

The Downfall of Israel's First King

THEOLOGICAL THEME: God requires total obedience to all of His commands.

God gave the people what they asked for when He chose Saul as the people's first king. Saul's rule began well, and it seemed like his heart was in the right place. But soon we observe Saul's faulty and wavering obedience. Saul obeyed God, but only halfway. He followed God's instruction, but not totally. His obedience was compromised, not wholehearted.

? Think back to when you were a kid, or consider the children you interact with regularly. What are some instructions that a child is likely to obey only halfheartedly?

? What are the signs that a child's obedience is compromised?

In this session we witness the downfall of King Saul and his choice to rebel against God. In Saul's story, we see how the failure to obey God completely leads us to rationalize and justify our disobedience, a sin that is compounded by the desire for human approval rather than divine grace. Halfhearted obedience is just another form of disobedience, and so, God calls us to renounce our hypocritical displays of righteousness and to submit fully to His purpose and plan.



Voices from Church History

"The best measure of a spiritual life is not its ecstasies, but its obedience."¹

—Oswald Chambers
(1874-1917)

Date of My Bible Study: _____

1. Our downfall is in our failure to obey God completely (1 Sam. 15:10-15).

First Samuel 15 opens with God giving a clear command to King Saul to conquer the Amalekites and not spare anyone or anything—not even the animals. But Saul refused to follow God’s instructions completely.

¹⁰ The word of the LORD came to Samuel: ¹¹ “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night. ¹² And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, “Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal.” ¹³ And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD.” ¹⁴ And Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?” ¹⁵ Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction.”

“*I regret...*” This seems like a strange emotion to attribute to God, doesn’t it? The Hebrew word is sometimes even translated “repent.” What does it mean for God to regret a past decision, or even worse, to repent of something He has done?

When God uses language like “I regret,” He is speaking in terms we can understand. It means that He truly feels the pain of our current circumstances, not that He is unaware of the future. There is a sense in which God has regrets, but it differs from the way humans experience this emotion. God feels sadness and regret for our sake when our decisions are harmful, but He does not share the pervasive human sentiment of wishing He could just go back and fix a past mistake (1 Sam. 15:29).

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

10. God Is Unchanging

God’s being and attributes, along with the ethical commitments He has given, cannot change. This means, among other things, that God is committed to being God and that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God’s unchanging nature is good news for Christians, for it guarantees that God does not change His mind or go back on His promises. Christians can find assurance and peace of mind in knowing that the God who brought them out of darkness into His marvelous light is the God who will carry them through into eternity.


 This passage gives two reasons for God's emotion of regret: Saul turned away from following Him and he did not obey His instructions. How are these two reasons related?

When Saul greeted Samuel, he boasted of his obedience. Take a moment and consider the craziness of this scene. The evidence of his disobedience was *literally* all around him: sheep making noises and the air filled with the smell of livestock. Yet he carried himself with the air of approval. "That's right," he said proudly, "I am faithfully following the Lord."

We shouldn't simply look at Saul and shake our heads. This story doesn't let us off the hook.

How many of us show up at worship services every weekend acting as if everything is just fine between God and us? How many of us sing songs and put on a good show? Meanwhile, the evidence of our disobedience is all around us. Our spouse, our children, our roommates or coworkers—they know our hypocrisy. They see our halfhearted obedience as the disobedience it truly is.

 What examples of blatant hypocrisy have you witnessed in your life?

 How do these examples serve as a warning to you about the danger of failing to obey God completely?



Voices from Church History

"When [Saul] was little with himself, he was great with God. But when he appeared great with himself, he was little with God."²

—Gregory the Great
(circa 540-604)

2. Our downfall is in our rationalization of disobedience (1 Sam. 15:16-21).

¹⁶ Then Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night.” And he said to him, “Speak.”

¹⁷ And Samuel said, “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. ¹⁸ And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, ‘Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’ ¹⁹ Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?”

²⁰ And Saul said to Samuel, “I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. ²¹ But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.”

“Though you are little in your own eyes,” Samuel told Saul, “are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel” (v. 17). Samuel brought Saul back to the beginning, pointing out that Saul was nothing when God decided to give him an entire kingdom. He said, in essence, “God made you everything, Saul! Was that not enough for you? After all that God has given you, you feel like you need *more* than that?”

Saul was after a name for himself, his own kingdom, and his own stature. That was why he spared Agag and kept him prisoner. Refusing to kill Agag was not an act of mercy. No, having an enemy king in your prison was an enormous status boost. In those days, conquering kings would frequently parade all of the kings they had captured—emaciated and in chains—as a sign to the world: “I am the conquering king. I am the king of kings.” Like a conquering king, Saul paraded the spoils of war in front of his people, the people he so desperately sought the approval of.



Notice how Samuel put Saul’s sin in the context of God’s faithfulness to him. How can reminders of God’s goodness help us see the ugliness of our sin?

Everyone has a “king,” something that they crave and must have to feel happy and secure. Even kings have “kings.” For Saul, personal recognition was his king. It fueled his rebellion. Sin usually grows out of some deep soul dissatisfaction, something we feel like we must have for a happy and secure life. But the real problem is that our soul is not satisfied in the Lord.

Saul succumbed to the temptation of following the wrong narrative. He constructed a narrative that excused his sin: blaming others for his disobedience, attempting to make up for his mistakes with other sacrifices, and generally asserting that he was still a pretty good individual. The revisionist history flowed out of Saul’s mouth so freely that it seems he believed the deceitful story he had crafted to dupe others. He fell prey to his own web of lies.

When confronted with our sin, we all find ourselves in situations similar to Saul’s. Like Saul, we may rationalize our disobedience and follow a non-biblical narrative. We can try to blame others for our disobedience, make up for our mistakes by giving extra money to the church, or point out that at least we are not as bad as *that guy*. But this is a path without an exit. Once we begin to rationalize, we begin to spin the web of our own demise, deceiving ourselves until, like Samuel’s robe in the hands of Saul, our lives are torn in two (15:27-28).

God does not want our rationalizations; He wants our repentance. He does not want our sacrifices; He wants our submission. The choice has passed for Saul, but not for us. The choice between self-deception and repentance—between death and life—stands before each of us even today.



What are some ways you have seen yourself or others justify or rationalize sin?

3. Our downfall is in our desire for human approval (1 Sam. 15:22-31).

²² *And 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 listen than the fat of rams.

²³ *For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.”*

²⁴ *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.”* ²⁵ *Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the LORD.”*

²⁶ *And 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.”* ²⁷ *As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore.* ²⁸ *And Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.”* ²⁹ *And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.”* ³⁰ *Then he said, “I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the LORD your God.”* ³¹ *So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the LORD.*



Imagine being invited over to a friend’s house for dinner. After eating, he or she says, “I want to invite you upstairs with me. I’ve got a pentagram and some candles spread out on the floor, and I thought we could enjoy some temple prostitutes, sacrifice a few goats, and generally just offer ourselves to Satan. Don’t worry, we’ll go to church on Sunday, just like normal.” How would you react to that? With revulsion, of course, and rightly so. *And that is precisely how God reacts to our halfhearted “obedience.”* According to Samuel, witchcraft-level rebellion is seen in partial or conditional or delayed obedience.

Unfortunately, many people in our churches are giving less than 100-percent obedience, just like Saul, and are completely at peace with it. Some are cheating on their taxes or their school exams. Unmarried couples are sleeping with one another under the excuse of being truly “in love.” Some are holding on to bitterness, refusing to forgive someone they know they should forgive. Many have heard a call to missions but are refusing to answer.

Those of us who are religious are often tempted to cover over rebellion with rituals, to substitute ceremony for surrender. We disobey in one area and try to “make it up” to God with some offering in another area. So we refuse the call to missions, but we resolve to tithe heavily in our local church. Or we refuse to break off the relationship with an unbeliever, but we resolve to share Christ with him or her instead. Or we refuse to give our money to God’s mission, but we resolve to “tithe of our time.” But all of these are just various forms of disobedience.



Why do you think we are so prone to partial obedience instead of complete obedience to God’s commands?

This passage ends with a confession from Saul. It looks like repentance. But as we see in the unfolding story, Saul never truly turned back to God. Also, the phrase in verse 25 indicated that Saul was still thinking of the whole situation incorrectly. Saul wanted to “worship the LORD,” but he was not thinking of singing some God-songs together or washing someone else’s feet. Saul wanted to have his national thanksgiving sacrifice on behalf of the victory. He wanted a big ceremony.

Samuel was the only one who could offer an official worship ceremony. If Samuel refused, this would be a major loss of face for Saul. Sadly, it seemed *this* was what Saul was so worried about. His main concern was still how he looked in the eyes of the people. He was still concerned about his status.

Too many of us are more worried about being caught in our sin than about the flagrancy of the offense before God. We would be embarrassed if our sin were exposed, but we completely ignore the fact that the Person most offended, most involved—God Himself—sees and knows our sin completely.

You must admit that the Bible has some vivid screenwriting. Imagine Samuel turning to leave, when Saul grabs his robe. *Rip!* Samuel takes one look at his torn hem and says, “God has torn the kingdom away from you, fool, and given it to a better neighbor of yours.” That neighbor would turn out to be King David. David was not a perfect king, but he knew how to repent, and he knew how to let repentance be about God’s kingdom, not his own.



How can we tell the difference between true repentance over sin and mere regret over sin’s consequences?



How can you discern the difference between repentance and regret in your own heart?

Conclusion

Earlier we saw how Samuel reminded Saul that God made him a king when he had been a nobody. Saul should have responded in gratitude because of God’s amazing grace. He should have allowed the value of God’s gift to him to break the captivating power of sin over his life. Instead, he hardened himself against God’s grace.

The great news of the gospel is that Christ, unlike King Saul, demonstrated wholehearted obedience perfectly for us. He died in our place, suffering the penalty for Satan worshipers. He died the witch’s death so we could have the saint’s acceptance. His obedience earns our acceptance before God, the one Person whose opinion matters more than any other—if we will receive it. And when we do, the power of disobedience in our lives is broken, setting us free from anxieties, dissatisfaction, insecurity, and fear.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Saul’s kingship could not last because he rejected God’s word. Israel needed a lasting kingdom ruled by Someone who would obey God fully. Through the perfect obedience of Jesus, God would establish His rule over His people forever.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to renounce our hypocritical displays of righteousness and to submit fully to His purpose and plan so that the world will see His redemption.

1. In what areas of your life do you need to repent of hypocritical displays of righteousness?

2. How can we lovingly help each other see through our deadly excuses at justifying or rationalizing sin?

3. What steps of obedience is God calling you to for the sake of making the gospel of Jesus known?

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Eric Geiger

Vice President, LifeWay Resources

Ed Stetzer

General Editor

Trevin Wax

Managing Editor

Daniel Davis

Content Editor

Josh Hayes

Content and Production Editor

Ken Braddy

Manager, Adult Ongoing Bible Studies

Michael Kelley

Director, Groups Ministry

Send questions/comments to:

Managing Editor,
The Gospel Project: Adult Personal Study Guide,
One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234-0102;
or make comments on the Web at
www.lifeway.com.

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About the Writers

Unit 1:



J. D. Greear is the lead pastor of The Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina. He's the author of *Gospel*, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart*, and *Jesus, Continued...: Why the Spirit Inside You Is Better Than Jesus Beside You*. J. D. holds a PhD from Southeastern Seminary. He and his wife, Veronica, have four children.



Spence Shelton lives in Charlotte, North Carolina, with his wife, Courtney, and their four children. Spence and his family were sent by The Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham to plant Mercy Church in the fall of 2015. He holds a BSBA from UNC-Chapel Hill and an MDiv from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Unit 2:



Greg Breazeale (sessions 7-12) resides with his wife, Heather, and three sons in Austin, Texas, where he is the North Campus pastor at The Austin Stone Community Church. He holds an MDiv from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and is currently pursuing a DMin in Expository Preaching at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.



Keith and Kristyn Getty (session 13) are writers of modern hymns that teach Christian doctrine sung in globally-accessible melodies. Some of their best known hymns include "In Christ Alone," "Speak, O Lord," and "The Power of the Cross," all three co-written by Keith with Stuart Townend. Their hymns are sung in churches around the world, in fine concert halls of Europe and North America, and on US network and public television and the UK's BBC. Keith and Kristyn live between Northern Ireland and Nashville with their three young daughters.

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