

## I Samuel Chapter 15 *“Saul’s Flawed Perspective”*

As Israel’s king, Saul was responsible to lead the nation in fulfilling the will and purpose of Yahweh in harmony with Israel’s covenant with their God. As one particular aspect of that responsibility, Saul was given a task which should have been one that he could successfully accomplish, since all that was required of him was to do precisely what Yahweh commanded him to do. But, in spite of the very specific instructions Yahweh gave him through the prophet Samuel, Saul failed to properly fulfill the mission that was given to him, showing scant regard for both the prophetic word and the awesome institution that was the “*ban*”.

### I. God’s Instructions to Saul: (vs.1-3)

In verse one we read, “*Samuel also said to Saul, ‘The LORD sent me to anoint you king over His people, over Israel. Now therefore, heed the voice of the words of the LORD.’*” The pronoun “*I*” is in an emphatic position in the Hebrew text to stress that God had given Samuel the authority to designate Saul as king, and this implied that Samuel spoke with authority over Saul in the name of God. The Hebrew word translated as “*heed*” literally means to listen, but idiomatically the word carries the idea of paying attention with the intent to obey. Therefore, the use of this word puts the idea of obedience at the forefront of the narrative.

Verses two and three record God’s instructions to Saul through Samuel, “*Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’*” Here, the use of the first-person pronoun “*I*” indicates that God viewed the coming campaign as His, one that was to be accomplished through Saul as His agent. In the title that God used to identify Himself, the term “*hosts*” literally means armies (used for the first time here). This title is always used in the Old Testament by a prophet to introduce an authoritative revelation from Yahweh to His people. As to the Amalekites, they were a nomadic tribal people inhabiting the desert south of Judah in the Negev and Sinai. The Amalekites, like the Edomites, were descendants of Esau (Gen.36:12). They had made themselves enemies of the Israelites following the exodus from Egypt, when they attempted to block the Israelites from crossing into West Asia from Egypt (Ex.17:8-16). They had savagely attacked Israel from the rear, an act that Yahweh decreed at that time would be severely punished. Samuel’s instruction to Saul indicated that Yahweh had determined that this was the time when His people were to execute that punishment. This would be the first time that the Israelites invaded Amalekite territory. The isolated nature of their nomadic existence explains why the Amalekites are not mentioned in any historical account outside of the Old Testament.

In verse three, the Hebrew word translated as “*utterly destroy*” is “*harem*”. The term refers to something that has been devoted exclusively to God, and because of this, it was something that was not to be used or touched by human beings. The term is part of the sacrificial language describing how the Israelites were to worship their God. The specific idea in this word is that certain persons or things were to be completely destroyed as an act that guaranteed that they belonged exclusively to God. This word occurs nowhere else in the books of Samuel except in this chapter, but in this chapter the word is used seven times (vs.3,8,9,15,18,20). The task of harem (referred to in English as the “*ban*”) was a solemn and holy one because the Israelites who would carry this out were functioning as Yahweh’s agents of judgment. Just as there were some types of sacrifices that belonged entirely to Yahweh while others were shared by priests and the ones making the offerings, so some plunder that was taken in a battle on behalf of God was set aside as belonging solely to Yahweh. But, just as a whole burnt offering was entirely consumed on the altar, so the harem (or the ban) mandated total destruction. Since this act of warfare was commanded by Yahweh and since it represented His judgment on Israel’s enemies, the Israelites were on a Divine mission with Yahweh as their commander. Since this would be His war, not theirs, and since He would win the victory, the spoil belonged to Him. By way of illustration, the caution and concern that a modern person would react to something that was highly radioactive pictures the way God expected the Israelites to react to those things that had been devoted exclusively to Him. Such things were irredeemable, and because they were forbidden by God’s command, to take possession of them would result in death. It was this consequence that Saul exposed himself to by not following the instructions for the ban. Although peoples outside the land were normally exempt from this judgment, God had singled out the Amalekites for destruction because of their barbarous and traitorous acts against His people. Therefore, the reason God commanded the destruction of Amalek lay in the execution of retributive justice (Deut.25:17-19). It was not due to the usual reason of preventing syncretism. In Deuteronomy 20:16-18 the “*ban*” is singled out as an important aspect of the Israelite conquest of Canaan.

## **II. Saul’ Execution of God’s Instructions: (vs.4-9)**

In verse four we read, “*So Saul gathered the people together and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand men of Judah.*” Telaim (Telem in Josh.15:24) was in the Negev, about thirty miles south of Hebron, and a few miles south of Beersheba. The city belonged to the tribe of Judah. Most scholars believe that the Hebrew word translated here as “*thousand*” should be rendered by its alternate meaning, “*divisions*”, a general description that was not intended to express a specific number. This would mean that it is impossible to know precisely how many soldiers were involved. The idea seems to be that each clan supplied a division, with the number varying dependent on the size of the clan. Later in history this word came to have only a standardized meaning, referring specifically to the number one thousand. Thus, we are told here that two hundred

military divisions came from Israel and ten from Judah. The large size of Saul's army makes it clear that Saul easily had the resources to fulfill God's instructions. The particular reference to the tribe of Judah was because, being the southernmost tribe, they likely had suffered from raids by the Amalekites and would have wanted to play a prominent role in this offensive.

In verses five and six we read, "*And Saul came to a city of Amalek, and lay in wait in the valley. Then Saul said to the Kenites, 'Go, depart, get down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the children of Israel when they came up out of Egypt'. So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.*" Normally in the OT, the Amalekites are described as nomadic, but here this author associates them with a term that refers to a town or city of some sort, something more substantial than an encampment. Given the overall way in which the Amalekites are depicted in the OT, it seems best to interpret what we read here to mean that this was a city that the Amalekites took refuge in, rather than a city that was theirs, since they seemed to have had no walled cities of their own. In regard to the Kenites, there was a long history of friendly relations between them and the Israelites. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was a Kenite (Ex.18:9-10). The use of the Hebrew word "*hesed*" (*kindness*) does not necessarily imply that a formal treaty existed between the Kenites and the Israelites. The term simply conveys that in the past the Kenites had acted with compassion toward the Israelites, meaning they in no way deserved the same fate as the Amalekites.

In verse seven we read, "*And Saul attacked the Amalekites, from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is east of Egypt.*" The account indicates that at some point in the battle the Israelites overwhelmed the defenses of the city that the Amalekites had taken refuge in. As a result, some of those who survived the assault fled into the country trying to escape. The two sites that are mentioned indicate that the reference is to the entire geographic extent of Ishmaelite territory (Gen.25:18); stretching from Egypt to Arabia. This supports the reference to the large size of the Israelite army, because to carry out an attack across such a broad area would require very large numbers. The site of "*Shur*" referred to Egyptian fortifications at their northeastern frontier.

It is clear that very little space in the narrative is devoted to the military victory itself. This is because it was what happened afterward that was important to the author's point in recording this story, while the details of the battle were not important to his point.

In verses eight and nine we read, "*He also took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.*" Some interpreters suggest that Saul may have taken Agag into custody with the intent of executing him later. It is argued that this is supported by the fact that there is no reference in the text to Samuel berating Saul for leaving this king alive. Other interpreters suggest that

Saul may have applied the ban selectively, believing that kings deserved special treatment. However, both of these suggestions seem to miss the author's point. For in both verses, we are told that Saul did not kill Agag. This repetition means that this choice was deemed to be important by the author. Also, the fateful word in this account is that Saul "*spared*" Agag. This word represents a direct contravention of the instruction that Samuel had given to Saul (vs.3). Therefore, the use of this specific verb was intended to highlight Saul's disobedience of God's instructions to him. The specific reference to the fact that Saul and the people were unwilling to destroy King Agag and the livestock perfectly coincides with what Samuel would later say when he confronted Saul as having sinned, and it reveals from the outset that Saul's claims of innocence and good intentions were a lie. The inclusion of the detail that Saul and the people were "*unwilling*" to destroy the king and the animals stresses the fact that sparing them was a deliberate act of their will. It is likely that when Saul saw the healthy state of the Amalekite sheep and cattle and when he considered the enhancement of his own glory and prestige in bringing back Agag, king of Amalek, as prisoner, he could not resist returning them as public exhibits of his success in battle.

Saul's sin was in showing no respect or regard for the holy mission that he had been sent on, and instead he arbitrarily decided to treat it like any other battle.

### **III. Samuel's Confrontation of Saul: (vs.10-19)**

In verses ten and eleven we read, "*Now the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, 'I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments'. And it grieved Samuel, and he cried out to the LORD all night.*" The Hebrew expression translated as "*has turned back from*" is used elsewhere in the OT to refer to serious rebellion against Yahweh (Num.14:43; 32:15; Josh.22:16-18). Therefore, the use of the expression here indicates that God's evaluation of Saul's choice was that He had acted in willful disobedience to God. In saying that Saul had "*not performed*" His commandments, God was saying that Saul had rebelled against Him, an expression that elsewhere refers to the actions taken by God's enemies (Ps.50:16-17; 119:139).

One question that needs to be answered is what Samuel was expressing as he "*cried out to the LORD all night*"? There is nothing in the text that indicates that Samuel interceded for Saul. Therefore, the most likely meaning is that Samuel poured out his heart to God in disappointment and frustration over the sins of Saul.

Another question relates to how we should interpret God's statement that He regretted making Saul king. Complicating this is that in this chapter we seem to have contradictory statements. In this verse and again in verse 35, the Hebrew expresses that God repented (translated as "*greatly regretted*"); but in verse 29 we are told twice that God does not repent. The answer lies in understanding the basic sense of the Hebrew word. The term refers to a change in attitude or feeling, not a change of mind. In other words, the idea is not that God came to a realization that He made a mistake. Rather, the use of this word, along with the general vocabulary and grammatical structure indicates that what is being expressed here is identical

to what is expressed in Genesis chapter six. In that passage we read that God was grieved at the sight of all the wickedness that mankind in general was engaged in. The language in both passages should not be understood to suggest a change in God Himself but rather indicates an emotional response to choices made by His creatures. The wording is meant to depict the reality of God's interaction with people in the world. These reactions are not random. Rather they reveal a definite pattern that is woven into Scripture. Through this pattern God's evaluation of people's choices are revealed. When people make sinful choices, the consequences often catch them by surprise. However, this is never the case with God. He knows precisely what the outcome will be of whatever people set in motion. In order then for the interaction with His people to be told (people who cannot foresee the future), this sort of language is necessary in order to picture how God relates to them. It conveys the reality that the decision making of human beings is real and reflects actual choices, at the same time it also reveals how those choices are seen from God's perspective. Therefore, when we read in Scripture that God "*repents*" it is expressed in response to a change in the character and conduct of those with whom He is dealing. When people significantly alter the trajectory of their lives, God changes His revelation regarding His plans and purposes for them. That these changes would ultimately take place were always known by God, but those changes are only revealed to people after they have made their sinful choices. We must remember that the use of this language is anthropomorphic, conveying an important truth about God, who is neither impassive nor static, but dynamic in His interaction with His creation.

In verse twelve we read, "*So when Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul, it was told Samuel, saying, 'Saul went to Carmel, and indeed, he set up a monument for himself; and he has gone on around, passed by, and gone down to Gilgal.'*" In this verse we read that after a night spent crying out to Yahweh, Samuel rose and left to confront Saul. As he began his journey, God informed Samuel about both what Saul was doing, and where he could be found. During that time, ancient Near Eastern kings often memorialized a victory with a commemorative stone slab or pillar. These pillars were normally engraved so that everyone would know the significance of the memorial. The engraving would typically offer the details of a successful military campaign and proclaim the suzerainty of a given king over a given area. These monuments tended to glorify (and enhance) the king but additionally were usually intended to elaborate on how the deity of that nation had brought victory to his favored one (the favored one being the king). Saul's monument was at the Judean town of Carmel. Absalom set up a similar monument in the King's Valley (II Sam.18:18). This town was in Judean territory just south of Hebron. This "*Carmel*" is not to be confused with the famous mountain by the same name.

In this account, it is important to note that the monument is said to have been "*for himself*" (in honor of Saul), meaning the primary glory for the victory was directed to Saul rather than to Yahweh. This highlights an ironic detail in the narrative that the reader knows, but that was not yet known to Saul, that while he

was seeking to exalt himself among the people, God's prophet was on the way to give him a Divine rebuke and reveal his dishonor. Saul was particularly trying to curry the favor of the tribe of Judah, and it would make sense that he would leave behind a symbol of a victory that would have been particularly beneficial to the tribe of Judah. Also, Gilgal was a significant place for the confrontation to take place, for it was in Gilgal that Saul's reign over Israel had been confirmed (11:14), and it was also there that the warning about the consequences of disobedience was given (13:13-14). Thus, it was fitting that it would be the location where Saul lost his role as the legitimate king of Israel due to ignoring the warning to be obedient that he had been given on that very spot twice before. The sequence of Saul's actions – performing acts of self-interest prior to those of devotion to God; was reflective of his entire life.

In verse thirteen we read, *“Then Samuel went to Saul, and Saul said to him, ‘Blessed are you of the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD.’”* Saul's statement regarding what he did stands in stark contrast to what God had just said about it in verse eleven. It is likely that Saul was not so much trying to deceive Samuel, but rather that he had deceived himself into believing that he had genuinely fulfilled God's commandment. So, the implication here is that Saul was oblivious to his failure, which highlights his insensitivity and dullness to spiritual things.

In verses fourteen and fifteen we read, *“But Samuel said, ‘What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?’ And Saul said, ‘They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.’”* There is an ironic wordplay imbedded in Samuel's reference to hearing the sounds the animals were making. The Hebrew verb translated as “hear” is the same one that was used earlier in the sense of “obey” in the instruction to Saul. The sense of the wordplay is that the sound of the animals betrayed the fact that Saul, despite the claim he had just made, had not heard (in the sense of obeying) the Word of God. In Saul's response, he demonstrated a willingness to shift the blame from himself to others in order to avoid taking responsibility for the choice he made when confronted by Samuel. The obvious flaw in Saul's excuse was the fact that the men about whom he spoke were supposed to be under his authority, since he was king (the irony is that this points further to how Saul was someone who could never fulfill the role that the Israelite elders envisioned for their king). The fact that he chose to shift the blame indicates already some evidence of the consciousness of his guilt; for if he did not sense that he had done wrong, he would simply have said I brought them. Interestingly, though Saul distanced himself from the choice to spare the best animals, he included himself when referring to the destruction of the rest. Saul's self-defense was that rather than being a leader of the people, he was a slave to their expectations of him. Whether the claim was true or false, either way it would indicate he was unfit to be Israel's king. Saul's proposed justification for leaving the animals alive was so they could be used to make an offering to Yahweh. In making

this argument Saul was ignoring the instructions he was given regarding the ban, for those instructions indicated that the immediate destruction of those animals was the offering that God commanded that He be given. A further revealing aspect of Saul's self-defense was that he referred to Yahweh as being Samuel's God rather than God to them both. This part of the statement indicates Saul's estrangement from Yahweh.

In verses sixteen through nineteen we read, *"Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Be quiet! And I will tell you what the LORD said to me last night'. And he said to him, 'Speak on. So Samuel said, 'When you were little in your own eyes, were you not head of the tribes of Israel? And did not the LORD anoint you king over Israel? Now the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go, and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do evil in the sight of the LORD?"* Having heard Saul's defense, Samuel responded by fulfilling his role as prophet, giving the Divine message that God had given him to pass on to Saul. The message began with God reminding Saul, that He had made Saul king, and therefore his role was to be subservient to God. The central idea in the message was Saul's sin, that he had willfully chosen not to listen to the voice of Yahweh. In the confrontation God also made it clear what He thought of Saul's superficial spiritual claim (that the animals were spared to be used as an offering), that in reality Saul and his men were guilty of plundering the animals for their own material gain, and thus were, like Achan generations before, attempting to steal from God what was His. God's instructions had been so simple and clear, there was no justifiable excuse for disobedience. It was simply an act of evil rebellion against Yahweh.

In the confrontation of Saul, there is one unusual element, the use of the title *"sinners"* to refer to the Amalekites. This is not the customary language when referring to a national enemy. Rather, this language characterized the Amalekites as habitual and intractably wicked and thus deserving the punishment that God had decreed for them. The use of this term seems to have been to convey that Saul had chosen to side with God's enemies rather than side with God.

#### **IV. Saul's Rationale & Samuel's Response: (vs.20-23)**

In verses twenty and twenty-one we read, *"And Saul said to Samuel, 'But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.'"*

In Saul's response to God's confrontation of him through Samuel he further sought to distinguish between what the troops had done and what he had done, despite the fact that Samuel's word placed the responsibility for the disobedience specifically on him. In doing this, Saul was contradicting Samuel's assessment of the situation and was claiming that he had done precisely what Yahweh had instructed him to do. In doing this Saul also revealed that either he was oblivious to the fact that as a

prophet Samuel was expressing God's words, or he was arguing with God Himself, suggesting that he understood the situation better than God did. Saul's description that he "*brought back*" Agag forms a sharp contrast to the description given by the narrator (vs.9). For in the narrative (which gives the true account of an episode) we are told that Saul "*spared*" Agag.

In verses twenty-two and twenty-three we read, "*So 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 heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king.'*" Though Samuel was stating a general principle, this principle was expressed in the form of a specific reply to Saul's claims of acting in obedience to God. The point Samuel was making was that sacrifices must be made on God's terms, not on one's own terms. Even if his assertions were true (even though they were not) Saul's postponement of the commanded destruction, even if done with good intentions, constituted a flagrant violation of God's will, because God did not include in His instructions the option to delay the destruction of the people and animals under the ban. And though the Law incorporated sacrifice as a part of the obedience that Israel was to give to God, it was not meant to express the totality of the obedience that Israel was to render to her God. For no ceremonial act can make up for a rebellious attitude toward God and His commandments, because obstinate resistance to God exalts self-will over His authority. Therefore, disobedience to God's specific commandments is a blatant form of rebellion to God's role as the sovereign of His people. The idea behind the comparison of rebellion to divination is that Saul was suggesting that he had reason to believe that what he was choosing to do would be pleasing to God, however the reason came from his own ideas rather than from God's specific instructions; thus it was tantamount to a claim to special knowledge through direct insight into the mind of God, which is the claim made by those who engage in divination. In addition to this, Saul's sin of rebellion was as offensive to God as the sins of divination and idolatry. For the reality is that the selfish refusal to submit to the Word of God results in slavery to the malignant forces of the demonic realm.

One might wonder why Samuel chose to pair divination and idolatry together to illustrate the wickedness of a rebellious posture before God. One might wonder this because they seem to be distinctly different sins. However, the Hebrew term used here for idolatry is "*terapim*". This term refers to a specific kind of idol that was used in divination, it was the object through which the worshipper sought a Divine disclosure. Therefore, the function of this type of idol seems to explain why these two sins were referenced together as poetic parallels.

The distinction that Samuel makes in these verses between obedience and sacrifice illustrates a drastic difference between the religion revealed in the Old Testament, from that of the pagans of the ancient Near East. In the religions of the Canaanites and the other Near Eastern peoples the instructions given by their

deities were centered in how the worshipper was to conduct ritual sacrifices. Therefore, obedience was viewed entirely as performing the prescribed sacrifices.

The previous judgment from God (ch.13) put an end to Saul's dynasty, while this one indicated that from God's perspective, Saul from that moment on was no longer Israel's king. In expressing this a Hebrew word was used that is translated as "*rejected*", and this word is an antonym of the Hebrew word used earlier in the narrative that is translated as "*chosen*" (12:13), further conveying the idea that God was reversing Saul's installation as king.

#### **V. The Resolution: (vs.24-35)**

In verse twenty-four and twenty-five we read, "*Then 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. Now therefore, please pardon my sin, and return with me, that I may worship the Lord.'*" Saul's attempt to blame his men for his disobedience demonstrated that his repentance was not genuine. In addition, it is revealed later in the chapter that Saul's greatest concern was not that God was angry with him, rather his concern was that others might notice the breach that now existed between himself and God's prophet, Samuel. Therefore, he had little concern for spiritual things, rather he was mainly concerned with how he was perceived by others. Earlier in the narrative God had told the people (including the king) that the way of blessing involved a genuine fear of God (12:24); however, here it is revealed that Saul actually feared other people instead. Another indicator of Saul's lack of genuine repentance is that his confession in this verse is a complete reversal of his earlier insistence of his innocence. Saul did this without ever acknowledging that he had just been caught in a lie. The absence of also acknowledging this sin indicates that Saul was not repentant, he was simply trying to minimize the punishment of his sins.

In verse twenty-five Saul appeals to Samuel in his priestly role to intercede for him that he might be forgiven. But as he elaborated on his request he made it clear that he was more concerned with his relationship with the people who were witnessing these things than he was with the awfulness of his sin and the implications of it to his relationship with God.

In verses twenty-six and twenty-seven we read, "*But 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'. And as Samuel turned around to go away, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore.*" Samuel's initial adamant refusal to return with Saul underlined the finality of the rejection by Yahweh that Saul has brought upon himself. The hem of the garment of a prophet, like that of a priest, was decorated distinctly. It seems to have designated the role that was possessed by the individual wearing the garment. Therefore, the idea seems to be that Saul's seizure of the edge of Samuel's robe was a final deferential plea for mercy and for him to use his role as prophet and priest to plead for Saul's forgiveness.

In verses twenty-eight and twenty-nine we read, "*So Samuel said to him, 'The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor*

*of yours, who is better than you. And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.*” The reference to “today” was intended to highlight the finality of Yahweh’s rejection of Saul, indicating there was to be no more argument. When Samuel said that kingship would transfer to someone better than Saul, the idea was the role would go to someone who would be more careful to obey God than Saul had been. This repudiation of Saul and the selection of a replacement did not mean that God had misled Samuel when He said He chose Saul in the first place, nor does it imply that God changed His mind about Saul. Rather, this is a further elaboration on the idea that God was changing how He related to His people in light of the choices His people had made. God had known from the beginning that Saul would fail. Saul was chosen in the first place because he represented the sort of king the people wanted. The choice of Saul was never because God thought he was godlier than he turned out to be. Rather, he was chosen to teach the people of Israel that they needed to seek His will rather than pressing Him to have their way. God always intended for another individual to rule after Saul (cf. 13:14; 16:1). Though still recognized by the people as their king for about 15 more years, Saul was deposed by Yahweh right then (cf. 16:14). The Divine title translated here as “*strength*” represents the Hebrew word “*nesah*”, which emphasizes the eternal nature of Yahweh. The idea in verse twenty-nine is that when God has determined something, that thing is certain and will not be revoked or changed.

In verses thirty and thirty-one we read, “*Then he said, I have sinned; yet honor me now, please, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the LORD your God.*’ So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul worshipped the LORD.” Even after this second acknowledgement of his sin against God, Saul continued to demonstrate that his main concern was how he was perceived by others.

One thing that is a bit confusing is why Samuel agreed to do in this verse what he had just refused to do in the previous verses. Some interpreters have suggested that Samuel made this choice on his own, and that it did not reflect what God would have wanted him to do. This seems unlikely as Samuel is continually presented in this book as acting in precisely the way God wanted him to. It is more likely that since Saul’s requests were making it clear that he was no longer seeking God’s forgiveness, only seeking to protect his reputation, that Samuel went along with the charade since he knew that God would soon replace Saul. Sometimes God gives individuals what they want, even though it is to their detriment. Gaining this fulfilled all that Saul was seeking. He made no further moves toward repentance. The tragedy pictured here is a man worshipping God despite having no real relationship with Him. It is religion without substance.

In verses thirty-two through thirty-four we read, “*Then Samuel said, ‘Bring Agag king of the Amalekites here to me.’ So Agag came to him cautiously. And Agag said, ‘Surely the bitterness of death is past.’ But Samuel said, ‘As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.’ And Samuel hacked Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal. Then Samuel went to*

*Ramah, and Saul went up to his house at Gibeah of Saul.”* We read here that Samuel took it upon himself to do what Saul had failed to do, putting the Amalekite king to death. The Hebrew term translated here as “*cautiously*” should be rendered as “*reluctantly*”. The word seems to convey that King Agag knew what Samuel was about to do. The Hebrew term translated as “*hacked*” is one used elsewhere for the slaughter of a sacrificial animal. The implication being that this was a ritual killing intended to fulfill the command that the Amalekites be devoted to Yahweh.

In verse thirty-five we read, “*And Samuel went no more to see Saul until the day of his death. Nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul, and the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.*” The finality of Yahweh’s rejection of Saul was not missed by Samuel, for from that day on he never again visited the king. The estrangement between Samuel and Saul represented that which now existed in permanent form between the Yahweh Himself and the disobedient king. Though God had permitted Saul to reign in response to the demand of the people, that necessary concession brought grief to the heart of God.

The grief that Samuel experienced over the fall of Saul (someone with whom he had a rocky relationship) demonstrated the prophet’s pastoral heart. For it reveals the prophet’s private emotions. Samuel as a godly man did not want to see anyone fail, or to turn away from having a relationship with the true God. When someone like Saul chose that path, it was heartbreaking. But the calling of a prophet includes delivering hard messages which are no more palatable to the prophet than they are to those to whom the message is given.

In the chapters that follow we read of some of the consequences that resulted from Saul’s sinful choices. For Saul himself we read in the rest of I Samuel about how he eventually lost everything because of his continued disobedience to God. We also read that Saul’s failure to deal more vigorously with the Amalekites left them free to harass southern Judah for a further generation, resulting in the suffering of the innocent because of Saul’s disobedience.

### **Conclusion:**

This chapter reveals that individuals can be blind not only to their own sinfulness, but to how that sinfulness puts them at odds with God. It illustrates that even the practice of orthodox religion can take the place of having a genuine relationship with God. Finally, it demonstrates that God considers obedience to His word to be a matter of supreme importance.