

A King After His Own Heart

1 Sam 15:1—16:13

So far, our exploration of Saul's kingship has not exactly been stellar. In chapter 13, Saul loses his chance for a lasting royal dynasty after having offered a hasty, impatient sacrifice and allowing fear to rule him rather than trusting in God's timing. In chapter 14, he loses the respect of his people after having made a hasty oath that results in his soldiers breaking the Law and nearly resulted in the death of Saul's own son, Jonathan. Now, in chapter 15, he loses his kingdom. Samuel tells Saul that God has torn his kingdom from him and has given it to someone else. The rest of First Samuel records the spiraling decline of Saul's reign (and his sanity) and the rise of another king, one after God's own heart, who will take his place.¹

So, let's explore what exactly happens that causes Saul to lose the kingdom finally and forever. What could he possibly have done that was so very bad in God's eyes? I'll be reading through portions of our passage today, and you are welcome to follow along in your Bibles. I'll be using the New Living Translation. We'll begin in verse one of 1 Samuel 15.

One day Samuel said to Saul, "It was the Lord who told me to anoint you as king of his people, Israel. Now listen to this message from the Lord! ²This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies has declared: I have decided to settle accounts with the nation of Amalek for opposing Israel when they came from Egypt. ³Now go and completely destroy the entire Amalekite nation—men, women, children, babies, cattle, sheep, goats, camels, and donkeys."²

Okay, we have to pause here. There's a crucial concept being communicated within these first few verses, and it's one that we are highly uncomfortable with today. This is the ancient concept of *haram*, which is the act of *totally destroying something in an act of devotion to God*. This is what God tells Israel to do when they enter the land of Canaan—to enact *haram* on all the people of Canaan in response to how the people of Canaan have been violent toward the land. Now, regrettably, this command has been used by Christians to justify holy war and genocide for thousands of years; that is a terrible misunderstanding of what *haram* was really all about. In order to understand what's going on here, we must realize a few things about the ancient world in which Saul and the Israelites lived.

First, tribal violence and conquest was extremely common at this time; it was how nations asserted their power—and not only their own power, but also the superior power of their gods. The collapse of the Hittite empire in the Late Bronze Age resulted in a power vacuum

¹ Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 218.

² 1 Sam 15:1–3

in this part of the world, and there was a desperate play for survival by each people group that lived in the land—the Canaanites, Amalekites, Amorites, Jebusites, Hivites, Perizzites, and Kenizzites (just to name a few). Each tribe tried to assert their dominance over the others. The historical context doesn't make this sort of violence right; it just is what it is.

Second, the wars between these various tribes and nations were always understood as battles between their gods. When the Canaanites beat the Philistines, for example, it was understood that Baal was more powerful than Dagon. In honour of their god's supremacy, the ancient people would totally destroy the conquered city as an act of worship to their god. The city was declared sacred to their god and offered up as a sacrifice in gratitude for their victory.

That's very uncomfortable for us today. What this context tells me is that YHWH, the God of Israel, worked within the parameters of an ancient worldview to instruct his people how to worship and honour *him*. He used the world as they understood it, only he *rewrote it* with himself as the one and only supreme god over *all the nations*. Theologians call this ancient revelation of God's nature "the Divine Warrior"—YHWH is a God who will fight all other gods and will *always win*. And so, when the people of Israel are victorious over another nation, *YHWH* is declared victorious over their gods. This is a powerful message to the other nations—it tells them, "Turn to this God, or else you too will be destroyed." As abrasive as this might sound to us, it was a legitimate divine message to them; Rahab, the Gibeonites, and the Kenites are just a few of the many people who encountered God like this and decided that they wanted to *join him* rather than be *destroyed by him*.

Third, the Amalekites had been a thorn in Israel's side for about five hundred years at this point. They have harassed and oppressed Israel at every turn in the wilderness, in the land of Canaan, and all throughout the book of Judges, and God has had enough. He casts judgment on them for their insistent oppression and violence toward Israel and the other nations of Canaan. "Enough," he says. The time for their judgment is at hand, and God calls his king, Saul, to carry out God's judgment.

The topic of God's judgment, like the concept of *haram*, is a challenging one. I don't have time to go into all the details that this topic deserves, but I'll just say this: *God's sword of justice always has two sides—judgment and mercy.*

When people—*any people*, not just Israel—refuse to fall in with God's mandate to take care of his earth and to love him and love others, they are deserving of God's judgment because they have decided for themselves what is good instead of doing what *God* has declared good. They have decided to rule themselves, and this rule is usually violent and

oppressive. The powerful lord their power over the powerless every single time. This is deserving of God's judgment. God warns his people of what will happen if they do these things—Leviticus 18 says that the land had become unclean because of the peoples' insistence on doing these detestable things and that the land will vomit Israel out if they continue doing these things, just as it vomited out the Canaanite nations.³

However, if people—*any people, not just Israel*—repent of misusing power and live in harmony with God's commands, then they receive his mercy. The land will protect them, and they will live in peace.

Often, whether you perceive God's justice as judgment or mercy depends on which side you're standing on—if you are the powerful oppressing the powerless, you receive judgment, but if you are the powerless being oppressed, the same action is received as mercy. Let's continue in our passage at verse four.

⁴So Saul mobilized his army at Telaim. There were 200,000 soldiers from Israel and 10,000 men from Judah. ⁵Then Saul and his army went to a town of the Amalekites and lay in wait in the valley. ⁶Saul sent this warning to the Kenites: "Move away from where the Amalekites live, or you will die with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up from Egypt." So the Kenites packed up and left. (*Notice, the Kenites are spared because they lived in harmony with God's commands to treat others with kindness.*)

⁷Then Saul slaughtered the Amalekites from Havilah all the way to Shur, east of Egypt. ⁸He captured Agag, the Amalekite king, but completely destroyed everyone else. ⁹Saul and his men spared Agag's life and kept the best of the sheep and goats, the cattle, the fat calves, and the lambs—everything, in fact, that appealed to them. They destroyed only what was worthless or of poor quality.⁴

Saul follows God's commands. . . but not completely. Unlike our modern sensibilities, Saul has no problem killing women, children, or baby animals. But he spares the king—it was common in those days for the victorious nation to enslave the conquered king as a sort of trophy—and he keeps all the best animals for himself.

And God says, "I am sorry that I ever made Saul king, for he has not been loyal to me and has refused to obey my command." Samuel was so deeply moved when he heard this that he cried out to the Lord all night.⁵

³ Lev 18:28; Zacharias, "The Land Takes Care of Us," 84.

⁴ 1 Sam 15:4–9

⁵ 1 Sam 12:10

When Samuel confronts Saul the next morning, he finds out a couple of things. First, Saul had set up a monument in honour of his victory over the Amalekites. Notice—*his victory*. Saul considers this his own shining moment rather than acknowledging that God had anything to do with it. Saul greets Samuel cheerfully, “Look! I have carried out the Lord’s command!”⁶

¹⁴ “Then what is all the bleating of sheep and goats and the lowing of cattle I hear?” Samuel demanded. ¹⁵ “It’s true that the army spared the best of the sheep, goats, and cattle,” Saul admitted. “But they are going to sacrifice them to the Lord your God. We have destroyed everything else.”⁷

Saul begins digging himself into his own grave. In a shifting of blame that sounds eerily like the man blaming his wife in the Garden of Eden, Saul says, “the army spared the animals! And really, they are for sacrifice so it’s not so bad.” Saul is rather oblivious to the effects of his actions. After all, this is *your* God, not *my* God. Saul has no emotional attachment or relationship with God. Samuel, however, is deeply grieved.

“¹⁹ Why haven’t you obeyed the Lord? Why did you rush for the plunder and do what was evil in the Lord’s sight?”⁸

²⁰ “But I did obey the Lord,” Saul insisted. “I carried out the mission he gave me. I brought back King Agag, but I destroyed everyone else. ²¹ Then my troops brought in the best of the sheep, goats, cattle, and plunder to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal.”

Saul deflects blame, and when that doesn’t work, he redefines God’s command—“*I did obey, see? It’s for sacrifice. Sacrifice is good. Surely, God meant that I should keep the best animals and offer them as sacrifices. That’s what he meant, right?*”

²² But Samuel replied,
“What is more pleasing to the Lord:
your burnt offerings and sacrifices
or your obedience to his voice?
Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice,
and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.
²³ Rebellion is as sinful as witchcraft,
and stubbornness as bad as worshiping idols.

⁶ 1 Sam 15:12

⁷ 1 Sam 15:14–15

⁸ 1 Sam 15:19

So because you have rejected the command of the Lord,
he has rejected you as king.”

Partial obedience is still disobedience.⁹ By deciding for himself what he thought was best instead of obeying God’s instructions, Saul has rejected God. And so, God has rejected Saul as king. It’s tragic, and yet *still* Saul doesn’t fully get it.

²⁴ Then Saul admitted to Samuel, “Yes, I have sinned. I have disobeyed your instructions and the Lord’s command, for I was afraid of the people and did what they demanded. ²⁵ But now, please forgive my sin and come back with me so that I may worship the Lord.”

See now, he says, yes I sinned, but I did it because I was afraid of the people! It wasn’t my fault. Except, we learned a few weeks ago that fear is not a satisfactory reason for disobeying God.

²⁷ As Samuel turned to go, Saul tried to hold him back and tore the hem of his robe. ²⁸ And Samuel said to him, “The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to someone else—one who is better than you. ²⁹ And he who is the Glory of Israel will not lie, nor will he change his mind, for he is not human that he should change his mind!”

Samuel repeats his message—God will give Saul’s kingdom away. It has been decided.

³⁰ Then Saul pleaded again, “I know I have sinned. But please, at least honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel by coming back with me so that I may worship the Lord your God.” ³¹ So Samuel finally agreed and went back with him, and Saul worshiped the Lord.

Saul’s second confession is hardly more convincing than the first. He requests that Samuel honour him in front of the elders and Israel. The wording of this sentence implies that he’s more concerned about saving face than truly worshipping God. The emphasis is not on his repentance, but on whether or not he still looks legitimate in the eyes of the elders as Samuel stands at his side. He still does not claim God as *his God*, but as *Samuel’s God*.

Then, in the final verses of this chapter, Samuel finishes the judgment that Saul could not complete.

³² Then Samuel said, “Bring King Agag to me.” Agag arrived full of hope, for he thought, “Surely the worst is over, and I have been spared!” ³³ But Samuel said, “As your sword

⁹ Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 220.

has killed the sons of many mothers, now your mother will be childless.” And Samuel cut Agag to pieces before the Lord at Gilgal.

³⁴ Then Samuel went home to Ramah, and Saul returned to his house at Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵ Samuel never went to meet with Saul again, but he mourned constantly for him. And the Lord was sorry he had ever made Saul king of Israel.

To us, this is harsh. But remember, Saul had been given a second, and even a third, chance before. When Saul was reluctant and hiding among the baggage, God sent his Spirit upon him so that he could behave as a king and carry out God’s justice against those who insisted on abusing their power. When Saul hastily offered up sacrifices, God took away his dynasty but still allowed him to be king. When Saul rashly vowed that no one in his army should eat anything before he’d had full revenge on the Philistines, God spared the Israelites for disobeying the Law in their desperation and spared Saul’s son from death. But now, enough is enough. God is sorry that he’d made Saul king, just like he was sorry for creating humans in the first place when their wickedness filled the earth the opening pages of Genesis. God and Samuel weep for the defiance of this king who lives for himself—he is a king after *his own heart*.

Notice—Saul does not weep in repentance. He doesn’t even seem to know how terrible his actions were. Shockingly, Saul is compared with the Amalekites and with all those who rebel against God—he has been hardhearted and insisted on ruling himself instead of obeying God, and so he will receive God’s judgment.

God is a just warrior; his justice is judgment, but it is also mercy, and we see his mercy at the beginning of the next chapter, when he anoints David to be Israel’s next king. Unlike Saul, David is neither tall nor charismatic. He’s a shepherd boy, the youngest of his family. Samuel assumes that he’s going to anoint one of David’s brothers to be king, but God tells him, “The Lord doesn’t see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”¹⁰ Remember, God likes underdogs.

We will see that David isn’t a perfect king either. But there is a big difference between him and Saul—when David is confronted with his sins later in the story, he repents, full stop. He doesn’t make excuses, doesn’t justify himself, doesn’t shift blame. He confesses and repents. This is what God sees when he looks at David; this is what it means when God calls for a man after *God’s own heart*. David will be the king, the anointed one, who will consistently return to God, whose heart is attuned to God’s, and who will rule the people

¹⁰ 1 Sam 16:7

with the justice—both judgment and mercy—that God directs. First Samuel 16:13 says, “And the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David from that day on.”¹¹

If Saul’s eulogy was a legacy of shame and erecting barriers between God and his people, then David’s, to this point, is one of hope and breaking down barriers between God and his people. If God was completely silent in chapter 14 when Saul makes a bad oath and bad decisions, then God’s returning presence in these chapters should perk up our ears—God is not finished with this story.

So, what can we learn from this story?

We learn that God is **patient** and wants all people to turn to him, giving them second, third, and fourth chances, even sometimes waiting hundreds of years for them to turn to him! He patiently waits for Saul to return to him, but when Saul doesn’t, God continues his vast plan for redemption through someone who *will* listen and obey.

We learn that when we insist on rebellion and choosing our own way instead of obeying God’s good way to life, we will receive God’s judgment as he seeks to bring **justice** to the world.

We learn that God’s justice is just as often his **mercy**, and that he invites us to be partners with him in bringing justice to our world. He could have ended the kingship with Saul, but he doesn’t. God persistently pursues his people—*this king didn’t work out? Well, that’s okay, because I’ve got another!* Thank God for his mercy, for giving his people another chance and choosing another king who might lead them in worship!

We learn that we, too, when confronted with the ways in which we have skirted around God’s commands, shift the blame to others, redefine God’s commands, or try to save face instead of **repenting**. Here’s a tip: *none of these tricks gain any points with God*. In fact, they are what God defines as *rejecting him*. Doing the “right” religious rituals is absolutely meaningless if they are only for the purpose of making ourselves look good. What monuments are we building to our own honour? What religiosity do we put on to make ourselves look better than the next person? *Meaningless!* God says. *I care about the heart, not outward appearances.*

Sacrifices, tithes, volunteer efforts, and moral uprightness aside, what is *your* heart saying to God? He’s calling you, too, to be a person after *God’s* own heart. To lay aside our pride when we’ve been offended, to honour the person beside us more than ourselves, to make right what has been done wrong, in short, to *repent*. Let’s pray.

¹¹ 1 Sam 16:13