

1 SAMUEL 15

15:1–3

The Israelites had been at war with the Amalekites from the time of Moses (see Exodus 17:8). The first battle with the Amalekites recounts the biblically famous story of how the Israelites would do better in battle when Moses raised his hands. The battle was fought for so long that Moses had to sit on a rock while Aaron and Hur propped up his arms until the evening.

The interaction in this passage between Samuel and Saul marked the beginning of the end of the wars with the Amalekites, whose power were finally broken by King David.

The Lord, through Samuel, told Saul to destroy the Amalekites—much like in the battles led by Moses and then Joshua, when they guided the Israelites into the promised land (see, for example, Exodus 23:27).

Samuel and Saul's relationship, prophet to king, is one that continued throughout the history of Israel's kings. The prophets would have an official role as counselors to the king as well as to the people.

Samuel's actions in this narrative form a motif for future prophets to follow: announcing the will of the Lord and also calling the king to repentance, or as in Saul's case, informing the king that he had failed in his duty. The prophet Nathan would take a similar role in calling out David's transgression with Uriah and Bath-sheba. Another hint of this role of the prophet is in the story of Queen Jezebel, who "cut off the prophets of the LORD" (1 Kings 18:4), meaning that she would not listen to the advice of prophets sent by God. Instead, she got rid of these prophetic advisors and counselors.

15:8

The Lord through Samuel had told Saul to kill all the Amalekites and their animals. Saul disobeyed the Lord by keeping Agag, the king of the Amalekites, and the best livestock alive. Saul, in his hubris, wanted to display his distinguished captive and, similarly, the most valuable animals and other booty. Saul justified his actions by blaming his own people. Instead of leading them to follow the Lord's commandments, he demonstrated that he would rule as a worldly king.

15:11–12

The phrase “it repenteth me” is better translated as “it grieves me.” The Lord and Samuel showed their sorrow for Saul by grieving for him because of his transgression. Because of Saul's actions, the Lord would change His plans and focus on raising up a new king.

Saul changed but did not repent. He turned his back to the Lord and made God his enemy. Samuel spent the night pleading for Saul, a righteous man grieving for the transgressor.

The theme of grieving over the wicked appears throughout the scriptures. In the Old Testament, the psalmist wrote, “I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved; because they kept not thy word” (Psalm 119:158). In the New Testament, the Lord “grieved for the hardness of [the Pharisees'] hearts” (Mark 3:5). In the book of Moses, Enoch had a vision of the Lord: “And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?” (Moses 7:28). In a great discourse about God's plan, the Lord responded to Enoch, “But behold, their sins shall be upon the heads of their fathers; Satan shall be their father, and misery shall be their doom; and the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer?” (Moses 7:37).

God renounced Saul as leader because he abused and corrupted the office of king and used his role as leader to aggrandize himself instead of glorifying the Lord. Instead of giving the glory to God, Saul built monuments to himself: “Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, ‘Saul has gone to Carmel. *There he has set up a monument in his own honor* and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal.’” (1 Samuel 15:12 New International Version; emphasis added).

15:13–17

Saul lied to Samuel about obeying the Lord, but Samuel wasn't fooled and confronted Saul with the evidence of his transgression. Saul tried to hide his sins, but he couldn't hide from the Lord or His prophet. Samuel then named Saul's transgression: the pride that kept him from obeying God's commandment.

15:21–22

In an all too human act, and in a sign of corrupt leadership, Saul tried to blame others for his transgression. Samuel refuted Saul’s reasoning, noting that to obey is better than to sacrifice. It is much easier to bring a sacrifice to be burned on the altar as part of the repentance process than to turn our thoughts and desires to obeying God and to make our will subject to His will.

15:22–23

This is a short poem common to prophetic pronouncement. Note that most of the narrative throughout the books of the prophets (from Isaiah to Malachi) is written in poetic form.

15:24–28

Saul’s repentance was not sincere. Because he disobeyed the Lord, the Lord would reject him and his kingdom. When Saul grabbed the bottom of Samuel’s robe and tore it, Samuel took the opportunity to use the symbol to further affirm that the Lord had rejected Saul as king.

15:32–33

The Hebrew word here translated as “delicately” is better translated as “cheerfully.” Agag had reason to believe that his life would be spared and that he perhaps would be ransomed back to his people. The Lord, and Samuel, however, understood that Agag was a murderer who had killed many of the Lord’s people, both before and during the battle. The Lord had already told Saul to kill Agag, which he neglected to do, so Samuel executed him publicly to fulfil the Lord’s commandment in front of Saul and the people of Israel.

15:35

See the commentary on verse 11.

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