

FIRST SAMUEL

Chapter 15

The Lord Rejects Saul

And Samuel said to Saul, “The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD. 2 Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. 3 Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’” 4 So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah. 5 And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. 6 Then Saul said to the Kenites, “Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt.” So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. 7 And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. 8 And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. 9 But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves [and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction. 10 The word of the LORD came to Samuel: 11 “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night. 12 And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, “Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal.” 13 And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD.” 14 And Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?” 15 Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction.” 16 Then Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night.” And he said to him, “Speak.” 17 And Samuel said, “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. 18 And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, ‘Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’ 19 Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?” 20 And Saul said to Samuel, “I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. 21 But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.” 22 And Samuel said, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.” 24 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. 25 Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow

before the LORD.” 26 And 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.” 27 As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. 28 And Samuel said to him, “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. 29 And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.” 30 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.” 31 So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the LORD. 32 Then Samuel said, “Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites.” And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.” 33 And Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal. 34 Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. 35 And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

15:1–35 The event that occasioned Saul’s rejection. Although no time designation is given, it evidently occurred after the conflicts of 14:47, in a time of relative peace and security. It is likely that David was anointed (16:1–13) shortly after the rejection of Saul (v. 22, 26, 28), thus c. 1025 B.C. (CSB)

15:1 *listen*. Cf Jn 8:31, where Jesus says, “If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples.” (TLSB)

15:2 *Amalekites*. A Bedouin people descended from Esau (see Ge 36:12, 16) usually located in the Negev and Sinai regions (see 27:8; 30:1; Ge 14:7; Ex 17:8; Nu 13:29). (CSB)

what they did to Israel. See Ex 17:8–13; Nu 14:43, 45; Dt 25:17–19; cf. Jdg 3:13; 6:3–5, 33; 7:12; 10:12. (CSB)

15:3 *destruction*. Saul is given an opportunity as king to demonstrate his allegiance to the Lord by obedience in this assigned task. (CSB)

Some commentators refer to this call for destruction as a “holy war.” Yet, outside of that unique situation, God has never given His people the directive to carry out military warfare to destroy enemies. It is far removed from the Muslim concept of jihad. For ancient Israel, it was God’s way of giving His people the land He had promised them and taking it from a people who for centuries had turned their backs on God and engaged in the vilest practices. (TLSB)

15:4 *Telaim*. Probably the same as Telem in Jos 15:24, located in the southern part of Judah. (CSB)

Probably Telem in southern Judah (Jsh 15:24). (TLSB)

two hundred thousand men on foot. Huge force, mustered from all the tribes (with Judah singled out), indicates the need for a large army to defeat the Amalekite threat. (TLSB)

15:5 *city of Amalek*. A settlement of Amalekites, most likely located between Telaim and Kadesh Barnea, possibly the residence of their king. (CSB)

Unnamed Amalekite settlement, possibly where the king lived. (TLSB)

lay in wait. In vast expanses of rocks, hills, and ravines, it would be possible to keep a large force undercover. Ambush was a common form of attack (cf Jsh 8; Jgs 20:33). (TLSB)

15:6 *Kenites*. A Bedouin people of the Sinai, closely related to the Midianites. Moses had married a Kenite woman (see Ex 2:16, 21–22; Nu 10:29; Jdg 1:16; 4:11), and some of the Kenites had accompanied the Israelites when they settled in the land of Canaan (see 27:10; Jdg 1:16; 4:17–23; 5:24; 1Ch 2:55). (CSB)

Bedouin or nomadic people related to Midianites. Moses had married a Kenite (Jgs 4:11), and some Kenites had gone with the Israelites into the Promised Land. (TLSB)

the Kenites departed. Spared because of their “kindness” toward the Israelites. (TLSB)

15:7 *Havilah to Shur*. The location of Havilah is uncertain. Shur was on the eastern frontier of Egypt (see 27:8; Ge 16:7; 20:1). Ishmael’s descendants occupied this area (see Ge 25:18). (CSB)

Lit, “a stretch of sand,” in the northern Arabian Peninsula, or the word could be an altered spelling of Hbr for “the wadi” or valley. *Shur*. Lit, “wall,” wilderness in northern Sinai Peninsula. (TLSB)

15:8 *all the people*. All the Amalekites they encountered. Some Amalekites survived (see 27:8; 30:1, 18; 2Sa 8:12; 1Ch 4:43). (CSB)

Just the Amalekites in this city; the nation of Amalek was not completely destroyed. Under David and Solomon, the Amalekites paid tribute to Israel (2Sm 8:11–12). By the time of King Hezekiah (c 700 BC), few Amalekites remained (1Ch 4:42–43). (TLSB)

15:9 When Israel refused to obey the Lord’s command (v. 3), their holy war against the Amalekites degenerated into personal aggrandizement, much like that of Achan at the time of the conquest of Canaan (see Jos 7:1). Giving to the Lord by destruction only what was despised and weak was a contemptible act (see Mal 1:7–12), not to be excused (see v. 19) by the protestation that the best had been preserved for sacrifice to the Lord (vv. 15, 21). (CSB)

spared Agag. In Est 3:1, the evil Haman is described as an Agagite, either a descendant of Agag or a person having the wicked character of Agag. In sparing Agag, Saul was not being good, but rather disobedient. It may have been an act of pride, in that he could show off the captive king to all the people. (TLSB)

despised and worthless. Keeping the best for themselves, the people destroyed only undesirable livestock. Centuries later, God would reprimand the people of Jerusalem for keeping the prize animals, while sacrificing to Him the “lame or sick” and “what is blemished” (Mal 1:13–14). Today, we do the same when we spend lavishly on ourselves and give only measly leftovers for the Lord’s work. (TLSB)

15:11 *I regret that I have made Saul king*. God used this expression before sending the flood (Gn 6:7). (TLSB)

he has turned back from following me. A violation of the fundamental requirement of his office as king. (CSB)

15:12 *Carmel*. Located about seven miles south of Hebron (see 25:2; Jos 15:55). (CSB)

Not Mount Carmel in northern Israel, but a town in Judah, c 8 mi SE of Hebron. (TLSB)

monument for himself. Saul’s self-glorification here contrasts sharply with his self-abasement after the victory over the Ammonites. (CSB)

Rather than erecting a monument honoring God, Saul set one up for himself, a clear demonstration of how far his heart was from the Lord. (TLSB)

Gilgal. Saul returns to the place where he was inaugurated and instructed in the responsibilities of his office (see 11:14–12:25). This was also the place where he had been told that he would not have a continuing dynasty because of his disobedience (see 13:13–14). (CSB)

15:13 *I have performed the commandment of the LORD.* Here and in v. 20 Saul is clearly less than honest in his statements to Samuel. (CSB)

Saul greets Samuel with a blessing. In his conscience, Saul felt justified for his actions. (TLSB)

15:14 *bleating of the sheep.* Samuel points to the evidence that contradicts Saul’s lie about carrying out the Lord’s commandment. (TLSB)

15:15 *The soldiers ... spared the best ... to sacrifice.* Saul attempts to shift responsibility from himself to the army and to excuse their action by claiming pious intentions. (CSB)

Saul blames the soldiers, when it was his responsibility (v 9). The humility of Saul’s early reign has given way to pride that fails to acknowledge sin. (TLSB)

the LORD your God. Saul’s use of the pronoun “your” instead of “my” here and in vv. 21, 30 indicates an awareness of his own alienation from the Lord (see 12:19 for a similar case), even though he speaks of obedience and the intent to honor God by sacrifice. (CSB)

15:16 From youth, Samuel was God’s spokesman, privileged to hear directly from God His will for the chosen people (cf ch 3). (TLSB)

15:17 *you were once small in your own eyes.* Sarcasm; Saul was obsessed with his own importance, though before coming to power he had truly been humble (10:22). Greg: “When he was little with himself, he was great with God; but, when he appeared great with himself, he was little with God” (NPNF 2 12:15). (TLSB)

15:18 *sent you on a mission.* Samuel underscores the seriousness of Saul’s failure, for he had a mission from God.(TLSB)

the sinners, the Amalekites. Refers to the Amalekites’ obduracy and outright opposition to the true God and His people. (TLSB)

15:19 Samuel asks rhetorical questions designed to solicit from Saul an acknowledgment of sin and a repentant attitude. (TLSB)

pounce on the spoil. Greed caused Saul to disobey the command to destroy the Amalekites and their livestock. (TLSB)

15:20–21 *I have obeyed.* Despite Samuel’s attempt to bring Saul to see his sin, Saul refused to acknowledge any fault.(TLSB)

the people took of the spoil. Again, Saul shifts the blame away from himself. (TLSB)

to sacrifice to the LORD. Even if what Saul said was true, God did not ask for this, but for the destruction of the Amalekites (v 3). (TLSB)

your God. Saul may have said this simply to win Samuel's favor and not necessarily as an expression of unbelief, as if God is Samuel's God but not Saul's. (TLSB)

15:22–23 Samuel's most eloquent words. *to obey is better than sacrifice.* Samuel is not saying that sacrifice is unimportant, but that it should be accompanied by the obedience that flows from saving faith. Luth: "In Scripture faith is called obedience" (AE 30:30). Iren: "The prophets indicate in the fullest manner that God stood in no need of their slavish obedience, but that it was upon their own account that He enjoyed certain observances in the law.... When He perceived them neglecting righteousness, and abstaining from the love of God, and imagining that God was to be propitiated by sacrifices and the other typical observances, Samuel did even thus speak to them" (ANF 1:482). (TLSB)

15:22 Samuel does not suggest that sacrifice is unimportant but that it is acceptable only when brought with an attitude of obedience and devotion to the Lord (see Ps 15; Isa 1:11–17; Hos 6:6; Am 5:21–27; Mic 6:6–8). (CSB)

fat of rams. The fat of sacrificed animals belonged to the Lord (see 2:15; Ex 23:18; Lev 3:14–16; 7:30). (CSB)

15:23 *rebellion.* Samuel charges Saul with violating the central requirement of the covenant condition given to him when he became king (see 12:14–15). (CSB)

Samuel classifies human pride and rebellion against God's commands along with idolatry and its accompanying evils. All have this in common—they look elsewhere than to God's Word for guidance and place their faith elsewhere than in the true God. This is a strong reminder to us that whenever we turn from God and place our trust in something or someone else, it is a form of idolatry. Chem: "[Samuel] shows that in [Saul's] disobedient way the rule he broke was the Second Commandment.... He uses His name in vain" (LTh 2:357) (TLSB)

sin of divination. A serious offense against the Lord (see Lev 19:26; Dt 18:9–12), which Saul himself condemned (28:3, 9). (CSB)

Determining the future by observing natural phenomena, such as the movement of the heavenly bodies, consultation with mediums (ch 28), and other such practices rather than listening to the Lord's Word as delivered through His chosen spokesmen. This was a sin of the Amalekites and of other heathen nations with which Israel came into contact in the Promised Land. Cf Dt 18:9–14. Their rituals were connected with worship of idols (Jer 10:1–10). (TLSB)

you have rejected the word of the LORD. A king who sets his own will above the command of the Lord ceases to be an instrument of the Lord's rule over his people, violating the very nature of his theocratic office. (CSB)

he has rejected you as king. The judgment here goes beyond the one given earlier (see note on 13:14). Now Saul himself is to be set aside as king. Although this did not happen immediately, as chs. 16–31 show, the process began that led to his death. It included in its relentless course the removal of God's Spirit and favor from him (16:14), the defection of his son Jonathan and daughter Michal to David, and the insubordination of his own officials (22:17). (CSB)

15:24 Saul's confession retains an element of self-justification and a shift of blame (contrast David's confession, 2Sa 12:13; Ps 51). Previously (vv. 15, 21) he had attempted to justify his soldiers' actions. (CSB)

Saul's words may well be sincere, yet he qualifies them. (TLSB)

I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Even in confessing, Saul shifts blame. (TLSB)

15:25 *please pardon my sin.* Another confession from Saul. Only God knows the sincerity of Saul's confession, but his subsequent words make it suspect. Cf Ex 10:16–17. (TLSB)

return with me. Saul's greatest concern was not to worship God but to avoid an open break with the prophet Samuel, a break that would undermine his authority as king (see v. 30). (CSB)

Concern comes across as more political and for show than sincere. (TLSB)

15:26 *I will not.* Withdrawal of God's spokesman Samuel from Saul would represent God's rejection of Saul's kingship. (TLSB)

15:27–28 *seized the skirt of his robe.* Saul desperately did not want to lose Samuel, who served as a symbol of God's favor before the people. (TLSB)

it tore ... torn the kingdom. Samuel immediately saw the tearing of his robe as a symbol of something larger, the tearing of the kingdom away from Saul and his family. Samuel apparently wore a distinctive robe, which may have evidenced his priestly and prophetic service (cf 2:19; 28:14). (TLSB)

15:28 *one of your neighbors.* David would ascend to the throne. (TLSB)

15:29 *Glory of Israel.* A title of God used elsewhere only in Mic 1:15, though in Ps 106:20; Jer 2:11; Hos 4:7 he is called "Glory." (CSB)

will not lie or have regret. See Nu 23:19; Ps 110:4; Jer 4:28. There is no conflict between this statement and vv. 11, 35, where the Lord is said to "grieve" that he had made Saul king. God has real emotions (one of the marks of personality). (CSB)

15:30 *honor me now before the elders.* Saul continues to seem more concerned with the perception of others than with his relationship with the living God. We constantly need to take stock in our lives as to the reason we do things (such as attend church). (TLSB)

15:31 *So Samuel turned back after Saul.* Samuel's purpose in agreeing to Saul's request is not to honor Saul, but to carry out the divine sentence on Agag and in so doing to reemphasize Saul's neglect of duty. (CSB)

Samuel was not concerned with helping Saul appear pious before the people, but he wanted to complete the Lord's directives. (TLSB)

bowed before the LORD. Sincerity or insincerity of this act of worship would not be evident to those present (cf 16:7). (TLSB)

15:32 *cheerfully.* May also be translated as "trembling" or "in fetters." (TLSB)

Surely the bitterness of death is past. Expression of false confidence, wishful thinking, or resignation to his fate. (TLSB)

15:33 *hacked.* Samuel was still able-bodied enough to carry out the law of retaliation. Demonstrating the severity of God's judgment, it was a graphic testimony to disobedient Saul. (TLSB)

before the LORD in Gilgal. Before the Lord's altar. (TLSB)

15:34 Tragic and final parting of Saul and Samuel. Although Samuel and Saul lived fewer than 5 mi apart, they never saw each other again. (TLSB)

Ramah. Samuel's home (see 7:17). (CSB)

In hill country of Benjamin. This had been the seat of Samuel's judgeship (7:17) and was where he had anointed Saul king of Israel (10:1). (TLSB)

15:35 *Samuel grieved.* Samuel regarded Saul as if dead (see the use of "mourned" in 6:19). Even though his love for him remained (see v. 11; 16:1), he sought no further contact with him because God had rejected him as king. Saul did come to Samuel on one other occasion (see 19:24). (CSB)

Could mean that Samuel regarded Saul as one who was already dead, but in light of Samuel's character, it more likely means that in his grief he continued to pray that Saul would repent. Bern: "When affection calls us, reason is silent. When Samuel wept over Saul it was by a feeling of pity, and not of approval" (SLSB, p 32). (TLSB)

the LORD regretted. God is all-knowing and perfect in all He does so that His will and decisions are unchangeable (v 29; cf Ps 110:4); from a human standpoint, however, God reacts to human conditions and, in that sense, may change. (TLSB)

Ch 15 One of the most tragic passages in OT history is recorded here—a stark reminder of the seriousness of not listening to and following God's Word. Saul fails to carry out the Lord's command to destroy the Amalekites completely so the Lord will no longer bless his leadership. God's Law is clear and calls for His people's perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed. Through the Law, God calls us to repent. Only because of Christ's sinless obedience and sacrificial death on our behalf can we enjoy His blessings. • Heavenly Father, forgive us for the many times we have not followed Your Word completely. We can never thank You enough for Jesus' sacrifice for our sins. Renew in us daily the will and ability to live for Him who died for us. Amen. (TLSB)