

Obedience

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

1 SAMUEL 15:7-23

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?

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UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

1 SAMUEL 12:1–15:35

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.

As you read 1 Samuel 15:7-23, identify the words or phrases that show Saul's partial obedience, and the excuses he made for partial obedience.

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EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

PARTIAL OBEDIENCE (1 SAM. 15:7-11)

7 Then Saul struck down the Amalekites from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is next to Egypt. 8 He captured King Agag 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, 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 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.

VERSES 7-9

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.

Havilah's location is not known. Many Bible scholars believe it refers to a general region in Arabia. ***Shur*** was the region on Egypt's northeast border. Abraham had lived in this area; Moses stopped here after crossing the Red Sea (Gen. 20:1; Ex. 15:22).

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***.

VERSES 10-11

The only other time we read of the Lord making a similar statement was in Noah's day when God regretted making mankind (Gen. 6:6-7). Whereas in Noah's day, the concern was because "human wickedness was widespread" (v. 5), here His ***regret*** was focused on one man, Saul. That he had ***not carried out*** God's ***instructions*** showed he had ***turned away from following*** Him.

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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?

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.)

MAKING EXCUSES (1 SAM. 15:12-15)

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." 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 to the LORD your God, but the rest we destroyed."

VERSES 12-15

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 likely believed the monument would remind future generations of his greatness.

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Saul 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?

HUMBLE SUBMISSION (1 SAM. 15:16-19)

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?"

VERSES 16-19

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***.

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The fact that the Lord had given this message to Samuel just ***last night*** shows the sense of urgency Samuel felt to deliver this word. He had traveled since morning all the way from Ramah to •Gilgal, a trek of about fifteen miles.

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). Even after being anointed, Saul was still reluctant to lead (10:17-25).

Despite Saul's humility, God—through Samuel—had anointed him as ***king over Israel***. Although Saul had lived in obscurity, he was now the leader of the twelve tribes of 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.

Earlier, Samuel told Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you as king" (15:1). He used the same verb here, saying that 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, the direct result of the actions the Amalekites had taken against the Israelites when they were headed toward Mount Sinai.

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?

FINAL JUDGMENT (1 SAM. 15:20-23)

[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

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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. [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.

VERSES 20-21

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).

Again, Saul blamed his soldiers; they took the animals. We can almost hear him saying, "But Samuel, you don't understand how innocent I am."

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.

VERSES 22-23

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).

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. The Hebrew word is related to pushing or pressing. We might use the word similarly to refer to a disobedient child or uncooperative employee by saying, "He's really pushing it."

Divination was the use of signs, omens, fortune-telling, witchcraft, or the occult to obtain information or to help affect

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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?

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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APPLY THE TEXT

- God expects His people to obey His commands completely.
- We must resist the temptation to justify our actions when we disobey God's commands.
- We should demonstrate humility by submitting to God's plans.
- We should focus on complete obedience to God so we can avoid His judgment in our lives.

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? Be ready to discuss your thoughts with your Bible study group.

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?

Memorize 1 Samuel 15:22.

Prayer Needs

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