

King Saul: "To Obey is Better than Sacrifice"

Scripture Readings: 1 Samuel 15; Mark 12:33

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Dear Congregation of Christ: "Was King Saul saved?" This is one of the most frequently asked questions by Christians. The same question is also asked of King Solomon and a few other people in the Scriptures. Many people point out that God bestowed the Holy Spirit on King Saul when he sought to kill David (1 Sam 19:23-24). However, this gift of the Spirit on Saul was God's means to prevent Saul from killing David. Remember the pagan prophet Balaam who was sent by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel? But the Spirit of God overpowered Balaam, so instead of curses, he pronounced blessings upon Israel (Num 22-24). Therefore, it is not always true that a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit is a believer. Many false teachers and prophets can be used by God to fulfill his purpose for his people.

Also, we find that in all of King Saul's reign, he exhibited no true repentance and faith in God. He sought to kill David, God's anointed king, almost all his reign because he was jealous of David whom the Israelites loved. After David struck Goliath dead and routed the Philistine army, the people sang, "*Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.*" From that day on until his death, Saul persecuted David, especially after David won many battles, "*So Saul was David's enemy continually*" (1 Sam 18:7-9, 29). He consulted the witch of En-dor instead of repenting of his sins and trusting in God before he died (1 Sam 28). And then when he was defeated in his final battle, Saul committed suicide. The sad and tragic epilogue of his life is this:

So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse. (1 Chr 10:13-14).

So, was Saul saved? The sad answer is no. But his reign was full of promise and potential at the start. His son Jonathan defeated the Philistines, and he led Israel to victory over the Moabites, Edomites, and the Ammonites. But there were two battles which became Saul's downfall. The first was in 1 Samuel 13 when the mighty Philistine army was arrayed against Israel's army who were "*in trouble... hard pressed.*" So he could not wait for Samuel to offer sacrifices before the battle in order to receive God's approval and blessing. Saul then offered the sacrifices himself, violating God's law that only the priest, Samuel, could offer sacrifices. He usurped the duties of the priests. Therefore, Samuel pronounced God's judgment against Saul, saying that the Lord has taken his kingdom away from him (1 Sam 13:13-14). This meant that his kingdom would end when he and his son Jonathan and his other two sons die in battle (1 Chr 10:6).

In our text this morning, we read about a second battle which resulted in the LORD again pronouncing the end of Saul's kingdom. He again disobeyed God's commandments. Our theme this morning is God's warning against him: **King Saul: "To Obey is Better than Sacrifice,"** under three headings.

False Alibi: "The People Spared the Best... to Sacrifice to the LORD"

After Samuel pronounced the first rejection of Saul by God in Chapter 13, Samuel again came to Saul with God's commandment, *"Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey"*(15:3). Why would God command "innocent" men, women, children, infants, and animals to be annihilated? Many liberals have condemned our God for this "genocide."

However, this war was prophesied by God about 400 years before the reign of King Saul. A people called the Amalekites attacked the Israelites led by Moses while they were traveling to the Promised Land. They attacked God's people when they were "faint and weary," killing those who were straggling behind (Deut 25:18). But God's people, led by Joshua, defeated the Amalekites. After this battle, God declared to Moses, *"I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven... The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation"* (Exo 17:14-16; see also Deut 27:19). The Amalekites also *"did not fear God"* (Deut 25:18). This is a picture of God's final wrathful judgment on all unrepentant people on the last day. There is no such thing as an "innocent" human being because all are sinners under God's wrath (Rom 3:23; Eph 2:3).

Attacking God's people invokes God's curse. When God made a covenant with Abraham, centuries before Moses, God promised Abraham, *"I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse"* (Gen 12:3). In the Old Testament, God's covenant people are the Israelites. In the New Testament God's covenant people are all who believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ alone as Savior, namely, all true Christians, Jews and Gentiles. God's blessing and curse in Genesis 12:3 still apply. Those who persecute, mock, harass, murder Christians are under God's curse and will reap what they sow. We have seen how they hate and do violence against churches and crisis pregnancy centers; how they plot to destroy families and children and our whole nation with their "woke" agenda. One day, God's patience will run out and they will "woke" to God's judgment.

However, Saul and his men disobeyed God's command. They spared the Agag king of the Amalekites and the best of their sheep, oxen, calves and lambs. When Samuel confronted Saul about his disobedience, Saul had an alibi: *"the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God"* (15:15). Saul reasoned to Samuel that he had done everything God had commanded him, but he spared the king and the best animals, supposedly for thanksgiving sacrifices. There are three errors from his alibi. First, he did not do everything precisely as God commanded him. Second, he did not acknowledge his sin, blaming his people. Third, his spin on sparing the animals is that they were for offering thanksgiving sacrifices. This is questionable at best, since most victorious armies usually want to take spoils for themselves. After sacrificing the animals, they would feast on roast beef and lamb to satisfy their hunger after a great battle.

Samuel then condemned Saul, saying, *"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams"* (15:22). Sacrifices are unacceptable to God when the worshiper's heart is not right with God. Obedience is more important to God than going through the motions of worship as mere rituals. Yes, our worship

must be acceptable and pleasing to God. However, to be acceptable and pleasing to God, our hearts must also be acceptable and pleasing to God, with true faith and righteous living. This is why the Apostle Paul exhorts us, "*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*" (Rom 12:1). And as we come to worship, we must worship with both reverence and joy, as the psalmist does, "*Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!*" (Psa 96:9) Worship with both holy splendor and trembling hearts.

Because of his violation of God's commandment and lying about sacrificing the sheep and oxen he spared, Saul came under God's condemnation for a second time. God will take his kingdom away from him and give it to another whom he had chosen.

False Confession: "I Have Sinned" (but not against the LORD)

After Samuel condemned Saul and told him that his throne will be given to another, Saul made a confession of his sin, "*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 bow before the LORD*" (1 Sam 15:24-25). Again, there are three things that are lacking in Saul's confession.

First, he confessed that he has sinned, but sinned against whom? His confession is different from David's confession in Psalm 51 after he committed adultery and murder, "*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight*" (Psa 51:4). David acknowledged that first and foremost, sin is a sin against God, and only secondarily sin against another person. When we sin against another, we sin against God. Our Lord Jesus Christ says that the first and greatest commandment is loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. If we do not love God wholeheartedly, we will never love our neighbor as ourselves. And then we sin against them. This is why Saul did not love David who served him faithfully in leading Saul's army to many victories. He did not love God truly, so he had no capacity to love his neighbor as he loved himself.

Second, as in his alibi, he did the blame game. He blamed his people for his sin, fearing them and obeying them, even if he knew that they were violating God's command. From the very beginning, man has played the blame game. After he sinned, Adam blamed his wife Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. Both did not acknowledge their sin against God, thinking that they could hide it from God. We always put a spin on our violations of God's law, thinking that we can get away with murder. But God knows all our hearts, our words, and our works. On Judgment Day, all the sins of all unrepentant unbelievers will be exposed and condemned, just as Saul was condemned.

Third, his plea for pardon was misdirected towards Samuel. Again, compare it with David's confession, "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions*" (Psa 51:1). His plea for mercy was directed towards God alone. In contrast, Saul asked Samuel to "*please pardon my sin.*" His plea for pardon was directed towards Samuel, not towards God, because he did not acknowledge that he sinned against God.

And throughout his reign, Saul did not demonstrate true repentance and faith.

False Worship: "That I May Bow Before the LORD *Your* God"

After he asks Samuel for pardon, Saul asks Samuel to return with him *"that I may bow before the LORD."* Saul was concerned about saving face, not wanting his people to know that God had rejected him, and that his throne will be taken away from him.

Did Saul truly want to worship God? The answer again, sadly, is no. He merely wanted to pretend to be a worshiper. Three times, he told Samuel, "the LORD *your* God" (15:15, 21, 30). With these words, he was not acknowledging that the LORD of Samuel and of Israel is also his LORD and God. But in the end, Saul did bow before the LORD, but only for show. He did not truly repent of his sin, did not truly confess of his sin, and did not truly worship God.

In Revelation 11, the two witnesses of God, representing the church, were martyred by the inhabitants of the earth. But after three days, God took them to heaven, and on that same hour, there was a great earthquake, and many died. But those who remained alive *"were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven"* (11:13). Were these people—left on earth after all believers are taken to heaven—also believe in God? No, because after all believers are taken by God to heaven, no believers will be left on earth. So, in their terror of Judgment Day, they will know that God is almighty and glorious and sovereign over all. There will be no second chances for them.

Their giving glory to God is false worship because they, like Saul, did not truly confess and repent of their sins and believe in God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ for salvation. Therefore, not all who bow before God, like Saul, are true worshipers.

Dear brothers and sisters: In Mark 12, a Jewish scribe asked Jesus what the greatest commandment is. Jesus answered, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."* And the second greatest commandment is, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* And the scribe added that these two commandments are *"much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices"* (12:28-33). Jesus also affirmed this in Matthew 9:13, *"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Samuel wanted Saul to confess and repent of his sin before God, and then he could offer acceptable worship before God. Like Saul, the scribes and the Pharisees had mere external religion. Their offerings and sacrifices meant nothing to God because their hearts were far away from him. They did not love their neighbors as they loved themselves, being self-righteous and condemning. They rebuked Jesus for eating with *"tax collectors and sinners,"* the outcasts of the community. They had no mercy and love for others (Matt 9:10-11). So Jesus rebuked them, *"For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Therefore, when we come to worship and confess our sins, let us do it with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. And welcome all strangers and visitors who come and worship God with us. Then, our worship will be pleasing and acceptable to God and to our Lord Jesus Christ.