

“Partial Obedience is Disobedience” (1 Samuel 15:1–35)

[The following dialogue is a brief drama between my wife and me. Lori has just finished leading worship as I climb up on stage.]

Keith: “Good morning.”

Lori: “Keith, you need to use my handheld microphone today. The batteries on your lapel mic are low.”

Keith: I ignore Lori, extend my left hand in a snubbing fashion, and ask, “How’s everybody doing?”

Lori: “Keith, I’m not kidding, you really need to use my mic!”

Keith: I grab Lori’s mic and impatiently repeat, “I need to use this mic today because my batteries are low.” I then promptly put the mic back in the stand.

Lori: “Keith, you never *truly* listen to me.”

Over the course of my marriage I’ve had a selective hearing problem. I have attempted to listen to Lori every time she speaks, but often I am busy or distracted and don’t pay attention like I should. To better myself, I have learned to robotically repeat what she says to me (sometimes even in a chant). If I have listened well, I *may* carry out her wish. But often I don’t pay attention to all the details and I only *partially* obey. Of course, I’m not alone [put on a pair of headphones]. My children have a selective hearing problem as well. (Maybe it’s hereditary?) Sometimes it’s because they have headphones on. Lori and I think they hear us. They use nonverbal cues to give us the impression that they have heard us. But what we ask them to do is usually not carried out. Or if they attempt to obey the command, they’re only *partially* obedient. Sadly, headphones aren’t required! Perhaps you can relate to our plight? Families don’t listen to one another like they should. Friends don’t listen to one another like they should. Employees don’t listen to employers like they should. Students don’t listen to teachers like they should. Humanity suffers with a selective hearing problem. This problem is thousands of years old. King Saul exhibited this problem in 1 Sam 15. Yet, this chapter is clear that *leaders are called to listen*.

1. Saul defeats (partially) the Amalekites (15:1–9). Our account begins with Samuel saying to Saul: **“The LORD sent me¹ to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore, listen to the words of the LORD”** (15:1). In this opening verse, Samuel strikes the keynote of the chapter: “Listen to the words of the Lord.” Also included in this phrase is the Hebrew word for “voice” (*qol*, see NKJV, KJV, and NASB marginal reading). This word occurs seven times in this chapter (15:1, 14 [twice], 19, 20, 22, 24), and is critical to our understanding. Samuel literally says, “listen to the voice of the words of the Lord.”² The key word in this chapter is “voice,” and the key phrase is “the word(s) of the Lord.” Samuel insists that a covenant king’s *first* priority is to listen to the Lord’s voice.³ *Leaders are called to listen*. Hence, 15:1 summons Saul to obey; 15:2–3 specify how he’s to obey: **“Thus says the LORD of hosts,⁴ ‘I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy⁵ all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.’”** Skeptics love to use 15:3 to argue that the God of the Old Testament is a bloodthirsty God who practices genocide. I would love to spend more time on this verse, but I have thirty–two more verses to go.⁶ Suffice to say, God values human life, but He’s also a just judge.⁷ Verse 2 mentions that when the Israelites were struggling through the desert toward Canaan, the Amalekites picked off the weak, sick, and elderly at the end of the line of marchers and brutally murdered these stragglers. They sought to destroy Israel and the channel of God’s redemptive plans for all humankind. Furthermore, the Amalekites continued to attempt to exterminate God’s people for over four hundred years!⁸ We don’t realize how patient the Lord had been with this nation, and how unspeakably wicked they were.⁹ Yet, God gave them time to repent. Nevertheless, eventually God says, “Enough is enough!” A holy God cannot let sin go unpunished.¹⁰ My real concern, however, is that God may decide to treat America the way He treated Amalek. If we become a nation characterized by ill-treatment of weak people rather than by commitment to them, we may find ourselves under God’s judgment.¹¹ *Leaders are called to listen*. Listen up!

Our story continues in 15:4–6: **“Then Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, 200,000 foot soldiers and 10,000 men of Judah. Saul came to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the valley. Saul said to the Kenites,¹² ‘Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, so that I do not destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the sons of Israel when they came up from Egypt.’ So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.”** Here, Saul’s large army gave him the confidence not to trust the Lord (cf. 14:2).¹³ Yet, he does right by the Kenites who had been kind to Israel (Exod 18:9, 10, 19; Num 10:29–32).¹⁴ They cared for God’s people, so He cares for them! Furthermore, the Kenites obeyed Saul’s word and “departed from among the Amalekites” and Saul spared them. Similarly, if we want to avoid God’s judgment, we would be wise to follow the lead of the Kenites and be kind to Israel and find a way to disassociate ourselves from Amalek-like people.

This scene ends on a rather ominous note: **“So Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. He captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive,¹⁵ and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword.¹⁶ 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 not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed”** (15:7–9). Apparently, Saul thought God’s original command was a little extreme. Thus, he was only *partially* obedient. He was obedient in attacking the Amalekites but disobedient in keeping Agag alive and in keeping the best of the flocks. Saul’s disobedience was partly a matter of pride. Jonathan’s victory had painted him in a bad light (14:1–15). Now Saul would be able to display Agag as a trophy, thus demonstrating his prowess in war rather than Jonathan’s.¹⁷ The best animals, of course, were simply a matter of profit. Saul had turned a solemn commission of the Lord into an occasion for his own prosperity.¹⁸ The writer seems to be very careful to point out Saul’s responsibility for the sparing that was done. The Hebrew suggests that it was Saul who “spared” and the people joined him.¹⁹ This will become an important observation when we reach 15:15.²⁰

2. Samuel confronts and condemns Saul (15:10–31). The scene now shifts back to Samuel. In 15:10–11 the author writes: **“Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, ‘I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands.’ And Samuel was distressed [lit. “angry”] and cried out to the LORD all night.”** God’s heart grieves over Saul’s lack of obedience.²¹ He hurts over every disobedient disciple. He is not a “you win some, you lose some” god.²² When we don’t fulfill our spiritual potential, God experiences disappointment and regret. If we are to be like God, we too must grieve over disobedient disciples. Although it is unclear why Samuel was angry (lit. “it burned to Samuel”),²³ he was likely angry at Saul for his disobedience (cf. 15:35).²⁴ Nevertheless, Samuel turned to prayer . . . and prayed all night long. Do you become righteously indignant with disobedient Christians? Do you become ticked with yourself when you succumb to sin? We are all responsible to pray and act on behalf of wayward believers. Is there a Christian whom God is calling you to speak to and pray for?

Samuel’s all-night prayer vigil is an indication that even at this stage there is still the possibility that Saul might be restored. After praying all night long, Samuel might have even been hopeful that Saul was going to repent. Verse 12 states: **“Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, ‘Saul came to Carmel,²⁵ and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal.’”**²⁶ Saul is building a monument for himself! He is totally blind to what he has done. In contrast, after Moses had defeated the Amalekites, he built a monument—an altar! That monument celebrated the Lord, and the altar was named “the Lord is my banner” (Exod 17:15). Saul’s monument was “for/to himself.”²⁷ Did this man have no idea what he had done?!²⁸ Saul cares more about his honor than God’s honor. To make matters even worse, Samuel’s encounter with Saul occurred on the way or at Gilgal (cf. 15:21). Gilgal was the place where the kingdom was renewed (11:14–15), where the dynasty was lost (13:7b–15), and now where the king was rejected!

Our plot thickens in 15:13–15: **“Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, ‘Blessed are you of the LORD! I have carried out the command of the LORD.’”²⁹ But Samuel said, ‘What then is this bleating [voice] of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing [voice] of the oxen which I hear?’** [Back in 15:1 the one thing Saul had to do was listen to the voice of the words of God. The air was now filled with the voice/sound of his failure to do so!³⁰] **Saul said, ‘They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed.’”³¹** Saul greets Samuel with pious language and seems to be blind to his sin . . . but the sheep and oxen give him away! What a gripping spiritual principle: Sin is eventually exposed. Failures refuse to be covered up. If the king of Israel couldn’t cover his tracks, you won’t be able to either. Saul is claiming obedience to God’s command. Saul tries to put the blame on the soldiers, as if he could do nothing to stop it. Rather than confessing his sin, Saul sought to justify his disobedience. He believed it was for a worthy purpose, and he failed to take responsibility for his actions and blamed the people instead. Saul is like the little boy who was caught with his hand in the cookie jar and then exclaimed, “I was getting it for you!” We, too, sometimes choose not to obey the Lord completely. Then we try to justify our own sinful behavior by telling ourselves that it doesn’t really matter to God or that other Christians are far more sinful than we are. We even like to claim that we have a noble motive. I cheated on my taxes, so that I could give more to my church. I plagiarized my paper so that I could get into the best Christian college. I looked at porn so that I wouldn’t have an affair. These excuses won’t fly with God—He demands total obedience.

After hearing Saul’s excuses, Samuel said: **“‘Wait, and let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night.’ And he said to him, ‘Speak!’ Samuel said, ‘Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were *made* the head of the tribes of Israel? And the LORD anointed you king over Israel, and the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, ‘Go and utterly destroy the sinners,³² the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.’ Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed³³ upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD?”** (15:16–19) Five times in these four verses, Samuel emphasizes the phrase “the Lord.” He is the focus. Samuel reminds Saul of his humble beginnings and where he is now. The implication is that Saul forfeited God’s blessing because of his compromise and disobedience. Samuel is saying, yet again: *Leaders are called to listen.*

In 15:20–21 Saul offers Samuel another flimsy excuse: **“I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took *some* of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal.”** Once again Saul claims total obedience and blames the people (cf. 15:9, 15). He seems to say, “That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.” Even worse, he claims he was partially obedient so that he and the people could sacrifice to the Lord at Gilgal—the place of God’s faithfulness. It has been said, “Religion is the last refuge of the scoundrel.”³⁴ Saul further betrays his lack of allegiance by referring to Yahweh as “your” God, not “our” God or “my” God (cf. 15:30). Clearly, Saul has disengaged from the Lord.

We now arrive at one of the greatest passages on total obedience in the entire Bible.³⁵ These verses are so significant that our English versions put them into poetic stanzas. In 15:22–23 **“Samuel said, ‘Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD?’³⁶ Behold, to obey³⁷ is better than sacrifice,³⁸ And to heed than the fat of rams.³⁹ For rebellion⁴⁰ is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from *being* king.”** To put it simply: God cares more about your obedience than your religious rituals. In other words, religious rituals don’t keep God happy. What is the use of performing outward acts of religion if that religious activity isn’t grounded in an obedient heart of faith? True religious affection for God begins with the heart and not in acts of worship or the accompanying spiritual disciplines.

What is the difference between obedience and sacrifice? Sacrifice is one aspect of obedience, but obedience involves more than just sacrifice.⁴¹ We should never think that we can compensate for our lack of obedience to some of God's commands by making other sacrifices for Him.⁴² Obedience is the foundation upon which sacrifice is offered.⁴³ Has it ever crossed your mind that you might compensate for some disobedience to God's Word with regular churchgoing or generous giving or even disciplined prayer and Bible reading?⁴⁴ We do this far more often than we think. After we sin, we often dive straight into a spiritual discipline in an attempt to appease God. Yet, Jesus said, "The one who has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. And the one who loves Me will be loved by My Father. I also will love him and will reveal Myself to him . . . If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him" (John 14:21, 23).

In 15:23 Samuel puts anything less than total obedience on par with divination, iniquity, and idolatry. Saul's independent, rebellious factions were as much a denial of God's authority as the recognition of Satan's supernatural power through divination.⁴⁵ Divination was condemned by the law (Lev 19:26, 31; Deut 18:9–14) and punishable by death (Exod 22:18). Saul's stubborn disobedience was nothing short of iniquity, and essentially an act of idolatry, because it elevated his will above God's will. In what area of your life are you being stubborn and hard-hearted toward God? *Leaders are called to listen.*

After Samuel lowered the boom, Saul responds in 15:24–26: **"Then Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice. [Saul finally gets down to the truth.] Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I may worship the LORD.' 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.'"** Saul confesses his sinfulness and asks forgiveness, but it is too late for him to get his ministry back. Verse 26 again says that God has rejected Saul from being king (cf. 15:23). However, it is notable that the text doesn't say "the LORD has rejected you"; it says "the LORD has rejected you *from being king*."⁴⁶ The issue here is ministry, not salvation. Rebellion inevitably leads to rejection. God rejected Saul from being king because he had a selective hearing problem.

"As Samuel turned to go, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore. So Samuel said to him, 'The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you.'⁴⁷ Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind" (15:27–29). Saul is a very tall man and the fringe of Samuel's garment was very low. It is quite possible that Saul was on his knees, begging, and he dove for Samuel as he departed.⁴⁸ Samuel used this visual aid to inform Saul that his kingdom had been given to his neighbor (i.e., David, 16:1–23). The designation "the glory of Israel" only occurs here in the Bible. The term "glory" (*netsach*) signifies a constancy, endurance, and then confidence, because a person can trust what is constant.⁴⁹ Samuel is saying that God will not "change His mind" (*nacham*, 15:29) concerning His overall purposes.⁵⁰ Some commentators find a supposed contradiction here because the Hebrew word translated "change His mind" is elsewhere translated "regret" (cf. 15:11, 35). Yet, are we really to believe that the biblical writer is stupid enough to contradict himself in the same chapter? No! He's using the word in an emotional sense in 15:11 and 35, and in 15:29 he's using the term in an absolute sense.

The narrator is saying that God has made an oath concerning Saul's future ministry.⁵¹ Consequently, he can't get back to where he was before this word was given. None of this has anything to do with salvation. But, Saul's ministry was lost forever, and with it, his eternal reward. It is possible that he was saved through fire (1 Cor 3:15) and could have been used in other ways, but as God's anointed king, he was finished. May we know God has not taken such an oath against us. If we can hear His voice, if we are not dull of hearing (Heb 3:7; 5:14), all is well. We can be renewed unto repentance. But we must keep our hearts tender toward ministry. Ministry can be lost . . . and so can an eternal reward.⁵² Leaders worth their salt take this to heart. *Leaders are called to listen.*

Saul once again responds to Samuel's rebuke in 15:30–31: **“Then he said, ‘I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and go back with me, that I may worship the LORD your God.’ So Samuel went back following Saul, and Saul worshiped the LORD”** Notice Saul's fateful words in 15:30: *“my people,” “your God”* (cf. 15:15, 21). With these words, Saul exposes his heart. He doesn't understand the seriousness of his sin; rather, he is more interested in keeping up appearances. Saul is more interested in his own reputation than God's reputation. But we must be careful not to judge Saul too severely. How often do we love the praise of men more than the praise of God (cf. John 12:43)? Samuel appears to acquiesce and make a gracious gesture to worship with Saul (cf. 15:26); however, it is important to note that Samuel did not offer forgiveness to Saul, because he sought pardon apart from true repentance.⁵³ Samuel's real reason for joining Saul was to fulfill God's mission.

3. Samuel separates from Saul (15:32–35). Our final scene ends with a rather surprising act. If you like action movies like I do, you'll love these verses: **“Then Samuel said, ‘Bring me Agag, the king of the Amalekites.’ And Agag came to him cheerfully. And Agag said, ‘Surely the bitterness of death is past’”** (15:32). Agag must have been gleeful over the sidelining of Saul. As Agag sees the elderly, wrinkled, shrunken prophet of God coming to him he's ready to celebrate. I'm sure he said to himself, *“This old man of God won't hurt a hair on my head. How could he? Just look at him!”* Agag could not have been more mistaken. In 15:33 we read one of the greatest one-liners in the history of action films—only this one-liner is in the Bible: **“But Samuel said, ‘As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.’ And Samuel hewed [hacked]⁵⁴ Agag to pieces before the LORD at Gilgal.”⁵⁵** Samuel did this act “before the Lord.” God sees this act as a holy and righteous judgment, fully deserved.⁵⁶ What an amazing picture this is: The ancient prophet hacking the warlord to pieces.⁵⁷ Hollywood couldn't have come up with a better storyline! God's mission is completed by God's man—the elderly prophet Samuel.

The narrative concludes on a low point in 15:34–35: **“Then Samuel went to Ramah, but Saul went up to his house at Gibeah of Saul. Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death;⁵⁸ for Samuel grieved over Saul.⁵⁹ And the LORD regretted⁶⁰ that He had made Saul king over Israel.”⁶¹** These are incredibly sad words. Saul has lost the privilege of hearing Yahweh's word through His prophet. Furthermore, this account ends with a harsh verdict on Saul: “reject.” Such a verdict brings with it deep grief. Undoubtedly, Samuel and God's hearts grieved over Saul's end.⁶² Saul refused to listen, and it cost him dearly. *Leaders are called to listen.*

Over the course of the last two years the grounds surrounding our church have been looking really good. Every time I gaze upon our church landscaping, I am pleased with our lush, green lawn. Last month on one of my drive-bys I spotted an unfortunate phenomenon: rounded mountains of earth on what had previously been a groomed lawn. Yes, that's right, a family of moles migrated to take up residence beneath our church property. The little creatures were wreaking havoc on our lawn by burrowing into the soil and turning our lawn topsy-turvy.

In some ways the activity of a small mole illustrates the dark side of the human heart. On the surface, we may appear polished and polite. But sin can work inner destruction. Sooner or later our sin will become apparent. The fatal flaw that festered beneath the surface of King Saul was a refusal to listen to the voice of the word of the Lord. You and I are guilty of this very same sin. May we take the time today to stop and listen to the voice of the word of the Lord. He wants to speak to our hearts. He wants to use His Word to change our marriages, families, churches, and workplaces. *Leaders are called to listen.* Jesus said it best, *“The one who has ears had better listen!”* (NET)⁶³

Scripture References

1 Samuel 15:1–35

Exodus 17:8–16

Deuteronomy 25:17–19

Revelation 6:9–10

Numbers 23:19

Jeremiah 18:6–8

Philippians 2:5–8

Study Questions

1. When have I refused to listen to the voice of the Lord? What was the outcome? Why is it so tempting to ignore the Lord's voice on a daily basis? Who or what are the other voices that are competing for my attention? How am I attempting to mute these voices? In what ways do I listen to people over the Lord? When do I intentionally take time out of my schedule to truly listen to the Lord's voice?
2. How does God grieve over my sin? How do I fail to grasp the severity of my sin? When have I recently covered up my sin? Why do I attempt to cover up my sin? How many times have I justified my own sin? In what way am I more interested in my own reputation than God's reputation? How do I treat partial obedience in my children, my church family, and my personal life?
3. In what ways have I only been partially obedient to God? How have I used religious rituals to compensate for my partial obedience? Why is obedience to God's Word more important than worship rituals or spiritual disciplines? Identify and reject any worship rituals that are done out of habit and not obedience. How can my worship result in obedience?
4. Have I been making little compromises in my personal life? If so, when did I begin? Have I shared my struggle with anyone? How have I made compromises at home, work, and church? Is someone encouraging me and holding me accountable to being above reproach in every sphere of my life? Am I humbly exhorting other believers to spiritual and moral excellence? How do I graciously go about this?
5. What have I learned about God from 1 Samuel 15? Think through or discuss the following: (1) God is slow to anger. (2) God is sovereign in His power and authority. (3) God is steadfast in keeping His covenant with those who revere Him. How have I seen God manifest each of these attributes in my life? Which of these three characteristics is most meaningful to me?

Notes

¹ The Hebrew word translated “me” or “I” is emphatic.

² For similar expressions, see Gen 3:17 and Job 34:16.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel*. Focus on the Bible (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, [1988] 2000), 123.

⁴ The title “Lord of hosts” appears four times in 1 Samuel (1:3; 4:4; 15:2; 17:45), and not before this book in the OT.

⁵ The term translated “utterly destroy” (*heram*) occurs eight times in this chapter (15:3, 8, 9 [twice], 15, 18, 20, 21), showing that God’s will is clear. This Hebrew root has a very important technical sense in holy war and was to be practiced only against peoples who had come under God’s severest judgment. The word denotes a special act of consecration to God; when related to warfare it designates the consecration of a city or its population to destruction. See also Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*. New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 168.

⁶ To read more on this issue, please see David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2011), see esp. 25–46, 93–113. I highly recommend this exceptional work. It is one of the most helpful and creative books I have read.

⁷ As to the question about the innocent children, four observations are relevant. (1) We are all born in sin and deserve death. (2) God will eventually take everyone in death—it is only a matter of when. (3) God is sovereign over life and reserves the right to take it when He will. Finally, all children who die before the age of accountability (whatever age that may be) are saved. Hence, the act by which God took the children is far from merciless.

⁸ In the days of the Judges, the Amalekites had joined the Moabites and the Ammonites in invading Israel and taking Jericho (Judg 3:12–14). The Amalekites had joined the Midianites to invade Israel in the days of Gideon (Judg 6:3). The Amalekites were a cancer in the land of Canaan. Like a cancer, they were to be completely exterminated. It isn’t wise to leave a few cancer cells behind, and it isn’t wise to leave a bit of sin behind.

⁹ In a most amazing prediction, Abraham was told that his descendants would be exiled and mistreated for four hundred years (in round numbers for 430 years) before God would lead them out of that country. The reason for so long a delay, Gen 15:13–16 explains, was that “the sin of the Amorites [the Canaanites] has not yet reached its full measure.” Thus, God waited four centuries while the Amalekites and those other Canaanite groups slowly filled up their own cups of condemnation by their sinful behavior. God never acted precipitously against them; His grace and mercy waited to see if they would repent and turn from their headlong plummet into self-destruction.

¹⁰ The Amalekites and other Canaanite nations were cut off to prevent the corruption of Israel and the rest of the world (Deut 20:16–18). When a nation starts burning children as a gift to the gods (Lev 18:21) and practices sodomy, bestiality and all sorts of loathsome vices (Lev 18:25, 27–30), the day of God’s grace and mercy has begun to run out.

¹¹ John Goldingay, *1 and 2 Samuel for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 76.

¹² The Amalekites were descendants of Esau (Gen 36:12), whereas the Kenites traced their ancestry from Midian, one of Abraham’s sons by Keturah (Gen 25:2). Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, was a Kenite (Exod 18:1–12).

¹³ David Toshio Tsumura, *First Book of Samuel*. New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 393.

¹⁴ There may have been a treaty between the Israelites and the Kenites. Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on 1 Samuel,” 2010 ed.: www.sonlight.com/constable/notes/pdf/1samuel.pdf, 55.

¹⁵ Smith notes: “Agag is the only Amalekite mentioned by name in the Bible. The name seems to have been a hereditary title, like Pharaoh, for the kings of his people. See Num 24:7.” James E. Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*. College Press, NIV Commentary (Joplin: College Press, 2000), 202 n. 7. Judges 1:6–7 tells of Adonai-bezek who kept an entourage of seventy conquered kings with their thumbs and big toes amputated. Perhaps Saul rationalized that, since all of the other kings were doing this, he would as well.

¹⁶ Saul didn’t destroy all the Amalekites at this time (1 Sam 27:8; 30:1; 2 Sam 8:12); King Hezekiah completely annihilated them years later (1 Chron 4:43). Yet, the text seems to suggest that Saul “utterly destroyed” the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:8). How can this inconsistency be resolved? Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 202 explains: “Two answers are possible. First, the ‘all’ may here be restricted, as frequently in Scripture, meaning *all* that fell into his hands, or *all* in that section of Amalek. Second, the text does not say that he slew *all* the Amalekites, but *all* of those who were subject to Agag. Some may have escaped.”

¹⁷ It is also possible that Saul was afraid to kill Agag (cf. 1 Sam 15:24). The text doesn’t explicitly say one way or another. See Gary D. Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David* (Maitland, FL: Xulon, 2008), 164.

¹⁸ John Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 228.

¹⁹ The verb “spared” is singular, suggesting in Hebrew “that Saul is the principal actor and the troops only accessories.” Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 88.

²⁰ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader*. Preaching the Word series (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 263.

²¹ The best parallel use of *nacham* (“regret”) is Gen 6:6. “The LORD was grieved [*nacham*] that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain.”

²² Davis, *1 Samuel*, 130.

²³ Waltke asks: “Was he angry with God for electing Saul? Was he angry with Saul for his folly? Or was he angry about the frustrating situation in which he found himself?” Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 640.

²⁴ Tsumura, *First Book of Samuel*, 396.

²⁵ This is not the Carmel along the Mediterranean where Elijah’s battle occurred (1 Kgs 18), but another town located south of Hebron.

²⁶ At the end of 1 Sam 14:12 the LXX (Greek OT) and one Old Latin manuscript include the following words not found in the MT (Hebrew OT): “to Saul. And behold, he was offering as a burnt offering to the LORD the best of the spoils that he had brought from the Amalekites.”

²⁷ Cf. Absalom’s arrogant monument “set up for himself” in 2 Sam 18:18.

²⁸ Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 268.

²⁹ Payne writes: “There is in all of us an inclination to resent being told what to do; but those in positions of authority and power are all the more reluctant to acknowledge anyone else’s superior authority.” David Frank Payne, *I & II Samuel*. The Daily Bible study series (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 77–78.

³⁰ Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 269.

³¹ Saul’s excuse is reminiscent of Adam’s excuse in Gen 3:12 (cf. Exod 32:22–23).

³² This same Hebrew term for “sinners” (*chatta*) is used of the citizens of Sodom in Gen 13:13.

³³ Rushing/pouncing on the plunder is exactly what the famished Israelite army had done after their battle with the Philistines (1 Sam 14:32).

³⁴ Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David*, 175.

³⁵ Mayhue states: “No other portion of Scripture so emphasizes God’s demand for total obedience.” Richard Mayhue, *A Christian’s Survival Guide* (Wheaton: Scripture Press, 1987), 53.

³⁶ Brueggemann observes: “The conclusion reached in these verses [1 Sam 15:22–23] is consistent with the premise of verse one, where Samuel asserts that anointing is for *listening*. Saul’s role is to listen. Now in verses 22–23 the same logic is worked backward to reach a negative conclusion concerning Saul. Saul has not listened; therefore he will no longer be the anointed. Where there is no listening, there will be no anointing. Rebellion by Saul inevitably leads to rejection by Yahweh.” Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 113.

³⁷ “In the ancient world there was little to obey—the gods were honored by rituals that gave them food and met other needs. It was therefore through ritual that that God was appeased, and that was all they required. This is why Samuel spoke of divination and idolatry (1 Sam. 15:23). Other nations interacted with their god through divination and idolatry, believing that gods could be managed or even manipulated. Yahweh was not one of the pagan gods—he expected to be obeyed.” John H. Walton & Kim E. Walton, *The Bible Story Handbook* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 159.

³⁸ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 172, n. 11 notes that there is no reason to suppose that Samuel was rejecting sacrificial worship. After all, Samuel was a Levite (1 Chron 6:22–26) and often performed ritual sacrifice himself (1 Sam 10:8; 11:15; 16:3–5). Andrews and Bergen remark: “Several passages of Scripture appear to reject Israel’s sacrificial and ritualistic worship (Ps. 15:1–5; 40:6; 51:16–17; Isa. 1:10–15; 66:3; Jer. 6:20; 7:21–26; Hos. 6:6; 9:9; Amos 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8). But behind all these passages is the clear consideration that sacrifice is acceptable only when brought with an attitude of obedience and devotion to God and his covenant commandments.” Stephen J. Andrews and Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*. Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), Electronic ed.

³⁹ The “fat of rams” refers to the fat portions around the entrails and kidneys and the fat tail. All such fat belong to Yahweh (Lev 3:16–17; 7:23–25) because it was viewed as the choicest part of the animal. As such, it was burned upon the altar.

⁴⁰ The term translated “rebellion” (*meri*) has to do with pressing one’s case (cf. Deut 31:27). At this point Samuel referred to Saul’s attempts to justify and excuse his actions.

⁴¹ God does approve of sacrificing, but He does not wish to have it at the expense of full obedience to His Word or as a substitute for a personal relationship of love and trust. Although sacrifices were under the OT economy, animal sacrifices are no longer necessary today because Christ was our sacrifice, once for all (Heb 10:1–18). Nevertheless, the principle of obedience over sacrifice remains the same.

⁴² Constable, "Notes on 1 Samuel," 57.

⁴³ Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David*, 175.

⁴⁴ Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 273.

⁴⁵ Divination attempted to gain control of a deity by foretelling what would please the god. Saul believed he knew what would please the Lord. Saul would later use divination (cf. 28:7–9).

⁴⁶ Michael Eaton, *1 Samuel*. Preaching Through The Bible (Kent: Sovereign World, 1995), 65. In a rather telling discussion, Leithart writes: "A final theological question arises in connection with Saul's fall. After he had been anointed by Samuel and encountered the Spirit, he was made 'another man' (10:6). The language sounds a lot like what theologians call 'regeneration,' an act of the Spirit that makes a sinner a new creation. Yet, regeneration is supposed to be irreversible; once changed, always changed, just as once elect, always elect. If we want to preserve our theology, we have to conclude that Saul was not *really* changed into 'another man' and he did not *really* receive the Spirit.

The problem is, the text says that he 'was changed into another man' (10:6), and even claims that 'God changed for him another heart' (10:9). If we want to bow before Scripture, we simply have to accept what the text says. Saul became another man through the work of the Spirit, but by persisting in sin, Saul grieved the Spirit, who departed from him. This is a real possibility, not a hypothetical one. We really can grieve the Spirit, He really will depart from those who persist impenitently in sin, God really does withdraw His grace from people who were once changed into 'another man.' The last state is worse than the first, for those who spurn and offend that Spirit will find their house desolate and will find themselves terrorized by an 'evil spirit from the Lord.'" Peter J. Leithart, *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 90. Leithart is an outstanding scholar and I wholeheartedly respect his exegetical honesty; however, *if* he is proposing a loss of salvation, his final conclusion is not necessary. Genuine believers certainly are capable of grieving the Holy Spirit, but this does not result in a loss of salvation (see Eph 1:13–14; 4:30).

⁴⁷ For a similar incident, see 1 Kgs 11:30.

⁴⁸ Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David*, 168.

⁴⁹ Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 208.

⁵⁰ See R. B. Chisholm, Jr., "Does God Change His Mind?" *BibSac* 152 (1995): 387–99. Kaiser writes: "God is not a frozen automaton who cannot respond to persons; he is a living person who can and does react to others as much, and more genuinely, than we do to each other. Thus the same word *repent* is used for two different concepts both in this passage and elsewhere in the Bible. One shows God's responsiveness to individuals and the other shows his steadfastness to himself and to his thoughts and designs. Thus the text affirms that God changed his actions toward Saul in order to remain true to his own character or essence. Repentance in God is not, as it is in us, an evidence of indecisiveness. It is rather a change in his method of responding to another person based on some change in the other individual. The change, then, was in Saul. The problem was with Saul's partial obedience, his wayward heart and covetousness. To assert that God is unchanging does not mean he cannot experience regret, grief and repentance. If unchangeableness meant transcendent detachment from people and events, God would pay an awful price for immutability. Instead, God enters into a relationship with mortal beings that demonstrates his willingness to respond to each person's action within the ethical sphere of their obedience to his will." Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, [1996] 1997), 206. The classic example of this conditional teaching is Jer 18:7–10: "At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy *it*; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant *it*; if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it."

⁵¹ See Ps 110:4: "The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind . . ."

⁵² Eaton, *1 Samuel*, 65. He also argues: "He [Saul] is like the Israelites who before God's oath could go to Canaan (Num. 14:8-9), but after God's oath (Num. 14:20-24) cannot be renewed back to the position where they were before and could not thereafter get to Canaan despite their attempts (Num. 14:40-45). If afterward he wished to exercise the kingship with God's anointing he would find no place for a change of heart in God though he might seek it with tears (see Heb. 12:17)."

⁵³ Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David*, 175.

⁵⁴ The Hebrew verb *shasaph* ("hewed, hacked") only occurs here in the OT. Hence, there is some question as to how severely it be translated. However, Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David*, 173 is undoubtedly correct when he states ". . . it would appear that Samuel got very physical at this point and went somewhat crazy in the execution of the Amalekite monarch."

⁵⁵ Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 209–10 notes: “The verb here is in the Piel, and therefore could mean not so much that Samuel personally put Agag to death, as that he commanded that it be done. In any case, Samuel was acting as God’s agent of judgment on the wicked man.”

⁵⁶ Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 277.

⁵⁷ Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David*, 176.

⁵⁸ Smith, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 210 n. 19 remarks that Samuel did not see Saul again in the capacity of a spiritual advisor. Saul did see Samuel again in 1 Sam 19:24. Here, however, (1) Saul went to Samuel’s dwelling to seize David, not to consult with Samuel; and (2) Saul was overwhelmed by the Spirit, and consequently did not have all his mental faculties functioning normally.”

⁵⁹ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 117 writes: “We are left to wonder what it means to say, ‘Samuel grieved over Saul’ (v. 35). Does it mean Samuel is chagrined by his own failure as a leader or by his failure for Yahweh? Samuel’s grief may also have a more personal dimension, perhaps evoking sympathy for Saul.”

⁶⁰ On Yahweh repenting/not repenting, see Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 249–51.

⁶¹ Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary*, 229 comments: “Though it is not mentioned here, the narrative appears to have one eye on the words of Balaam in Nu 24:7 (“His [NIV, their] king will be greater than Agag, his [NIV, their] kingdom will be exalted”), as if to say that Saul was not to be the fulfillment of these words. Someone else was yet to come.”

⁶² Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 118.

⁶³ See Matt 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9 [twice]; 8:8 [thrice]; Luke 14:35.