same word. This word "to listen" is going to be translated "obey" later in the chapter is now here called "summoned." The king has summoned the people. He's called the people. What is a summons? You've been called. Maybe you were summoned to appear before a court, the court has called you and you'd better show up. Here the king of Israel has said, "Come to this place to have a meeting," and Israel must obey and they do and they come.

Now the word will appear again down in verse 14. God has given Saul specific instructions to kill everything. We'll talk a little bit about that later but God has told Saul to go to the Amalekites and utterly, verse 3, destroy them; to spare no one and to spare nothing; to wipe out everything; to turn the city of the Amalekites into a parking lot. It all goes. Nothing's left. And Saul doesn't do that. 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?'" Here the word translated "listen" in verse 1, translated "summoned" in verse 4, is now translated "hear" in verse 14, now used with more of that kind of physical, that I'm physically hearing something.

Saul says, "I did what was asked. What do you mean I haven't fulfilled the commandments of God? I've done all that I was supposed to do." Then Samuel says, "Why do I hear sheep bleating in my ears? Why do I hear cows lowing?" Isn't it interesting that Saul does two things very quickly: he shifts the blame to the people, verse 9, "But Saul and the people spared Agag," then it says in verse 15, "Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep.'" He was involved and then all of a sudden it's the people. And how many times do I point out to you and I did this this weekend with Michael's wedding, the sons of Adam do exactly what Adam did, "It's not me who sinned, it's the woman that you gave me." And here we see Saul is a good son of Adam. God spoke to Saul just as God had spoken to Adam. There is nothing in the first two chapters of Genesis that would tell us that God ever spoke to Eve. Maybe he did. Maybe he didn't. I'm not saying whether he did or he didn't, all I'm saying is there is nothing in Genesis 1 or Genesis 2 that says God spoke to Eve. He spoke to Adam, "Do not eat of the tree in the center of the garden." God had spoken to Saul. He didn't speak to the people. And God said to Saul, "Utterly and completely destroy them." And he didn't.

Then over in verse 19, "Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD." This is our word to listen, to hear, to summon, shema. You did not "obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD." When God says, "Do this," and we don't do it, it's evil. We're going to come back to that but we must come to grips with the real definition of sin. Then in verse 20 it says, "Saul said, 'I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission,'" but he didn't do what God asked him to do. Then twice in 22, "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices As in obeying?" That's our word. Listen or to hear, to summon. "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey," that's our word again, "is better than sacrifice."

So whatever else the chapter is about, it's about hearing and hearing has consequences, and to hear the word of the Lord and not do the will of the Lord is evil. So with that as the backdrop, the idea of the importance of hearing, I want to look at just two points: the hearing of God's vengeance and the priority of obeying.

God has given Saul the command to go and utterly destroy the people, the Amalekites, and in doing so he has put them under what is often called a ban. You know that the word "holy" as I've told you many times, the primary meaning of the word "holy" is "to be separate." Secondly, it's purity. But to be holy is to be set apart for a particular function, like the illustration I often use will be the vessels in the temple. Why are the vessels in the temple called holy vessels? Why is the temple called the holy temple? Because they did not use the temple for worship in the morning and bingo at night.

I remember when I went to Haiti many years ago, at night you could hear the Voodoo drums where I was. You could hear the Voodoo drums off in the distance at night and that was a little creepy. The missionary that I was with would say that the same Catholic priest who offered the Mass in the morning at the Catholic church would himself also

offer the Black Mass in the same building at night, and that's what we were hearing with the beating of the drum.

Something that is holy is set apart for a singular purpose. The temple of God was set apart for the right worship of God. The vessels were set apart. You didn't drink the drink offering at the temple and then use the same cups for going to your favorite sports rally later that day.

When I grew up, there was something of that in our home. As a kid, the living room, though my parents would never have used the word holy, was holy because you were not allowed in our living room. It was reserved for company. No one went into the living room for any reason except for mom to go maybe get some dishes. It was reserved for a particular purpose, company. Even the dog wasn't allowed into our living room and so it was always nice. There was no dog hair on the furniture. The carpet looked fresh and clean. The furniture is all fresh and fluffy. Anyway.

So the word "holy," I've been too long there, I'm going to move on here. "Holy" means "to separate off," but it talks about in verse 21, "devoted." "But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD." There the word "devoted" is also a parallel word to the word "holy." It is the word "cherem" or we might come into our language as the word "harem." What was a harem? A king might have a harem and we often think of a king's harem as a bunch of ladies and we think oftentimes of it as being a guy who just, you know, has lots of lovers or something. Well, whatever the moral aspect of a harem was, the idea is these women have been set apart for the king and no one else is allowed to touch them. They have been separated off. But in the way the Bible will use that word that we might say "harem," the "cherem," is "to banish and devote to a ban; to put under a ban." Much like the king, these women are under a ban, you can't have them. Where God separates out his people and calls them holy and says, "You are to be holy for I am holy. You are not like the nations." In the New Testament, we are strangers, we are aliens, we're not to be like this world. Our attitudes, our actions, our ethics, our relationships, our time, everything about us is to be different than the world and to be measured by God who is different than the world.

To put something under a ban by God was also to set them apart for a specific role and that was destruction. God could put something under a ban and call it holy. God could put it under a ban and call them cherem. He could put them apart, separate them off for his purpose of glory in blessing, or he could set them apart for the purpose of glory to destroy them. And he says in verse 2 and 3, his purpose here is putting the Amalekites under a ban for destruction. Verse 2, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

So back in Exodus 17, we are told about as Israel is coming up out of Egypt, they haven't even gotten to Mount Sinai yet, and the Amalekites launch a sneak attack from behind and try to kill Israel. That was 300 years earlier and now God back in Exodus, God had said and God says in Deuteronomy, "I will punish the Amalekites," and now 300 years, the judgment has come due. As Martin Luther liked to say, "The wheels of God's justice turn slowly but they turn fine." The wills of God's justice will destroy that which is wicked and evil. One commentator said some people in their yards put a sign, "Beware of the dog." He says God has put a sign in his yard that says, "Beware of the flock. You touch my flock and I will touch you."

That's an important message for us because it's actually part of the Gospel and this will play into the sermon we're going to preach tonight out there in Valley City from Psalm 137 and I can't wait to preach tonight. I hope it all comes together really well, but I'm more and more, I'm thinking this is a Psalm that we need to be singing on a regular basis. It's wonderful.

But turn to the book of Isaiah. When we think of the Gospel, so often we think of the Gospel as the good news of salvation, and it is that; we think of the good news of the forgiveness of our sins, it is that; but we have often truncated the Gospel by only making it good news for the believer, it's also bad news for the unbeliever. In Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news," there's our word Gospel, "To bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives And freedom to prisoners; To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD." Then we stop there. We ought to put a period there to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, period. But there is no period. "And the day of vengeance of our God;" semicolon, "To comfort all who mourn." The Gospel is good news to those who confess their sin and with broken and contrite heart surrender to God and say, "I have sinned. I have gone after my own way. I have not kept your word."

When the sinner stands in the mirror of the law of God, what's the reflection that he sees? You know, we all like to look in the mirror. You know, I was getting ready to do the wedding and I stood in the mirror and made sure my hair is looking good, my tie is straight, which half the time it isn't, and whatever. You know, how am I looking? When you look into the mirror of the law of God, what do you see? I'm pretty good. I'm pretty good. If you look into the law of God and you're thinking you're looking pretty good, then the Gospel is really bad news for you because the vengeance of God is about to fall upon you. It may take 300 years but it will fall, and when it falls, it will fall hard and it will break and destroy whoever and whatever has stood against God and his people.

You look into the mirror of the law of God and you see a sinful man or woman and that sinful man or woman is you. I have not loved God with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind and all my strength. Not even for one second. That's what I see. Then the Gospel is good news. God separates off sinners, some to salvation to make them holy and conform them to the image of Jesus Christ, and he takes other sinners and he sets them apart under a ban to be destroyed. The question you need to ask yourself this morning is which of the two groups are you in?

The Amalekites were under the ban because they had touched the people of God and had damaged and hurt and killed them, and God's just judgment is coming back 300 years later and paying their fine in full. So what we ought to take away from that and say, "Who am I? Am I really of the house of Israel or am I of the house of the Amalekites? Am I doing the will of God or am I ignoring the will of God? Do I hear and obey?" This is what gives us hope. Even as Isaiah says, this is part that gives us hope, that the vengeance of God will come. It's what will give us comfort and part of what I will preach on tonight.

I don't know about you, but as I tried to watch some of the news this week and I saw the state of affairs of our own government and I sat there and I thought, "This is what we've come to? This is what is called the shining light on the hill in the world? The place where people want to come? Where a government that is limited for the freedom of people, this is what we have?" And I started to feel bad and discouraged and then I stopped, "Wait a minute, this is not my government. This is not my home. I'm a citizen of heaven. I have been set apart for the people of God. This is what earthly kings produce."

And God's just judgment was upon the Amalekites and some will read a passage like this and say, "Oh, isn't this genocide? Look, the God of the Bible is terrible, wicked. He has all of them killed." He's only bringing about just judgment. You know, the one thing you're never allowed to say in conversation anymore is, "You know, that sounds like Hitler." Whenever you try to evoke the name of Hitler, people say you've already lost the argument. But when Hitler and his generals, of course Hitler is dead by the time the Nuremberg Trials came, but when Hitler and his generals were tried at Nuremberg and they were put to death, did anybody say, "Oh, that shouldn't have been. They should have spared them. Those poor German generals, they didn't really know what they were doing." Did anybody say they should not be put to death? All God is doing in this passage is giving the Amalekites exactly what they have earned. The wages of sin is death. We have been told. We have been warned and if you will not do the will of God, you will be under the ban of God and the just judgment of God will fall upon you. The point of this chapter is to tell us something about the just vengeance of God and we see it come against the king of Israel himself.

I want to talk a little bit in the closing minutes about the priority of hearing, the obedience. God had given Saul a specific task to do, "Bring my justice to the Amalekites for what they did to Israel," verses 2 and 3. Now the judgment comes and Saul doesn't do it. Now let's take a moment and think about that. What is God's assessment? How does God assess the action of Saul? Well, God says, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands." The number 1 thing we learn about the priority of hearing and obeying, let's call sin what it really is. We substitute the biblical language for sin with all sorts of euphemism. Alright, so Saul, he disobeyed. He sinned. But we might say, "He failed to carry out what God had asked him to do. He failed to carry out." What God says is, "he turned his back from following Me." To know what God has commanded us to do and not to do it, God's assessment of that is we have turned our back on him.

Think of the commands of God. Everything from repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, to fail to do that is to turn your back on God. Repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be baptized. That's a command of God. To not do that is to turn your back on God and not follow after him. The command to forgive as you have been forgiven, not forgive but to hold in your heart anger and bitterness towards others is to turn your back on God. To consider the needs of your neighbor as more important than your own is to turn your back on God. To love this life and to love the things of this world that is passing away, God has said, "Do not love the world, the things of the world, the lust of the flesh, the boastful pride of life. Do not love these things." To love them more than Christ is to turn your back on God. Now I stress it that way because sometimes we need a reality check. To lust after a woman other than my wife is not simply, "Well, I struggle with my thought-life." Isn't that what we say? No, it's to commit adultery. "I have anger. I'm a little peeved at Brother So-and-so for whatever." No, that's to violate the sixth commandment, to kill and to have murder. "You know, I'm a little short on cash this week or this month," whatever your giving pattern is, "I really want to go on that vacation to Disneyland and so we won't tithe for a few weeks so we can make sure we've got enough money to go on vacation," is to steal from God.

When you start to put it in the biblical language, it has a different ring to it, doesn't it? But it gets better. He's told that what he's done is evil, verse 19, "Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil," that was supposed to be destroyed, "and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD?" To sin is not only to turn our back on God and not follow him, but it is the doing of evil. But we have nice little names. The ninth commandment tells us not to lie, but "This is a white lie, a little white lie." Doesn't that sound nice? "It's a white lie. It's not a big lie, it's a nice little lie. My wife asked me how I thought she looked and I didn't want to really tell her the truth." Lying is lying and lying is evil and there's just no two ways about it.

But then God's not done describing the sin. Verse 22, "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from being king." What's God's assessment of our sinful disobedience? Well, he calls it rebellion and the sin of divination, insubordination or arrogance, and compares it to the wickedness of idolatry, and he's still just talking to Saul at this point, and all Saul did was have a little mercy. He killed all the people, he just saved the king. He killed all the women and all the children and all the animals, except for the best ones.

Now, let's turn it slightly. What was the excuse? What was the excuse that Saul gave for not completely obeying the word of the Lord? I don't know whether he actually meant this. I don't know whether this was one of those things that, you know, some people are so quick of mind, you ask them a question and they come up with a really quick answer to how to deflect the problem. So whether they actually want to do this or not, I don't know. All we know is what Saul says. Why did he spare all the animals? "So we might

worship God." Why did we fail to do to the letter of the law the killing and the wiping out of all the Amalekites, men, women, children and animals? "So we could worship God." And if there was anything that condemns not just Saul but all of Israel and all of the church in this age, it's right here. When we offer up to God unprescribed, uncommanded worship, it is as the sin of divination, it's as in the iniquity of idolatry, it is to reject God as Lord.

Well, why do we worship the way we worship? "Oh, because we like to. We like that song. We like this practice. We like that." Well, that's great, you've got six days a week to be able to go and do what you like but when it comes to the worship of God, God has demonstrated through story after story, event after event, that he doesn't really care for us offering him up things he hasn't asked for. Ask Nadab and Abihu, and now ask Saul. There is nothing that we can offer God that God wants more than simple obedience. We must offer to God simply that which he's asked for. One writer put it this way, he said, "Samuel negates sacrifice not absolutely but relatively," meaning he doesn't say that the sacrifice and worship of God, making sacrifice in the worship of God is wrong, it's just in this case it was wrong. He is saying that formal worship cannot be substituted for the obedient life, this writer says. "Formal worship cannot be substituted for an obedient life. External devotions for internal submission. Your Gloria Patri, the Apostles' Creed, Christian luncheons, all-star Bible conferences, none of these matter unless you are keeping Christ's commands." None of it matters. Our worship is vain. As Jesus says in Matthew, I believe it's 15 he says, "You worship Me in vain because you offer up the traditions of men rather than keep the commandments of God."

So we see from this passage two key or three key lessons. We need to hear. Christian, are you hearing God this morning? I don't mean some voice, you know, but hearing as in the mirror of God's law is reflecting back at you and you're getting something of who and what you are. Are you hearing him speak? Secondly, we need to hear about the vengeance of God. Our hope is not in Washington. Our hope is not in Bismarck. Our hope is not in man. Our hope is not in the sons of men. Our hope is not in a political party. Our hope is not in some leader. Our hope is in the King of God's people, the Lord Jesus Christ and his coming kingdom. "Seek first the kingdom of God." Everything else will perish. Everything else goes away.

I gave my life, 16 years of my life to train as an athlete. Much of that time, five hours a day, morning and evening, six days a week, and then it was gone one day and someone, as I was strutting on campus with my Arizona State letter jacket feeling so proud to have the same kind of athletic leather jacket as Sal Bando and Reggie Jackson and Rick Monday and these other world class athletes, somebody asked me, "Did you go to Arcadia High School?" I was humbled. It all passes away. What are you putting your hope and your affection and your glory and your effort into that's just going to fade away like dust in the wind?

Our hope is in the kingdom of God. How do we know that we've put our hope in the kingdom of God? Are we seeking to do his will? "But, pastor, you say we've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God, is there no hope for me because I want to do the will of

God but the more I do it, the more I see I don't?" Yes, there's hope because we have a King who did all of the will of God not for himself but for you, and the broken and contrite heart, as Isaiah 61 says, "Those who are weary, come." Christ has taken our sin and made it his own and because we are sinners, he wraps us in his perfectly white robes of perfect obedience and sets us apart for the people or as the people of God. Are you hearing the Lord this morning?

I forget who I was listening to, I was listening to a sermon some time this week and I thought this was an interesting question. You go through your Bible and you look at all the places where the glory of the Lord has been manifested. Oh, I know, I was listening to Sproul because he talked about the "Holy, holy, holy" passage of Isaiah 6. You go throughout all the passages wherever the glory of the Lord is manifest and you see a variety of responses. Some people fall as dead men. Some people shake and quiver. Many fear, dying. There is a multitude of responses but the one response you never find when the glory of the Lord has been revealed is boredom. Never boredom. And the church gathered around the law and the Gospel and the word and sacrament, the people of God drawing near to heavenly places, in Hebrews 12 to the city of the living God, if you can be bored with all that, that may tell you whether or not you're under the ban or you've been set apart. But take stock because to hear the word of the Lord is ultimately the thing that will judge your ultimate destiny. Have you heard and believe and follow by the grace of God? Or did you hear and ignore and go after your own way? May the Spirit of God give us ears to hear what he is saying to the church.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we acknowledge that we are sinful men and women. We acknowledge, Lord, that even in our best and finest moment we fall short of your glory. Now Lord, we ask that you would give us grace to hear your word and to believe you that we might find hope not in ourselves and not in our righteousness, but in a King who has obeyed, who did keep righteousness and he did so for sinners such as us. Awaken our hearts and minds. Unstop our ears. Give us eyes to see that we might take proper evaluation of our life and find Christ, a wonderful Savior. And those who are asleep in the light, bored in the midst of the glory of God, we pray you would have mercy on them and awaken them even this very moment. In Christ we pray. Amen.