

1 Samuel 15:1-35

Saul Spares Agag but Loses His Kingdom

The previous chapter described a series of wars against Israel's enemies. We don't know how long afterward this attack on the Amalekites happened. But Saul's failure to obey was the final straw, and he was effectively stripped of his kingdom, although he continued occupying the position. "The Spirit of Jehovah departed from Saul" (**1 Samuel 16:14**).

1 Samuel 15:1 - "Samuel also said unto Saul, The LORD sent me to anoint thee to be king over his people, over Israel: now therefore hearken thou unto the voice of the words of the LORD. Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass."

Israel had been urged by God to "remember Amalek" and wipe them out:

- **Deuteronomy 25:17-19** - "Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God. Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it."

These were descendants of Esau (see Genesis 36:15-16) who surprised Israel, smiting the hindmost and the feeble, women and children, in cold-blood and unprovoked. The Amalekites were sneaky and cowardly. (See **Exodus 17:8**)

Rabbinical commentary explains that Amalek made war against Israel not for national glory or for imperialist expansion, but first to "diminish the awe of the Lord" in the eyes of the world and then also out of bitter hatred of Jacob who had stolen the patriarchal blessing from their forefather Esau.

Vendettas die hard.

The extermination of Amalek was carried out in several stages: by Barak and Gideon (**Judges 5:14; Judges 6:3; Judges 7:12**, &c.), by Saul and Samuel (**1 Samuel 15**), by David (**1 Samuel 27:8-9; 1 Samuel 30:17**), by the Simeonites (**1 Chronicles 4:42-43**), and lastly by Esther, who exterminated the Agagites in Haman's house.

The rabbis said it was especially the responsibility of the Israelite king to accomplish this, citing Balaam's prophecy:

- **Numbers 24:7** - "...his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be

exalted."

The Targum of Jonathan adds, "and even in the days of the King Messiah it shall not be forgotten."

But because the command is in the plural in this chapter, it applies to all individuals throughout history.

Also, Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, whose mother was Rachel. Tradition said that only a descendant of Rachel would defeat Amalek. Further, Benjamin was the only son of Rachel who did not bow to Esau because he was not yet born (**Genesis 33:6-7**).

This means for us today that the spiritual type of the Amalekites and their opposition to God's kingdom, attacking us at our weakest points, must still be rooted out within ourselves by the cross of Jesus and by dying to self daily. Another instance of "revenging the disobedience" (**2 Corinthians 10:6**).

When we "remember to forget" ourselves, and self is blotted out of our consciousness, and Christ in us can truly fulfill God's commandments through His own righteousness.

The mystics call the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil, "the tree of doubt." The Hebrew word for doubt (*sufek*) and the word Amalek share the same gematria, 240. Amalek represents the opposite of faith.

Why Destroy the Amalekite Property?

"utterly destroy all that they have" - This was to show that the attack on Amalek was not to obtain plunder. Israel would not benefit at all from anything of Amalek's. Similarly, Esther and Mordechai and the Jews took no plunder of their enemy (**Esther 9:10**).

"have no pity" - They were to exterminate every Amalekite. One rabbinical source explains: "This mandate was difficult for the Jewish people to accept, since they are naturally merciful, particularly since they could not have foreseen what evil might come of pitying Amalek - i.e. the birth of Haman generations later. - *Daas Sofrim*

1 Samuel 15:3 - "And Saul gathered the people together, and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand footmen, and ten thousand men of Judah."

Telaim ("the place of lambs") - Rashi has it that Saul numbered the people by making each pick out a lamb, since it was unlawful to number the people directly, for it is stated concerning them: "which will not be counted for multitude" (**Genesis 32:12**).

The Targum says that these sheep were paschal lambs, brought to celebrate Passover. And one tradition says that the ultimate eradication of Amalek was destined to occur on the 14th of Nissan, which is Passover.

1 Samuel 15:5-6 - "And Saul came to a city of Amalek, and laid wait in the valley. And Saul said unto the Kenites, Go, depart, get you down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them: for ye shewed kindness to all the children of Israel, when they came up out of Egypt. So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites."

Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, is said to have belonged to the Kenites (**Judges 1:16**). He was also called "the priest of Midian."

<https://www.thetorah.com/article/moses-father-in-law-kenite-or-midianite>

Since the war against Amalek was a result of how they treated Israel coming out of Egypt, Saul reminds the Kenites that they showed kindness to Israel during that time, and would be spared if they separated from the Amalekites.

Amalek Defeated, but Agag Spared

1 Samuel 15:7-9 - "And Saul smote the Amalekites from Havilah until thou comest to Shur, that is over against Egypt. And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly."

The "ban" or *herem* - a "holy war" against Amalek - seems excessively harsh and brutal to us today.

But as Paul tells us:

- **1 Corinthians 10:11** - "Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."

So how do we interpret it? Our war is not with flesh and blood, but with spiritual wickedness in high places.

Accordingly, the command to exterminate Amalek, for us, means to remember to obliterate our consciousness of self, our self-seeking.

Amalek was considered to embody the essence of sin. The Zohar associates the Amalekites with the saying in **Psalms 104:35** - "Sinners will cease from the earth," referring to the wiping out all remembrance of Amalek.

Instead, Saul keeps those things he values, things he judges as "good" or useful. Some he suggests could be sacrificed as offerings. Keeping Agag alive could have seemed like a good way to extract future concessions from the Amalekites, perhaps to make Amalek a vassal state to Israel. Or maybe it boosted his ego to display such a captured king. (Remember how the pagan king Adoni-bezek kept 70 conquered kings captive, cutting off their thumbs and big toes and feeding them scraps around his table - **Judges**

1:7)

The spiritual meaning of this is we cannot retain those aspects of the flesh - maybe strengths or talents we think we could use for God. They all to die before a new creation can come forth. You can't skip the cross to get to the resurrection.

Whatever his motive, Saul still disobeyed the mission given to him by God through Samuel.

Later, Saul would show no mercy or pity when he slaughtered the priests at Nob who aided David (1 **Samuel 22:19**). This leads the Midrash to note that a person who is merciful when he should be cruel will eventually be cruel when mercy is called for (Koheles Rabba 7:16).

Judging Good and Evil - "all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly." - This is rooted in the Bible's first story. Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and begin to judge good and bad for themselves. Saul and the Israelites here do the same thing. But there's a problem: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. (**Isaiah 55:8-9**).

1 Samuel 15:10-11 - "Then came the word of the LORD unto Samuel, saying, It repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the LORD all night."

"God's repentance is not like ours, for, 'the Strength of Israel will not lie, nor repent; for He is not a man that He should repent.' Man's repentance implies a change of mind, God's a change of circumstances and relations. Saul had moved away from God." - *Alfred Edersheim*

The Talmud says were it not for Samuel's cry and prayer to God, Saul would have been killed immediately. Instead Saul continued to reign for two and a half more years.

Samuel Arrives to Confront Saul

1 Samuel 15:13 - "And Samuel came to Saul: and Saul said unto him, Blessed be thou of the LORD: I have performed the commandment of the LORD."

"I have performed the commandment of the LORD" - If we say this, we know we really haven't. Excusing our actions through pious words is the height of Phariseeism. It is like Jesus' parable:

- **Luke 18:11-13** - "The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, 'God, I thank You that I am not like the other men — swindlers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and pay tithes of all that I acquire.' But the tax collector stood at a distance, unwilling even to lift up his eyes to heaven. Instead, he beat his

breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner!...'"

- **Matthew 7:21-23** - "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers'"

1 Samuel 15:14 - "And Samuel said, What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?"

While Saul's own conscience was silent, the sheep were proclaiming his disobedience.

The rabbis associate the bleating of these sheep with the cries of Jewish children under threat by Haman generations later, which Samuel prophetically envisioned here.

Samuel asks Saul why he disobeyed the Lord's command.

1 Samuel 15:20-21 - "And Saul said unto Samuel, Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and have gone the way which the LORD sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the LORD thy God in Gilgal."

My dad, who was a police reporter, told me one of the cardinal rules of interrogation was that criminals will usually confess to something, but never to the whole crime. That probably applies to us all, and to Saul here.

Self-justification - "All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the spirits" (**Proverbs 16:2**)

Accusing others - Saul tries to blame the people again, as in the previous chapter.

And remember - In the previous chapter he was so committed to his own vow that he would have executed his own son Jonathan. Here he offers excuses for sparing the pagan king of the Amalekites, Israel's sworn enemy. Saul doubles down on proclaiming his own rightness.

Obedience Better than Sacrifice

1 Samuel 15:22-23 - "And Samuel said, Hath 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 hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king."

stubbornness - *pâtsar* - to continue to press or push against; arrogance, presumption

i.e. to persist in sin obstinately, or to vindicate yourself in it, and insist on your innocence.

iniquity - *aven* - self exertion

Rebellion means you think you know better than God - and sorcery is the attempt to divine the future. We engage in sorcery when we lack faith in God and begin to worry.

Stubbornness puffs me up, and I worship my own arrogance like an idol. Both are just vanity and air.

Rebellion and stubbornness are contrasted with obedience and "to hearken" (*qāšab* = incline, pay attention to, heed).

Saul's initial rebellion was like sorcery, which was punished by lashes. His later stubborn self-justification was like idolatry, a capital crime.

God wants us to hear and obey - to "hear under" as in the Shema.

Saul's previous disobedience had severed his descendants from continuing his dynasty (1 Samuel 13:13-14 - "your kingdom will not endure"). Now Saul himself was stripped of kingship.

1 Samuel 15:24-25 - "And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD, and thy words: because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray thee, pardon my sin, and turn again with me, that I may worship the LORD."

Although Saul confesses, he is still not coming clean. He puts the blame on the people, and there is no real repentance. He is asking Samuel to pardon his sin, not God. And he is still using religious jargon to cover his rebellion.

1 Samuel 15:27-29 - "And as Samuel turned about to go away, he laid hold upon the skirt of his mantle, and it rent. And Samuel said unto him, The LORD hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbor of thine, that is better than thou. And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent."

Samuel is quoting **Numbers 23:19** - "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?"

(A similar rent garment later signified the rending of the ten tribes from the kingdom of Solomon in his son Rehoboam, **1 Kings 11:30**)

1 Samuel 15:30-31 - "Then he said, I have sinned: yet honor me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn again with me, that I may

worship the LORD thy God. So Samuel turned again after Saul; and Saul worshipped the LORD."

Always more concerned with appearances than truth, Saul wants the people to see them as still a team. Samuel remains but does not worship with him. Saul worships alone. Samuel probably did this to maintain the authority of the monarchy until Saul's replacement was anointed.

Agag's Demise

1 Samuel 15:32 - "Then said Samuel, Bring ye hither to me Agag the king of the Amalekites. And Agag came unto him delicately. And Agag said, 'Surely the bitterness of death is past.'"

delicately = *ma'ădān* - with gladness or delight

[But this passage could also be translated, "Agag came to him chained. And Agag said, 'Surely the bitterness of death approaches.'"]

1 Samuel 15:33 - "And Samuel said, As thy sword hath made women childless, so shall thy mother be childless among women. And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD in Gilgal."

Agag was killed either before the ark of the Lord, the symbol of the divine Presence; or before the altar, where Saul and the people had been sacrificing. The word "hewed" signifies he cleaved him, as wood is cleaved; or divided him into four parts.

The Midrash even says that Samuel castrated Agag. Other rabbis interpret the wording to suggest Agag was quartered, or flayed.

How Samuel did this, while still a Nazarite who could not touch a dead body, is debated by the rabbis.

(We will see later in the study of Esther an equally grisly demise of Agag's descendant, Haman).

Revenge the Disobedience

This is the prime example to us of spiritual warfare:

- **2 Corinthians 10:6** - "Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled."

1 Samuel 15:35 - "And Samuel came no more to see Saul until the day of his death: nevertheless Samuel mourned for Saul: and the LORD repented that he had made Saul

king over Israel."

Samuel had a natural affection for Saul, and had invested a lot in his preparation as king. Now he was probably concerned for his eternal welfare, seeing him unable to repent.

Saul was now king in name only. But still Samuel mourned for him; mourned as for one cut off in the midst of life, dead while living, a king rejected by God.

Again, this illustrates the biblical principle: first the natural, then the spiritual.

- **1 Corinthians 15:46** - "Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven."

Saul, as a type of the natural man, had to fail to open the way for David, the type of Messiah. The years of his reign were borrowed from David's, who was the real chosen king and type of Messiah. The name Saul means "borrowed."

Saul was blinded by biases and weaknesses and simple self-seeking that kept him from obeying God, and then kept him even from repenting. All he could muster was the repentance of the world. Like Esau, who "could find no ground for repentance, though he sought the blessing with tears." (**Hebrews 12:17**)

The flesh is always a disappointment. The good news is that we can take off the old robe and put on the new. We can neglect the Old Man Adam and become a new creation.

This will be apparent especially at the Resurrection:

- **1 Corinthians 15:53-54** - "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory."

"put on" = *endyō* - to sink into or slip into clothing; put on clothing; clothe oneself

When we leave our old self behind and "put on" Christ and His righteousness, we can sit down with Him at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (**Matthew 22:11-14**).