Obedience

Because Saul failed to follow God's instructions, the Lord rejected him as king.

I was counseling one of my seminary students, a student who was tall and handsome, an incredibly gifted and talented preacher. By that time early in his ministry, he had already received far more than his fair share of human accolades. He asked me to mentor him for a while and give him counsel on his life and ministry. But he was greatly concerned because he was failing in the things that really matter. He recognized that his marriage needed a lot of work, and he was concerned that he was not the kind of husband and father he needed to be. Even though he was gifted at preaching, he was horribly lacking in people skills. And to top it off, he found it difficult to have a heart of compassion for his flock, to truly love his people.

I asked him, "Not listening to your press, how does God feel about you?" That's what concerned him. In all his busyness and activity of ministry he had let his spiritual walk slide. "How are you and Jesus getting along?"

In all the cacophony of life, this student neglected to spend time alone with his Master. There was a reason for this. He knew if he spent time alone with God, this student would have to deal with himself, who he had become. He knew that God looks directly at the heart, that God judges people based upon their character, not on their abilities.

Our character is not developed in an instant. It is a series of choices that make us who we truly are. If someone wants to grow in Christlikeness, they must make decisions regarding holiness each and every day. Our session today shows how Israel's first king was dismissed from being king because of his disobedient and rebellious character toward God. He built into his life a pattern of disobedience toward God's commands, and God wanted an obedient servant to lead His people.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 Samuel 12:1–15:35

After the people's demand, God gave Israel a king—Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul was tall and handsome (1 Sam. 9:2) and looked like kingly material. God anointed him to be king over God's people Israel. God empowered Saul with His Spirit to do the task he was assigned to do (10:6,10; 11:6). God promised Saul His divine presence (10:7), the most vital promise of all. And with God's help, Saul won some tremendous victories in battle (11:13; 14:47-48).

The problem was Saul started out a humble man, but the longer he was king the more he believed that he was in charge instead of God. Through a series of arrogant and disobedient acts against the Lord (chaps. 13–15), Saul proved that he had forgotten that God was his commander-in-chief. Saul was to be God's servant—an obedient servant (15:1-6).

Samuel brought an explicit command from God that Saul was to destroy the Amalekites in battle (vv. 1-3). Saul was now the king to exercise the Lord's judgment, to annihilate the Amalekites.

During the battle, though, Saul only fulfilled part of God's command (vv. 4-6). He spared the life of the Amalekite king, Agag, and kept some of the best livestock (vv. 7-9). As a result of this partial obedience, God told Samuel that He regretted making Saul king over Israel. Samuel also grieved Saul's lack of complete obedience.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Partial Obedience (1 Sam. 15:7-11)

God gave the victory but Saul spared Agag the king of Amalek as well as the best of the spoil, only destroying the worthless booty (15:7-9).

VERSE 7

Then Saul struck down the Amalekites from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is next to Egypt.

The Amalekites were an ancient enemy to Israel (Ex. 17:8-16). Deuteronomy describes them as terrorists who preyed on weaker opponents,

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

showing no regard for God (Deut. 25:17-18). They were cowardly by attacking an unsuspecting nation, and the Lord promised to exercise vengeance on them in the future, "I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven" (Ex. 17:14; see Deut. 25:19).

The Amalekites had made themselves enemies of God's people and thus, enemies of God Himself. The Lord declared His judgment on the Amalekites was just (1 Sam. 15:2). They had attacked Israel even before Israel arrived at Sinai (Ex. 17:8-16). It was a dirty attack (Deut. 25:17-19).

Samuel brought to Saul a direct order from God, an important "mission" (1 Sam. 15:18), that Saul was to completely destroy the Amalekites in battle (vv. 1-3). Saul and his army **struck down the Amalekites from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is next to Egypt.**

The method of war to be employed was clearly spelled out in Deuteronomy 20:16-18; they "must not let any living thing survive." To disregard Samuel's direct command was to refuse to honor God's clear word to Saul. As king over God's people, Saul was to exercise God's judgment on Amalek, to put the Amalekites under "the ban" (*herem*), to "completely destroy" everything, a term used eight times in 1 Samuel 15 (vv. 3,8,9[2x],15,18,20, "destruction," v. 21). Anything placed under the ban was strictly off limits to Israel and totally devoted to the Lord.

VERSES 8-9

He captured King Agag of Amalek alive, but he completely destroyed all the rest of the people with the sword. Saul and the troops spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, goats, cattle, and choice animals, as well as the young rams and the best of everything else. They were not willing to destroy them, but they did destroy all the worthless and unwanted things.

Saul may have thought that kings should be given special consideration because he let Agag live, **but he completely destroyed all the rest of the people with the sword.** Saul and his army selectively chose which of the Lord's commands they obeyed and which ones they didn't. To highlight the seriousness of Saul's disobedience, the writer mentioned it twice: **He captured King Agag of Amalek alive** and **Saul and the troops spared Agag.** Saul was ordered to "attack the Amalekites and completely destroy everything they have. Do not spare them. Kill men and women, infants and nursing babies, oxen and sheep, camels and donkeys" (v. 3). Granted, Agag was only one man, but Saul's decision to spare him was a flagrant violation of the Lord's clear command. The term *spare* sometimes is used to mean "to have compassion for" or "to take

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

pity upon." Along with Agag, they also spared **the best of the sheep, goats, cattle, and choice animals, as well as the young rams and the best of everything else.** Again, this was in direct disobedience to the Lord's command.

The writer gives us their motive: **They were not willing to destroy them.** They were displaying willful defiance to the Lord. Instead, **they did destroy all the worthless and unwanted things.** They dedicated these to the Lord, giving Him what was *worthless*. Anything they did not want, they gave to the Lord. All the *best* things they kept. Partial obedience to the Lord's command regarding the ban was not an option.

VERSES 10-11

Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned away from following me and has not carried out my instructions." So Samuel became angry and cried out to the LORD all night.

"I regret that I made Saul king." The Hebrew word for *regret* is an emotional term denoting being deeply troubled or suffering emotional pain. The only other place in the Old Testament where the Lord is grieved over people's actions is Genesis 6:6-7, "The LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and he was deeply grieved . . . 'for I regret that I made them.'" God was grieved over the sin of people and that their sins would bring His judgment. This shows the intensity of God's sorrow over human sin.

In this passage, the term *regret* means that it was a great tragedy that Saul had refused to follow the Lord in obedience, and it grieved the Lord greatly. This by no means makes God capricious or wishy-washy. Instead it reveals God's intense sorrow over sin; He is grieved over a lack of obedience. In other words, Samuel was not the only one who mourned over Saul (1 Sam. 15:35).

God declared that what Saul had done was not just a mistake or simply failure to complete the task. **"For he has turned away from following me and has not carried out my instructions."** In his actions, Saul had rejected his servanthood. He had rejected the Lord from being his King.

So Samuel became angry and cried out to the LORD all night. The Lord had used Samuel in anointing Saul as king, and now God had changed His mind on the matter. Samuel took no glee in Saul's failure, and he would take no glee in performing the task the Lord would now ask of him.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

Saul lost his dynasty (13:13-14) and the respect of his people by his rash oath (chap. 14). Saul displayed deliberate disobedience to the Lord's command, and that finally proved to be his undoing (chap. 15).

Explore Further

Read "Amalek, City of" and "Amalekite" on page 52 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How did Israel's strife with the Amalekites start and how long did it last?

Making Excuses (1 Sam. 15:12-15)

Samuel went out to confront Saul, eventually finding the king in Gilgal. While Saul believed he had obeyed God's commands, Samuel pointed out the livestock that had been spared. Shifting blame to his troops, Saul justified his actions by claiming that the animals had been saved for sacrifices to God.

VERSE 12

Early in the morning Samuel got up to confront Saul, but it was reported to Samuel, "Saul went to Carmel where he set up a monument for himself. Then he turned around and went down to Gilgal."

The Lord had rejected Saul, and the Lord sent Samuel to tell him so. Samuel rose early to go meet Saul only to find that **Saul went to Carmel where he set up a monument for himself.** *Carmel* here is not the mountain in the northern part of Israel but rather a small town in Judah, about seven miles south of Hebron. Nabal and Abigail were from there (Josh. 15:55; 1 Sam. 25:2). Saul had set up a monument at Carmel to commemorate his great victory over the Amalekites, then he went to **Gilgal** to meet Samuel for the sacrifice. *Gilgal* was one of the chief worship sites for Israel (1 Sam. 7:16).

VERSE 13

When Samuel came to him, Saul said, "May the LORD bless you. I have carried out the LORD's instructions."

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

When Saul met Samuel he offered a greeting as if nothing bad had happened, **"May the Lord bless you."** Then Saul brought his report on the assignment that had been given to him, **"I have carried out the Lord's instructions."** Saul was only deceiving himself that he had done exactly what he was commanded. His claim of obedience directly contradicted how the Lord had revealed to Samuel that Saul had turned his back on the Lord's command (vv. 10-11). Saul also refused to be honest about how his and the people's actions (v. 9) had directly contradicted the Lord's clear orders (v. 3). In trying to cover up his sin, Saul tried to make statements in his own defense, revealing that any sorrow Saul may have felt was simply over being caught.

VERSE 14

Samuel replied, "Then what is this sound of sheep, goats, and cattle I hear?"

The noise of the Amalekites' livestock was a dead giveaway of Saul's disobedience. **"Then what is this sound of sheep, goats, and cattle I hear?"** If Saul had indeed carried out the Lord's instructions, there would have been no animal noises because they would have already been slaughtered in the ban.

VERSE 15

Saul answered, "The troops brought them from the Amalekites and spared the best sheep, goats, and cattle in order to offer a sacrifice to the Lord your God, but the rest we destroyed."

Partial obedience is disobedience. Saul tried to explain away his sin. In a lame attempt at his own defense, Saul placed the blame on his people, **"The troops brought them from the Amalekites and spared the best sheep, goats, and cattle."** *They* wanted to do this. *They* wanted **"to offer a sacrifice to the Lord your God."** *They* wanted to make the sacrifice at Gilgal rather than on the battlefield as the Lord had commanded. In a way, Saul was also trying to pass the blame onto God: All of this was necessary because God required the sacrifice. They did not want to approach the Lord empty-handed. But then as an added defense, Saul said, **"the rest we destroyed."**

Ever since the first sin in the garden of Eden people have been trying to pass the blame for their own sin onto someone or something else. Adam blamed the woman, and ultimately God, for his sin before finally owning it (Gen. 3:12). The woman blamed the serpent (v. 13). There is only one

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

remedy for sin, and that is repentance. The first stage of repentance is confession, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The Greek word for *confess* literally means "to say the same thing as," in other words, to call sin what it is, not to try to explain it away.

Explore Further

Read "Confession" on page 328 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What excuses might people today use to justify their disobedience to God rather than to confess it to Him and repent of it?

Humble Submission (1 Sam. 15:16-19)

In rebuking Saul, Samuel emphasized that God had raised Saul up from obscurity to be the king over Israel. Despite the king's justifications, the Lord had provided clear instructions regarding the Amalekites. Still, Saul had chosen to disobey God. He had taken plunder instead of destroying everything, which was evil in God's sight.

VERSES 16-18

"Stop!" exclaimed Samuel. "Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night." "Tell me," he replied. Samuel continued, "Although you once considered yourself unimportant, haven't you become the leader of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel and then sent you on a mission and said, 'Go and completely destroy the sinful Amalekites. Fight against them until you have annihilated them.'"

Saul was slow to catch on how serious his offense was, so Samuel needed to explain it further. **"Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night."** Samuel had received a fresh word from the Lord on the matter, of which Saul was eager to hear.

Saul had earlier described himself as insignificant, "from the smallest of Israel's tribes" (9:21), but Saul should not have forgotten he had **become the leader of the tribes of Israel** by the Lord's appointment.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

"The Lord anointed you king over Israel." So why as the Lord's anointed one and the people's king should Saul be swayed by the opinions of the people, opinions that directly contradicted the Lord's command?

God had sent Saul **on a mission,** so why had he disobeyed Him? God gave Saul a task to do—**"Go and completely destroy the sinful Amalekites. Fight against them until you have annihilated them."** Anything less than complete annihilation was blatant disobedience.

VERSE 19

"So why didn't you obey the Lord? Why did you rush on the plunder and do what was evil in the Lord's sight?"

Saul's sin was blatant disobedience to the Lord's command, **"So why didn't you obey the Lord?"** Instead of completing his "mission," Saul did **evil in the Lord's sight.** "*Didn't . . . obey*" and *"evil in the Lord's sight"* define each other: Disobedience is evil in God's eyes. This is how sin is determined, not by something we "feel" is wrong or something determined by our own human standards. *Evil* is something determined by how the Lord sees things, what is evil in His sight.

Explore Further

Read "Evil" on pages 520–521 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. God is never the source of evil, but He does allow evil. According to the article, what are the biblical reasons for evil? How can God take evil and use it for His purposes?

Final Judgment (1 Sam. 15:20-23)

Saul continued to argue that he had obeyed God's commands, blaming his army for keeping the livestock and insisting that the animals were set aside for sacrifice. Samuel countered that sacrifice means nothing to God without an obedient heart. Rather than obeying God, Saul had rebelled against the Lord's commands. As a consequence, God rejected him as king.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

VERSES 20-21

"But I did obey the LORD!" Saul answered. "I went on the mission the LORD gave me: I brought back King Agag of Amalek, and I completely destroyed the Amalekites. The troops took sheep, goats, and cattle from the plunder—the best of what was set apart for destruction—to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal."

When confronted with his sin (v. 19), Saul owned up to his disobedience only reluctantly. First, Saul tried to explain his disobedience away. **"But I did obey the LORD!"** It all depends on how you define *obey*. In Saul's eyes, he did obey, but he did it his way, thinking that his way was as good as God's way. **"I went . . . I brought back . . . I completely destroyed the Amalekites."** It was the *"I brought back"* part that got Saul in trouble. He was not supposed to bring anything back, much less **King Agag of Amalek.** With anything (or anyone) brought back alive, Saul had not completely destroyed the Amalekites.

The second thing Saul did in his defense was to pass the blame onto someone else. **"The troops took sheep, goats, and cattle from the plunder."** It was the troops' fault. They took the items. The troops wanted to impress God with such an extravagant sacrifice. In Saul's eyes, at least their motives were good. But Saul's view of the matter was not the issue. The only view that mattered was God's.

VERSE 22

Then Samuel said: "Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams."

Samuel sought to help Saul understand the seriousness of the offense by asking: **"Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD?"** By no means was Samuel dismissing the Old Testament sacrificial system given through Moses. Rather, formal worship cannot be substituted for an obedient life. **"Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams."** Formal worship is to be an expression of the state of one's heart, a heart submitted to God's lordship. Samuel's question and assertion fit right in line with what the Old Testament teaches of what true worship is. No one may come before the Lord with a disobedient and unrepentant heart and expect to buy God off with sacrifices. God is not as

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources

interested in the *offerings* as He is the *offerer*. If the Lord has a person's heart, He has everything else.

VERSE 23

"For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and defiance is like wickedness and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king."

Samuel then offered a comparison to make the matter clear. **"For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and defiance is like wickedness and idolatry."** What Saul had done was *rebellion*, willful disobedience to God's authority. It was as serious in God's book as *the sin of divination*. Saul had disobeyed God's command in order to make this sacrifice, which was a deliberate act of rebellion, which was no different than practicing black magic and worshiping pagan idols. It was outright rejection of God's authority. Both are attempts to manipulate God. And this is how and why someone worships an idol.[1]

To reject the Lord's word is to reject His authority in one's life. It is a rejection of the Lord Himself, a dismissal of His kingship. Because Saul refused to acknowledge the Lord as his King, the Lord **rejected** Saul **as king** over His people.

Immediately after this, Saul offered a half-hearted repentance, asking for forgiveness (1 Sam. 15:24-25). Samuel told Saul that the Lord's decision was firm: The kingdom would be torn from Saul and given to someone else "who is better than you" (v. 28). Saul begged Samuel to come back and "honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel" (v. 30). Instead of honoring Saul, Samuel returned and completed the unfinished task, he killed King Agag the Amalekite (vv. 32-33).

Explore Further

Christians are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Yet, obedience to God's commands should be a result of our faith. Can you recall a time in your life when you knowingly followed your own will instead of God's? What were the consequences? Why is it always right to follow God's will no matter what?

1. Paul S. Evans, *1–2 Samuel, The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 171.

© 2026 Lifeway Christian Resources