

## **Whose King?**

### **1 Samuel 15:1-16:23**

What's the most important thing to look for in a leader? Suppose you had the job of running the advertising campaign for a Prime Minister wannabe – what's the one absolutely essential thing they must have?

- Good looks?
- Great personality?
- Charisma?
- Magnificent promises?
- Sensible policies?
- Willingness to listen to you?

What's the thing that's on top of your list is you're going to sell this candidate to the electorate?

It's an interesting question, isn't it?

- It tells you something about your values.
- It tells you something about what you think are the values of our culture.

What's God think is the most important thing?

### **The Rejection of Saul**

In 15:1-3, Samuel brings God's word to Saul. It's a word of command – a mission God gives Saul. The text emphasises that it's God's word:

- Yahweh anointed you as king.
- Listen to the message of Yahweh.
- This is what the Lord Almighty says.

We're not left in any doubt. Neither is Saul.

The command is crystal clear: Go and destroy the Amalekites and everything that belongs to them. There's no ambiguity. There's no question from Saul.

- He doesn't ask: Who are the Amalekites? How do I distinguish them from the Ammonites?
- He doesn't ask: What's the time-frame for this? Is it OK if I get it done in 5 years?
- He doesn't say: That's too hard. I just don't have the manpower to do it.

He knows what he's supposed to do and he goes off to do it. No problems.

But many of us have problems. We think this is a harsh command. We want to question it. We want to question God's word. Now, I don't want to spend a lot of time on this at this point. It's not the focus of the passage. But, because it is the focus of many modern people, I'll make a few brief comments. Four things – and I'm pinching them from Andrew Heard.

- First, God's command is based on justice. These Amalekites acted wrongly against Israel 300 years earlier. God now executes judgment on them.
- Secondly, the Amalekites were still wicked. That's stated in verse 18. Agag was still making women childless in verse 33. These guys aren't innocent bystanders.
- Thirdly, God was patient in acting against them. He waited 300 years. They had plenty of opportunity to change their ways. Instead of doing that, they used the opportunity for more evil.
- Fourthly, God's judgment is the other side of God's salvation. If God is to bring justice for His people, then that requires judgment for those who do evil. What hope do we have if God doesn't do that?

One further comment: as we'll see in a minute, Saul's disobedient to God's word. God judges him for that. That's

what this chapter's about. God rejects Saul as king. Perhaps we moderns are even one step worse. Not only are we disobedient to God's word, we want to judge God's word in the first place. Even before we get to the point of whether or not we obey, we want the right to decide whether any particular word from God is acceptable to us. We want to sit in judgment on God. Think of the things that are questioned today – even by people who claim to be Christians.

- Some refuse to allow a loving God to be angry with sinners; to act in judgment against them.
- Some say it's OK to practise homosexuality – God can't be against people enjoying themselves and expressing who they are.
- On the same basis, others will advocate married people having affairs and divorcing for the purpose of marrying the person they're now in love with.
- Others say God got it all wrong about greed – He wants you to be rich and indulge yourself with everything on offer in our modern society.
- Others say that when Jesus told us to deny self and take up your cross He really meant to build up your self-esteem and assert yourself and not let others walk all over you.

Now, you may be quite happy to agree with God on all those things. Yet, one of the dangers in this is that we become used to the process of questioning God's word – that somehow we have the right to sit in judgment on it. And that's plain wrong.

Anyway, that wasn't Saul's problem. He went off to do what God told him to do and he did it – almost.

- Verse 8: he killed all the Amalekites, except Agag.

- Verse 9: he killed all the weak animals and kept the good ones.

God's evaluation of the situation is in verse 11:

*Saul has not carried out my instructions.*

Verse 12: Samuel goes to confront Saul about this. The narrator highlights several things for us. First, there's this monument Saul sets up in his own honour. That should get the alarm bells going. Other people celebrate victories by building altars to Yahweh (Moses does that when they defeat the Amalekites in Exodus 17) or by setting up memorials to remind them of what God did (Joshua does that after they cross the flooded Jordan River). Setting up a monument to honour yourself departs from the pattern. It may be shrewd politically – remind those southern tribes what the king did for them – but it's man taking God's honour for himself.

Secondly, Saul appears to think he's done what God told him to do. The narrator's already told us he hasn't. So, what's going on here?

- Is Saul just putting a good public spin on it? He knows he's fudged the figures, and there's a risk he'll be found out, but he thinks he can pull the wool over Samuel's eyes – that sort of thing.
- Is Saul simply self-deceived? When we do the wrong thing – or fail to do the right thing – we get very good at coming up with excuses. We find all sorts of reasons to justify what we actually did and we rehearse those in our mind. After a while, we believe them. We convince ourselves that, under the circumstances, what we did was actually best. Maybe Saul had been telling himself that all the way back from the battle. That's the deceitfulness

of sin. There's something about sinful people that means they're often blind to their own sin. We need God to open our eyes to our own wickedness.

Thirdly, Saul tries to shift the blame.

- Verse 15: the soldiers brought them ...
- Verse 21: the soldiers took sheep and cattle ...

This tactic goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. God questioned them about what they'd done. What did they say?

- It was the woman You gave me. It's her fault. And if it's not her fault, then it's Your fault.
- And the woman did the same thing – it was the serpent who tricked me.

It's not my fault. It's all these soldiers I had around me. They didn't want to kill all the animals. There were some good specimens among them. And you know what it's like when you've got all these armed soldiers around you who want to disagree with what you're telling them to do.

Fourthly, he tries to put a religious spin on it. We're not keeping these things for ourselves – we're going to put them on the altar. It's hard to know if this was the intention all along – or if it was just something Saul thought up on the spur of the moment as a way to save face. Either way, it's still disobedience. It's theft.

- God made His will quite clear about these animals: destruction down in Amalekite territory. How can you then bring back something that's not yours and offer it as your sacrifice to God?
- More than that, Saul is talking about sacrifices where the person making the sacrifice shares in the sacrificial meal afterwards. In other words, they planned to eat some of this meat God told them to

destroy. How can that honour God?

Fifthly, after a lot of talk back and forth, something of Saul's real motivation finally comes out in verse 24:

*I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them.*

Saul was the people's king. He was the king demanded by the people. He was the king who had his eye on the people. He was more worried about how the people would react than how God would react.

Any of that ring any bells? Have you ever been disobedient to God? Bit of a rhetorical question really. How did you deal with that disobedience? How do you deal with your ongoing disobedience?

- Ever spent time justifying what you did in your own mind? Finding reasons that minimise or excuse your disobedience.
- Ever convinced yourself that what you did was pretty close to complete obedience and no one else would do any better given the circumstances?
- Ever tried to blame someone else?
- Ever tried to offer a religious alternative?
- Ever done something because you wanted to look spiritual in the eyes of others?

In verse 23, Samuel pronounces judgment.

*Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,*

*He has rejected you as king.*

It's repeated in verse 26:

*You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you as king over Israel!*

How do you react to that? Think Saul got a harsh deal? After all, he did *most* of what God said. If this were an essay, perhaps you'd give him a distinction – he only

missed out on Agag and a few choice sheep, but everything else was completed satisfactorily.

If you think Saul was harshly done by, you haven't yet understood sin. You haven't truly understood your sin. Come back to verse 22.

*Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices*

*as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD?*

*To obey is better than sacrifice,*

*and to heed is better than the fat of rams.*

*For rebellion is like the sin of divination,*

*and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.*

Saul's problem is he's more concerned about himself than God. He's more interested in how he comes across in the eyes of others than God. He's more interested in using religion to serve his own agenda. God isn't his top priority. And so he stands loosely in relation to God's word. If God's word suits him, well and good. But if God's word conflicts with his own agenda or his own assessment of the situation, then he'll find ways to negotiate round God's word. He'll even throw in a bit of superficial religion for good measure.

Now, there's nothing wrong with sacrifice. That's not what Samuel says. The whole sacrificial system was set up by God Himself. Samuel officiated at sacrifices before this – and after it. But sacrifice isn't the most important thing – nor is it to be used as a substitute if you think the most important thing's too hard.

What God's really after – what delights Him the most – is obedience. Now, God knows we'll fail at that. That's

why He gave the sacrificial system. But that system is based on the one offering the sacrifice acknowledging their sin. It means saying:

- Yes, I've done the wrong thing. And what I did really was wrong. It was a terrible thing to do. It was a great offence against God. It was a great evil.
- And I deserve God's judgment. I deserve to die – just like this sacrifice I bring.
- All I can do is throw myself on God's mercy and ask Him to forgive me.

But I can't do that and continue to hold onto my disobedience. I can't do that and pretend my disobedience is something trivial. I can't do that and continue to make excuses for my evil – to pretend it was something less than disobedience and rebellion.

When you tell your child to clean up their room before going out to play – and later discover they merely shoved everything under the bed – what do you do? What would give you delight?

- If they told you they'd done the wrong thing, gave you a big cuddle, and sat down to watch TV for the rest of the night?
- Or if they told you they'd done the wrong thing, perhaps gave you a quick cuddle, and then went and tidied their room properly?

Saul only ever gets to that first stage – if that. He says he did the wrong thing. He takes no steps to rectify it. And he's still more worried about how he looks to the people – his big concern is to have Samuel come with him for the official religious ceremonies.

Chapter 15 ends on a sad note. Saul and Samuel go their

separate ways. Samuel never goes to see Saul again. In other words, Samuel never takes God's word to Saul again. Saul rejected God's word. He's left with what he wanted. He gets no further word from God. God has rejected him as king of His people. Saul's not the one who can truly lead God's people the way God wants – because He refuses to submit to God's authority.

### The Choice of David

But that doesn't mean God's rejected His people. It doesn't mean God's not still active in Israel. It doesn't mean God's done with kings altogether. God's still got His plans that He's bringing about. And so chapter 16 moves to finding a new king – a king who can submit to God and lead God's people to submit to God.

God sends Samuel off to Bethlehem – a fairly insignificant place. There he's to anoint one of Jesse's sons. As was usual, they start with the eldest. That's the cultural expectation. He's the important one. He's the one that receives the primary blessing. Verse 6:

*When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed stands here before the LORD."*

Why's Samuel think that? Look at God's answer in the next verse:

*Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.*

In other words, Eliab was an impressive looking guy. Eliab had the height and the looks. Eliab was the sort of guy you could imagine others following. Eliab was like Saul – physically impressive.

Yet, the outward packaging's not the important thing.

- Physical strength may help you wield a sword, but it doesn't guarantee good decisions.
- A handsome face may attract a following, but it doesn't guarantee either intelligence or wisdom.

Nor do those things guarantee submission to God's word – which is the one essential for the king of God's people.

Why do we struggle so much to remember this? We live in a culture obsessed with image. So often we pay attention to those with the media image – whether they be politicians or actors or sports stars. This thinking can even infect the church. How often are we influenced by external appearance as we evaluate leaders?

- The poster-boy face that attracts crowds.
- The friendly face that welcomes all-comers.
- The cheerful salesman face that sells the church to the community.

It's not that these things are wrong. It's not that they disqualify someone from the kingship. When we eventually get down to David in verse 12, we find God's blessed him with a handsome appearance. But these things are irrelevant. It's the internal qualities that matter. It's the heart that submits to God's word. It's the heart that hears God's word and does it.

God's choice cuts across human values. As you read the Old Testament, you see that time and time again. He chooses Jacob over Esau. He chooses Israel – though she is neither more numerous nor more powerful nor more righteous than the other nations. God uses unexpected instruments. That's what Hannah's song said – 2:7-8

*The LORD sends poverty and wealth;  
He humbles and He exalts.  
He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;  
He seats them with princes  
and has them inherit a throne of honour.*

And so now He chooses David – Jesse's youngest son. He's so unexpected, they didn't even bother inviting him to the sacrifice. He's just the errand boy of the family. He's left looking after the family flock. He's got seven brothers in front of him in the family pecking order. Yet, God chooses him.

As the story unfolds, we find David is better than Saul.

- He's concerned for God's honour, not his own.
- He trusts God – even when things get tough.
- He refuses to take things into his own hands and kill Saul – instead, he waits for God's timing.
- He wants to submit to God's word.

Yet, he's not perfect. He still fails – rather spectacularly as he soils his hands with adultery and murder. He disqualifies himself as the sort of king God needs. So what's left for Israel? Where are we left?

Two things. First, we see the difference between David and Saul when they're confronted about their sin.

- Saul's concerned about his own image. He makes excuses. He blames others. He tries to save face before the people.
- David's cut to the heart. You see it in Psalm 51. He admits he's done wrong. He doesn't make excuses. He doesn't blame others. He appeals for God's mercy.

Secondly, it's through David that we come to God's true king – Jesus. In all this, God's preparing for the coming of Jesus – by the promises He makes; by the lessons He teaches. By the end of David's reign, we should realise that no mere human king can do it. We just don't measure up. None of us truly submits to God. None of us always obeys God's word 100% of the time. At heart, we're all rebels. God drives the lesson home again and again. King after king comes and goes. Some of them are better than others – but they all fail to fully obey God. It's important we realise our desperate position.

But then we come to Jesus – the descendant of King David. He doesn't look much on the outside – no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him. He doesn't live in a palace – brought up in a peasant family in the backwaters of Galilee. He doesn't inspire a mighty army – just wanders around teaching a group of rag-tag men. And then He goes and gets Himself executed – on a cross of all things. But He always did God's will – He knew that to obey was better than sacrifice. He didn't just listen to God's word – He did it. God gave Him a mission and He completed it perfectly – even to the point of dying that horrible death on a cross. Here's someone truly qualified to be King of God's people. And that's exactly who Jesus is.

### **The Comparison**

The end of 1 Samuel 16 puts Saul and David side by side.

- Verse 13: David's anointed as king and the Spirit of the LORD comes on him in power.
- Verse 14: the Spirit of the LORD leaves Saul and is replaced by an evil spirit.

Saul remains king for several more years – in the sense

that he still rules over Israel and leads her armies into battle. But he's rejected by God. He's not God's king. God's found a new king and He's equipped him with His Spirit.

When you read that in verse 13 – about the Spirit coming on David in power – what are your expectations? What happened when the Spirit came on Saul? You find it back in 10:6-13: Saul prophesies with the prophets. He's also supposed to do something about the Philistine garrison at Gibeah – which he doesn't do. Is it to be the same with David? Is he supposed to get stuck into Israel's enemies and drive them out of the land?

David doesn't get any instructions like Saul. Nor does David have the experience of prophesying like Saul. Instead, he gets a summons to the royal court to play his harp for the tormented king. Seems a bit of a let-down doesn't it? Where are all the powerful deeds? Did the narrator get it wrong? No. The narrator stresses it by telling us the words of Saul's servant in verse 18:

*And the LORD is with him.*

God's word affirms for us that God's Spirit was with David. What's it mean for him?

- Initially it means a call-up to the royal court to play the harp. God quietly gets him into the political system where he can observe and be observed. And God uses him to bring a measure of grace to King Saul.
- In the next few chapters we'll see it means a life on the run. He'll have to flee for his life – not because he's done anything wrong or he's missed out on God's will for his life, but because King Saul's paranoid. God's Spirit sustains him through that

time.

We started this morning by asking: What's the most important thing to look for in a leader? God says:

- It's someone who'll hear my word and do it.
- It's someone whose heart wants what I want.
- It's someone who's more interested in pleasing Me than in looking good before the people.

Do you agree with God? Is that what you think's absolutely essential in a leader?

Now, it may be you don't think of yourself as a leader. And you may have no aspirations of leadership. And you may be thinking to yourself: This is something I can use to judge others – to judge those who want to be in leadership – but I don't have to worry about it for myself. The context of these chapters is leadership – yet, go back to 15:22

*To obey is better than sacrifice,  
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.*

While Samuel says that directly to Saul, and while Saul loses the kingship over it – it's not really confined to kings, is it? It's not that it's more important for kings to obey than sacrifice but God's quite delighted for the rest of us plebs to sacrifice rather than obey. What delights God is the person who hears His word and does it – the person who comes to His King and submits to Him. Is that you? If not, what will you do about it?