SESSION 6

Obedience

1 SAMUEL 15:7-23

BECAUSE SAUL FAILED TO FOLLOW GOD'S INSTRUCTIONS, THE LORD REJECTED HIM AS KING.



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Cooking shows are all the rage and come in many forms. Some are competitions between bakers. Others are step-by-step how-tos. Can you imagine someone deciding, "I don't want to do that part. It won't matter if I don't preheat the oven." Or "I'm going to use baking soda rather than baking powder. They're probably the same thing." The result could be a disaster.

CAN YOU THINK OF SITUATIONS OR PROJECTS THAT REQUIRE FOLLOWING STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS? WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THOSE STEPS AREN'T FOLLOWED?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

The roots for this study go back to the exodus. After successfully and miraculously crossing through the Red Sea, God's people headed toward Mount Sinai. Before reaching that destination, they stopped at Rephidim, which is toward the southern end of what we call the Sinai Peninsula. At Rephidim, God miraculously provided His people water from a rock. While there, though, the Israelites were attacked by a group known as the Amalekites. That begs the question: Who were the Amalekites, and what do they have to do with this week's study?

The Amalekites were the descendants of Esau (Gen. 36:10-12). Although they had been a semi-nomadic people, they eventually settled in the northeastern part of the Sinai Peninsula. This was a desolate region that bordered on what would be the southern border of Israel. This was over 250 miles northeast of Rephidim.

The Amalekites engaged the Israelites militarily, attacking the stragglers who were at the rear of the throng of Israelites, meaning the most weak and vulnerable. This unprovoked attack demonstrated that the Amalekites were not beyond engaging in barbaric warfare (see Deut. 25:17-19). Because of their military atrocities, God, in essence, told Moses to mark His words—He would wipe the Amalekites from the pages of history (Ex. 17:8-14).

Although not a definitive connection, archaeologists have dug at Tel Masos, a site about seven miles east of Beer-sheba. Some believe this was the ancient city of Amalek, home of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:5). Signs of habitation from the site fit with the dates of the biblical account. At the beginning of the Iron Age (1200 BC), the location began to grow and develop into a significant trading center.

Saul came to the throne about 1050 BC and ruled for forty years (Acts 13:21). Tel Masos has evidence of habitation until the 900s BC, which fits the timeline of Saul attacking and killing most all of the Amalekites—events in this week's study.



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1 Samuel 15:7-23

7 Then Saul struck down the Amalekites from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is next to Egypt. **8** He captured **King Agag** [A] of Amalek alive, but he completely destroyed all the rest of the people with the sword. **9** Saul and the troops spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, goats, cattle, and **choice animals**, [B] 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. **10** Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, **11** "**I regret** [C] that I made Saul king, for he has turned away from following me and has not carried out **my instructions**." [D] So Samuel became **angry** [E] and cried out to the LORD all night. **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**. [F] Then he turned around and went down to Gilgal." **13** When Samuel came to him, Saul said, "May the LORD bless you. I have carried out the LORD's instructions." **14** Samuel replied, "Then what is this sound of sheep, goats, and cattle I hear?" **15** Saul answered, "The troops brought them from the Amalekites and spared the best sheep, goats, and cattle in order to **offer a sacrifice** [G] to the LORD your God, but the rest we destroyed." **16** "Stop!" exclaimed Samuel. "Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night." "Tell me," he replied. **17** 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 **18** and then sent you on a mission and said, 'Go and completely destroy the sinful Amalekites. Fight against them until you have annihilated them.' **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?" **20** "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. **21** 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." **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**, [H] to pay attention is better than the fat of rams. **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.

Key Words

A. Saul's motivation for sparing the Amalekite king is unclear, but this act betrayed Saul's lack of obedience to God and His commands.

B. Saul and his troops were fine with killing the weak animals, but they were not willing to destroy animals that might hold value.

C. The same Hebrew word also describes God's response to humanity's sin before the flood (Gen. 6:7). It's a strong emotion akin to grief.

D. Through Samuel, God had explained His expectations clearly (1 Sam. 15:3), but Saul chose to obey only part of God's directions.

E. "Grieved" (KJV). The Hebrew wording implies a burning flame. Saul had once burned in anger against God's enemies (1 Sam. 11:4-7). Now he was the cause of such anger and grief.

F. Saul was more concerned with building a legacy than with honoring God.

G. First, Saul blamed the soldiers (vv. 15,21). Then, he tried to justify his actions by saying the animals had been saved for a sacrifice to God.

H. God called for sacrifices, but these acts were never more valuable than obedience.

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EXPLORE THE TEXT

1. Partial Obedience

(1 Sam. 15:7-11)

God expects His people to obey His commands completely.

- **Why did the Lord regret making Saul the king of Israel?**
- **What motivated Saul and the Israelites to get rid of only the worthless and unwanted things? How do you think they justified that choice in their minds?**

2. Making Excuses

(1 Sam. 15:12-15)

We must resist the temptation to justify our actions when we disobey God's commands.

- **What excuses do people use to justify their disobedience to God?**

3. Humble Submission

(1 Sam. 15:16-19)

We should demonstrate humility by submitting to God's plans.

- **What do these verses teach about the importance of complete obedience?**

4. Final Judgment

(1 Sam. 15:20-23)

We should focus on complete obedience to God so we can avoid His judgment in our lives.

- **Why did God impose such a harsh punishment on Saul?**

Apply the Text

Saul received God's message through Samuel. How can we know when God has given us something to do? Is it God's will or our own thoughts? How can we tell the difference? Discuss your thoughts with your Bible study group.

KEY DOCTRINE:
God

God is all powerful and all knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. (See Psalm 139:1-6; Proverbs 15:3.)

BIBLE SKILL:
Reflect on and apply the memory verse for this session.

The memory verse for this session, 1 Samuel 15:22, teaches a critical lesson for living the Christian life. Read it aloud several times in the Bible translation of your choosing. Then, try to quote it from memory. Read it again several more times and then complete the memorization of the verse. How would you rate your daily obedience to God as opposed to religious activities that you engage in? Why is obedience more important that religious motions?

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TALK IT OUT

Focus on 1 Samuel 15:22. In what ways do people substitute religious activity for genuine obedience?

God told Saul to destroy the Amalekites completely, but Saul only partially obeyed—sparing the king and keeping livestock. He made excuses, but Samuel declared that obedience matters more than sacrifice, and God rejected Saul as king. Partial obedience is still disobedience, and God desires complete obedience from the heart.

What excuses do people commonly make, like Saul, to justify disobedience? What do you think God meant when He said, "to pay attention is better than the fat of rams"?

To "pay attention" to God is synonymous with "to obey." It means we take God's Word seriously enough to listen carefully and act accordingly. Paying attention to God means listening with the intent to obey fully—and following through without delay or excuses.

Where are you tempted to practice partial obedience instead of full obedience to God? What's one specific step of obedience you've been delaying, and what would it look like to take that step this week?

Place 1 Samuel 15:22 on your phones or on cards and agree to memorize it together.

Prayer Requests / Notes

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DAILY EXPLORATION

Day 1: 1 Samuel 15:7-11

Underline Saul's acts of disobedience.

Speaking through Samuel, the Lord had instructed Saul to destroy the Amalekites for the way they had opposed the Israelites when they came out of Egypt (1 Sam. 15:2-3). This was a divine directive. God had already declared that Amalek would be destroyed after their first attack on Israel (Ex. 17:14-16). Moses later reiterated this command, urging Israel to "blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven" and then punctuated it with, "Do not forget" (Deut. 25:19).

Saul's actions, however, fell short of complete obedience. He let the king (Agag) live as well as "the best" of all the animals. Saying the Israelites were "not willing" to slay these meant this was an intentional choice. Having made this choice, they got rid of only "the worthless and unwanted things."

Saul had earlier disobeyed God (1 Sam. 13). Fearing imminent military danger, he offered sacrifices—a role reserved for the priest. When Samuel confronted Saul, he became defensive and tried to put the blame on Samuel, saying essentially: You didn't come when expected, the Philistines were so close, I hadn't sought God's favor, "so I forced myself to offer the burnt offering" (13:12). Samuel confronted him for his disobedience. Afterward, Saul meticulously followed God—until now.

What motivated Saul and the Israelites to get rid of only the worthless and unwanted things? How do you think they justified that choice in their minds?

Day 2: 1 Samuel 15:12-15

Note the excuses Saul used to try to explain his disobedience.

Setting up "a monument for himself" was a way of claiming sovereignty over a town or area. Doing this on the heels of conquering Amalek, Saul was claiming full credit for the military triumph. He was basking in the glory of his elevated self-opinion. Yet in greeting Samuel, he attempted to deflect attention away from himself and put the spotlight on Yahweh. Saul mentioned Him twice in two sentences.

Saul seemed to have no awareness of having done anything wrong. Yet, his explanation of his actions was a direct contradiction of what God had earlier said. The Lord told Samuel, Saul "has not carried out my instructions" (v. 11).

Samuel responded to Saul's bravado with a piercing question: Why was he hearing bleating and mooing? Saul was asking Samuel to believe the words he was saying and to ignore the animal noises from nearby.

Saul first blamed his soldiers: "The troops brought them." This contradicted the report that Saul and the troops spared King Agag and the best animals (v. 9). He next tried to justify why they kept the animals: So, we could sacrifice them. In Saul's mind, this had to be the most noble of intentions. Finally, Saul highlighted what he had done right: "The rest we destroyed." He failed to mention that the rest were worthless and unwanted (v. 9).

What excuses do people use to justify their disobedience to God?

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Day 3: 1 Samuel 15:16-19

Consider the accountability that comes with being chosen by God for a mission.

Having heard enough, Samuel commanded Saul to "stop!" How could he speak so boldly to the king? Samuel knew his authority was not his own; he was speaking on the authority of the Lord. Saying that Saul once considered himself "unimportant" meant he had been humble. Some translations render this as "were once small in your own eyes." Saul had displayed this humility when Samuel came to anoint him as king (1 Sam. 9:21). Despite Saul's humility, God—through Samuel—had anointed him as king over Israel. This was a divine appointment. God, ever true to His character, was exalting the lowly and humble. To that elevated position, God would hold him accountable.

Samuel told Saul, God "sent you on a mission." This mission called for focused obedience. Saul's mission was neither negotiable nor up for debate. It had come from God. Saul had tried to place the blame on his troops (v. 15). Samuel, though, wasn't convinced, thus the questions, "why didn't you obey" and "why did you rush on . . . and do . . . evil?" In essence, Samuel said, "Saul, it was you." Although Saul tried to justify his actions, the only evaluation that mattered was God's. This was evil in His sight.

What do these verses teach about the importance of complete obedience?

Day 4: 1 Samuel 15:20-22

Note what God prefers over sacrifices in the life of His people.

Still defiant, Saul declared his innocence. Four times in verse 20, he referred to himself; each instance highlighted how carefully he had followed God's directives. Saul's response showed that he had not believed Samuel's indictment (v. 19).

Though Saul blamed his soldiers, verse 21 spotlights what was behind Saul's disobedience. Speaking to Samuel, he referred to Yahweh as "your God." This was the second time Saul had used this phrase (also v. 15). He could not refer to Yahweh as "my God." This was Samuel's God. He lacked any real connection with the God of Israel.

Saul was convinced Samuel should have been satisfied with his actions. Reserving the best animals for sacrifice and allowing the king to survive certainly ought to have fulfilled his obligation—at least in Saul's mind. However, it did not.

The altar fire completely consumed the animals given as burnt offerings—none remained for the worshipers to share. With sacrifices, though, the worshipers got to eat a portion of the animal. The fat of rams was considered the choicest meat. This part always remained on the altar until completely consumed in the fire. The Israelites saw this as their gift to God (Lev. 3:16-17).

God was not saying He no longer desired sacrifices. Rather, His greater desire was that His people obey (see Hos. 6:6).

Where have you failed to obey God completely?

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Day 5: 1 Samuel 15:23

Circle the ways Saul sinned against the Lord.

Saul committed two offenses. "Rebellion" refers to deliberately refusing to obey a rule, law, or expectation. "Defiance" has to do with being stubborn or insubordinate.

Divination was the use of signs, omens, fortune-telling, witchcraft, or the occult to obtain information or to help affect the future. These practices involved looking for supernatural guidance beyond what God would provide. Divination is strictly prohibited in Scripture (Deut. 18:10; 2 Kings 17:17). The word "idolatry" here is plural. Its roots likely come from the tradition of having household gods (Judg. 17:5). Thus, both rebellion and defiance put a person's self-will on the throne, replacing God's rightful place.

Samuel previously explained to Saul that being king was contingent on his obeying God (1 Sam. 12:14-15; 13:13-14). Saul failed miserably. Thus, God rejected him as king.

When Saul saw and realized that the kingdom of Israel was going to be taken from him, he eventually repented (15:24,30). But Samuel, rather than Saul, was the one who ultimately did as God commanded—he destroyed Agag, the Amalekites' king (vv. 32-33).

Why did God impose such a harsh punishment against Saul?

APPLY THE TEXT

Examine your own life. Are there areas in which you are "almost" following what God wants you to do? What changes do you need to make so you are following fully?

JOURNAL

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