

# Our struggles with God's severe command

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 25 August 2024

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[ 0 : 00 ] The reading today is from 1 Samuel 15, 17-29, and then 16, 1-13, which can be found on page 286 of the Church Bible.

Samuel said, Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel, and then he sent you on a mission, saying, Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amicalites. Wage war against them until you have wiped them out. Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?

But I did obey the Lord, Saul said. I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amicalites and brought back Agag, their king.

The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord, your God, at Gilgal. But Samuel replied, Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice.

And to heed is better than the fat of the rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.

[ 1 : 30 ] Then Saul said to Samuel, I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instruction. I was afraid of the men, and so I gave in to them. And now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord.

But Samuel said to him, I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel. As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore.

Samuel said to him, The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to one of your neighbors, to one better than you. He who is the God of Israel does not lie or change his mind, for he is not a human being, so that he should change his mind.

And then 1 Samuel 16, 1-13. The Lord said to Samuel, How long will you mourn for Saul? For since I have rejected him as king over Israel.

Fill your horn with oil and be on your way. I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king. But Samuel said, How can I go?

[ 2 : 44 ] If Saul hears about it, he will kill me. The Lord said, Take a heifer with you and say, I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do.

You are to anoint for me the one I indicate. Samuel did what the Lord said. When they arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him.

They said, Do you come in peace? Samuel said, Yes, in peace. I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.

Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord.

But the Lord said to Samuel, Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

[ 3 : 47 ] Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, The Lord has not chosen this one either. Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, Nor has the Lord chosen this one.

Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, The Lord has not chosen these. So he asked Jesse, Are these all the sons you have?

There is still the youngest, Jesse answered. He is tending the sheep. Samuel said, Send for him. We will not sit down until he arrives. So he sent for him and had him brought in.

He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the Lord said, Rise and anoint him. This is the one. So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers.

And from that day on, the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks for meeting God. Thanks Lakshmi for reading.

[ 4 : 55 ] And good morning, St Silas. If we've not met before, my name is Martin Ayres. I'm the lead pastor here. And it's my privilege to take us through these two chapters of 1 Samuel, chapters 15 and 16 today.

Lakshmi's just read portions of those. And as ever, you can find, if you open up the notice sheet, there's an outline inside there. And that will help you if you can follow that as we look at this together. What would help you more is keeping your Bibles open at 1 Samuel 15, so that you can just see, you can keep checking that what we're looking at here is coming straight out from the scriptures.

And let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray. Mighty God and gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. And we ask that as you speak to us this morning, you will give us ears to hear your voice, minds that can understand, hearts that are willing to change and respond rightly to you.

Lord, however we feel this morning, wherever we stand with you, we ask that your word would not just inform our heads, but would inflame our hearts as we come to know you better in your power, your character, your wisdom, your love.

For we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I don't know whether you've had, I think most of us will have had the experience before of where we think we know someone, maybe a friend, we know them quite well, but we suddenly see them in a different setting and we see a different side to them.

[ 6 : 25 ] They say something or do something that really surprises us that they did that. And we might find ourselves saying to them something like, well, I'm seeing you in a different light now. I didn't know that about you.

Well, we were made to know God and I guess everyone here will have, when we think of God and what God is like, things will come into our minds. We'll have an idea of the God who we were made to know.

But this morning in these two chapters, we see things about God, things that God says, things that God does, that are stretching for us and might make us think that they're surprising about his character, about his plan, important things for us to know that might mean we're left thinking, I'm seeing him in a different light.

And that's really good for us. I would encourage us not to kind of push away things that we find troubling or daunting about God. Often those are times when he is most at work in us as we see things that startle us.

If you're just jumping in with us, at this point, we are in a series working through the book of Samuel so that we're letting God set the agenda as we look at this chapter by chapter.

[ 7 : 42 ] And we're after Moses. It's the 11th century BC. God has led his people out of slavery in Egypt and rescued them. We're after Joshua, through whom God led his people into the land of Canaan that he promised for them.

So this is the people of God living in the promised land, taken there to enjoy God's rule and blessing. And at the start of Samuel, we had a prophecy in chapter 2 from Samuel's mother, Hannah, that God would bring his blessing to his people through his anointed king or his Messiah.

Since then, we've seen Israel, the people of God, choose, ask for a king, and God has given them the kind of king they wanted, this man Saul.

He was physically impressive, proud, strong, the kind of king the nations around them liked to have. And in these chapters, we get a tale of two kings.

We get one who is being humbled and taken down, and one who is being exalted. But before we get there, we're going to think about the background to those events. And I've called it on our sheets, our struggles with God's severe command.

[ 8 : 57 ] The severe command comes in verses 1 to 3 of chapter 15, where God commands Saul to strike down and destroy Israel's enemies, the Amalekites, and spare no one in verse 3.

And that is disturbing for us. And when we find something like this in the Bible, we've got a number of options. One is that we just give up on the whole thing. We throw out the Christian faith and say, it can't be true if the Bible says that the God who made us would command this kind of thing.

But I would hope that all of us here would resist that temptation, that we would all have seen enough of Jesus, hopefully even experienced enough of Jesus in our lives, if not at least to have seen enough of the wonder of his life in the scriptures, to know that it wouldn't make good sense to throw the whole thing away when we find something in the Bible we're uncomfortable with.

Another option, though, is to go for a kind of pick-and-mix Christianity, where we think, well, I'll take from the Bible the bits that I agree with, but when I find things like this, I will dismiss them as untrue, as kind of man's best guesses at the time, but can't be right about God.

But really, if we do that, what we will be left with is a God we've made in our image, a God of our own imagining, rather than the God of revelation, the God who is there, who is making himself known to us.

[ 10 : 30 ] Another thing that we could do with something like this is quietly come to terms with ourselves and accept that God commanded this at that time, that it's true of God, but we choose to kind of bury it away and never really think about it and never really talk about it and hope that if our friends are interested in Christianity, they might not notice that there are things like this in the Bible.

I don't think that any of those are good things for us to do, and so instead, what we're doing this morning as a church is being brought to kind of wrestle with this and really think about what's going on here as God does something that we find so confronting.

And it may be that it causes us to reshape our thinking about God and what he thinks of us and what he is like. So one thing we need to say is that this is a unique command at a unique moment in history.

There is no place in the Christian life for violence against people who make us into their enemies. If someone chooses to make Christians their enemies, there is no place for the Christian to be violent towards them.

God commanded this as an instrument of his just judgment against this people at that time, the Amalekites. And he tells us why he did that and why it's just.

[ 12 : 00 ] In verse 2, he remembers that when he rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and they, with their children, came fleeing out of brutal slavery and he brought them through the Red Sea into the wilderness, the Amalekites ambushed them and viciously attacked them and caused terror among the people.

We also know that God's judgment is patient here. He's given them generations to repent and we know that God's purpose in saving Israel because he's told us, his purpose in saving this people and gathering them and giving them his law to live by was that the nations around them would be saved, that they would turn to the living God as they saw through Israel's life and worship the God who is there.

He has given the Amalekites generations to do that but now their time has gone and it's time for judgment to come. And his judgment is just, it's responsive to how the Amalekites have behaved and we see that in verse 33 at the end of the chapter when Samuel takes the sword to Agag, the king of the Amalekites and he explains that Agag will die by the sword because by his sword he made many women childless.

So God's judgment responds to what they have been like. And the other thing to bear in mind as we see this command is that for the people of God at this time the Amalekites had been an ongoing source of terror, of distress, of grief, of bereavement and pain and so God's declaration that they will be judged now would actually have been of comfort to the faithful people of God as they could look forward to their future in the land with security.

But it is severe. It's a wipe out including the livestock as though God is saying that the whole land has to be rid of the idolatry and the immorality that the Amalekites have brought there.

[ 14 : 13 ] And what we shouldn't try and avoid from this chapter is that God's judgment is real. It is a reality. Because soberingly when we see instant cases of God's judgment like this they are foretastes of the coming judgment that Jesus Christ says will come to everyone.

That one day we will all stand before his judgment seat. and Jesus pleads with us that we must make sure that we do not arrive at that judgment day unforgiven.

We will be held accountable by him. So that command from God is the background to what becomes this tale of two different kings in our chapters. And our first point we're going to look at it under three points.

Our first one is the rejection of God's disobedient servant. judgment and that's in chapter 15. So God gives his clear command but Saul thinks that he knows better.

He spares the king and he spares the plunder. Not because he's more merciful than God but because these are the things that Saul values and he keeps them back.

[ 15 : 23 ] And the verdict on him comes in verse 10. If you look with me at verse 10 of chapter 15. Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel I regret that I have made Saul king because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.

And when we see there that language of God saying that he regrets it's not that God kind of thinks he made a mistake but it's language that reflects that the attitude that Saul now has to experience of God has changed.

Because God is unchanging and Saul has become disobedient. And so if you were to think of God in human terms it would be like regret that now God says Saul can't be king he has disobeyed my word.

And that whenever anybody departs from God's word it should be something that grieves us something that we lament and so we see that in Samuel's reaction. We get the beginning of it here in verse 11 Samuel was angry and he cried out to the Lord all that night.

So Samuel confronts Saul then with this reality of what Saul has done and what Saul does in the confrontation it's like a textbook on ways that any of us might try and excuse our sin.

[ 16 : 49 ] We might try and justify ourselves when we have chosen not to obey God's word. So in verse 13 first Saul tries to hide what he's done when Samuel reached him verse 13 when Samuel reached him Saul said the Lord bless you I have carried out the Lord's instructions.

So he's saying look at all I have done and it's Samuel who has to say Saul I think I can hear the bleating of sheep what is going on here.

Then Saul tries the blame game it's not my fault it was other people. So in verse 15 he says it was the soldiers who brought back those things. As if to say it's nothing to do with me.

And Samuel cuts him off in verse 19 and he says why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?

Saul then decides to try and pretend to be pious deeply religious devout. He says in verse 21 that the reason he kept back these animals was to sacrifice them to the Lord.

[ 17 : 56 ] And we might think that's actually quite a nice idea. God's won the victory so keep the animals back to offer them to God. And the apparent reasonableness of that excuse teaches us something really significant this morning that from God's perspective he can tell what we really think of him by how we respond to his word.

So Samuel tells us that in verse 22 but Samuel replied does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord?

To obey is better than sacrifice and to heed is better than the fat of rams. In other words God hates a kind of human religion that's just a cover up a veneer of respectability to cover hearts that have chosen not to obey his every word.

So Saul faces isolation from God and as a symbol of that Samuel turns from him and as he turns to leave him in verse 27 Saul realizes what's happening and he takes hold of Samuel's cloak and it tears at the hem and on the hem there would have actually been a tassel to remind them of God's word to represent God's word and it comes off and Samuel says as like a parable in verse 28 the Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors to one better than you he who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind for he is not a human being time we're going to see that in the coming chapters and the years ahead and for Israel this is a moment to weep it's a return to darkness for the people of God at the start of first Samuel they were in dire straits and they thought the solution was a king and

God has given them the kind of king they wanted and it's ended in this disaster but then we come to our second point the wisdom in God's surprising choice at the beginning of chapter 16 the wisdom in God's surprising choice so God picks Samuel up from the floor in chapter 16 verse 1 the Lord said to Samuel how long will you mourn for Saul since I have rejected him as king over Israel fill your horn with oil and be on your way I am sending you to Jesse so Samuel heads to Bethlehem and let's remember at that time Bethlehem means very little it means nothing to him he's going to this innocuous place to this man Jesse but in verse 6 we meet the obvious choice for the next king verse 6 when they arrived Samuel saw Eliab and thought surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the

[ 21 : 03 ] Lord and we can all picture the type can't we handsome 6 foot 3 stacked captain of the first 15 rugby team effortlessly bright head boy at his school great taste in aftershave and just so charming it's like everyone is in orbit around this man and Samuel sees him and he thinks we've got him we've got our next king everyone is going to follow this guy but what does God say well look with me at verse 7 but the Lord said to Samuel do not consider his appearance or his height for I have rejected him the Lord does not look at the things people look at people look at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart so the search goes on as

Jesse calls his next son Abinadab and the next one and seven sons pass before Samuel and in verse 10 Samuel says the Lord has not chosen any of these and you sense the tension because that's all the guys and in verse 11 he asks Jesse are these all the sons you have there is still the youngest Jesse answered he's tending the sheep and Samuel said send for him we will not sit down until he arrives and that probably made things even more tense because I've learned from visiting Graham Cameron's farm that when you're tending sheep you could be very far away and Samuel is saying there's no lunch until they find the eighth son so they're all waiting but someone does go and they bring him back and we learn in verse 12 as he arrives that he is glowing with health and has a fine appearance and handsome features which I don't know about you but I'm a bit surprised that we're told that but

I think it's partly because it's a bit like Joseph looks in Genesis and God used Joseph to save his people so I think there might be an allusion there to Joseph and it might also be because we're just being told there not to overreact from Saul so just because Saul was very tall and good looking and strong and was a terrible king doesn't mean that we should kind of despise the good looking the point is that it doesn't matter how he looks what matters is what happens next in verse 12 it's what God says of this man or boy in verse 12 the Lord says rise and anoint him this is the one and so if it's God's choice then we follow him so the breathtaking moment as Samuel the kingmaker takes his horn of oil and he anoints the youngest son of

Jesse to be the next king of Israel and we need to learn here from both the surprise of God's choice and the wisdom of God's choice that this is David here and he was almost overlooked by the people there that day and he's one of the greatest men who ever lived undeniable today as a matter of history that this is one of the greatest men who ever lived King David but the surprise of God's choice of David to be the right king for his people makes us look forward beyond this moment to 28 generations later when there was a man in the line of Jesse and David and it was Joseph and he has to go back to that same little town of Bethlehem with his betrothed Mary because of the census of Caesar Augustus and we need to apply verse 7 and that principle to the baby that was born then

Jesus to make sure we don't misjudge him by looking at the outward appearance judging in a human way what we think of Jesus so in chapter 7 of John's gospel the people around Jesus at that time even though he's doing signs that show that he is the one who can give life and return people to God they're rejecting him because he doesn't keep their man-made rules about the Sabbath and he says to them in John 7 24 stop judging by human appearances but instead judge correctly we don't know much about what Jesus looked like but in Isaiah's prophecy about him in chapter 53 of Isaiah looking ahead to what he would be like it says he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him he was despised and rejected by men a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering and yet he goes out to the Jordan river to be baptized by John the Baptist and

[ 26 : 11 ] John tells us that when he does God says to him this is the one and as he comes apart of the water there's a voice from heaven this is my son whom I love with him I am well pleased he is God's choice to be our saving king and each of us can ask afresh this morning will I accept him as my king and turn to him and verse seven is then a key lesson from first Samuel for all of us that principle that people look at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart and it's good to remember that when we think about Christian leadership the church in Corinth in the New Testament we learn the church in Corinth failed to do this so they reject the apostle Paul who first planted the church in Corinth and by the time he writes to them 2nd Corinthians in chapter 10 they've replaced him with leaders who are more visually impressive who fit the bill for them their rhetoric is better their oratory is impressive and the apostle

Paul says to them that they're judging by appearances and we can stumble like that when we think about the kind of leaders we're willing to follow in life in our work places in politics but also in church life we find ourselves drawn to the Eliabs to people like Saul people whose talent and charisma draws in a crowd I was invited to a conference on Christian leadership in Edinburgh not so long ago and it was striking just how glitzy the publicity was for the conference it was all about the appearances and the worldly achievements of the guys on the platform who were speaking and any of us as a church we can stumble here when it comes to looking for the next minister or looking for a youth worker for Christian leaders we can find ourselves judging by outward appearances looking for people who are the dynamic movers and shakers or people with the right education or people who are funny instead of looking at character what are they like on the inside do they love

Jesus do they have a humble desire to trust him and to be more like him and it's good to apply that lesson to our own lives it's a daunting thing isn't it I find it daunting as each of us stops to think what am I really aspiring to be what do I really want for myself what am the truth is isn't it that outward appearances really matter to us in our times just like in souls times and technology has accelerated that it plays on that in us so I'm reading at the moment Matthew Hates book The Anxious Generation and in his book he's talking particularly about teenagers growing up in our world today with technology and social media but what he says about how the mind of a teenager is affected by social media is true to an extent for all of us even those of us who are not teenagers as you scroll through image after image on something like

Instagram and whenever you pause or you react the algorithms get to work to bombard you with more images that are the same because the whole thing is designed to hold your attention and those images what you're seeing each time is how many positive reactions there have been by other people to those images and what Matthew Height says is that what that's doing to our minds is it's subliminally training us to know what you need to look like in order to be given the verdict on your life approved and he says within an hour on Instagram the teenage mind can be given many thousands of examples of that that draw new patterns in their brain in order that they can see how you need to look in order to be admired to be liked to be loved and isn't that something that all of us can end up affected by in our society well

Jesus liberates us from that he wants to liberate us from that when he says to us this morning that what he is concerned with as our king like on the inside what do you really like when it's just you and your heavenly father he says people look on the outward appearance but the Lord he looks on the heart so we thought about the wisdom in God's surprising choice and our third point more briefly this morning is the hope in God's anointed king let's pick things up again in verse 13 and see what happens next after the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers and from that day on the spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David and the very next thing that happens to David is he delivers the king of God's people from evil we didn't have that read but from verse 14 to the rest of chapter what we find out is that

[ 31 : 42 ] Saul becomes tormented by an evil spirit and his attendants bring in David son of Jesse and he becomes Saul's armor bearer because Saul likes him and let's look at verse 23 just to pick up what happens at the end of the chapter whenever the spirit from God that's the evil spirit God is sovereign over all things and this evil spirit has come to torment Saul so whenever the spirit from God came on Saul David would take up his lyre and play then relief would come to Saul he would feel better and the evil spirit would leave him so as David lives a life worshipping God on the lyre the spirit has anointed him so that he is the one who can deliver God's people from evil in the next chapter he'll take on Goliath and the

Philistines the people's greatest enemy as he fights their battles for them so let's just think if we know any more about David's life and what's going to happen now that the spirit of God has rushed on him what is he going to experience well his life is about to become excruciatingly difficult he's going to end up on the run from an envious powerful angry king who will plot to take his life he's going to get hunted he's going to be betrayed he's going to be trapped he's going to hide in caves to survive at one stage he's going to have to feign insanity just to stay alive the spirit comes and trouble begins and so it and so it was the spirit descends on him at his baptism and the very next place he goes is the wilderness among the wild beasts starving a testing place where the spiritual attack the spirit comes and the trouble begins and we could expect the same thing in our lives we are an anointed people those of us who were trusting

Jesus this morning we are given the spirit every believer has the spirit we become children of the living God and the spirit equips us for everything God calls us to as Jesus sends us out on a mission to go and make disciples of all nations but when we keep in step with the spirit we are not to think that everything will become serene in our lives and calm and comfortable it might mean being brought into conflict difficulty persecution the writer Dale Ralph Davis says the wilderness is not the sign of the spirit's absence but the scene of his presence David's experience forewarns us of that if your life is really difficult it might not be a sign of your sin or of being under judgment from God it might well be a sign of being a child of

God of being in Christ of being called by God sometimes it's when the spirit comes that the trouble begins but let's come away from these two chapters feeling the joy and relief this morning that God has chosen and appointed the right king for us and in him we find hope in soul God had given Israel the saviour they really wanted and it was a disaster but picture God picking Samuel up from the floor and telling him arise because of a new hope God saves Israel from their saviour and he gives them his wise choice of king a surprising king a humble king a shepherd king an anointed king equipped by the spirit to save them and so for us sometimes we need to be saved from our own self appointed saviours the things we've put our trust in that will never save us who let us down but while we were helpless

God sent the anointed king that we need when the spirit rushed on Jesus he went out into the wilderness to take on and confront our great enemy Satan and as he was tempted and tested by Satan he passed the test that Saul had failed that Israel had failed as he responded to the devil's temptations with the word of God and with obedience so that now we as his people can enjoy the peace and security of knowing that our king has done everything well he has saved us from the severe judgment of God against sin he has won for us God's favour and blessing by God and delighting God and he is the one that we can trust to deliver us from evil forever let's pray together heavenly father as we come to your table this morning we do so reminded that your just judgment is a dangerous reality that one day everyone will stand before you to give an account and we thank you that while we were still sinners you demonstrated your love for us in sending us the king who can deliver us that by the death he died that we should have died he has borne your judgment that he is now our victorious king we worship him our unexpected king our humble king our shepherd king our spirit filled king and so we ask that by your spirit you will continue to help us to fix our thoughts upon



[ 37 : 53 ] Jesus and you will transform our hearts as we do that so that when you look at our hearts they will be hearts that love you and long to please you for we ask in Jesus name amen