

Eastwood Baptist (AM, 5/8/18) **“TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE”** (1 Samuel 12-15)

Introduction How do you picture God? As a king on a throne? As a kindly old man with a long beard? As a terrifying figure riding on the storm? And what qualities do you attribute to God? Do you think mainly of power and authority? Or of grace and love? Do you think more of his righteousness, accompanied by a readiness to act in judgment, or more of his mercy, accompanied by a readiness to forgive? Perhaps you think of the fact that God revealed himself in Jesus, which is a good thing to remember. But what pictures of Jesus come to mind? Do you think of Jesus healing the sick, and casting out demons? Do you think of Jesus welcoming children, and eating with people who didn't keep God's law? Do you think of Jesus confronting the Pharisees, and casting out the traders from the temple? Do you think of Jesus dying on the cross, and rising victorious from the dead? We don't all have to think in the same way about God, but we need to try to think in a way which reflects the whole of what the Bible has to say about God. And the way we think about God matters. It influences the way we worship God, and the way we live as God's people. This morning, I believe, we will see this exemplified in the figures of Samuel and Saul. We will see Samuel's right view of God, and his right living as God's servant. We will see Saul's defective view of God, and his failure to live rightly. I should add, however, that I'm not saying that Samuel never did anything wrong, or that Saul never did anything good. I'm talking about the dominant character of their lives over time.

Samuel's Integrity (Chapter 12) In Chapter 12 we have what the NIV Bible entitles "Samuel's Farewell Speech". Samuel isn't finished, as future chapters will show, but he is taking a step backwards to allow Saul to function as king. Hear the beginning of his speech - **read 12:1-5**. Samuel speaks of his age and of Saul's role as King, but the emphasis falls on his integrity. He is clearly confident that he has a good record, and can't be accused of abusing his role of leadership. This suggests that he sees God as a God who cares about these things, a God of justice who expects leaders to treat his people with justice. In the remainder of his speech, Samuel first reminds the people of how God has acted toward them in the days of the Judges, with justice and faithfulness and mercy, then encourages them to see their new king as God's generous provision and to act accordingly. He tells them how they should live in the coming days of the Monarchy - **read 12:13-15**. Samuel then calls upon God to demonstrate his presence and power, and God sends a mighty thunderstorm. The people are awed by this, and ask Samuel to pray for them, confessing their sin in demanding a king. Samuel's response to this request is the conclusion of his speech - **read 12:20-25**. Samuel exhorts the people to think of God as he has done, as a mighty and faithful God, and to serve God as he has done, faithfully and wholeheartedly.

Saul's Foolishness (Chapters 13 and 14) The focus of the narrative now shifts to Saul, although Samuel continues to be a powerful presence. And we soon see that Saul doesn't share Samuel's good understanding of the character of God. Therefore it is not surprising that he fails to heed Samuel's exhortation and he fails to imitate his life. I'm just going to provide a quick overview of Chapters 13 and 14, so that I can give a sufficient time to Chapter 15, which brings us to the climactic point where Samuel declares that Saul has been rejected by God, and which presents a problem for Christian readers. The first incident, recorded in 13:1-14, is when Saul gathers a force to fight against the Philistines. Samuel has told Saul in God's name to wait in Gilgal for him to come and offer a sacrifice to God before going out to fight against the Philistines. But the agreed time comes and Samuel has not arrived. In addition, Saul's men have begun to drift away. So Saul offers up the burnt offering himself. He seems to think that offering a sacrifice is essential to enjoying God's favour, but obeying God's prophet and priest is not essential. Samuel arrives soon after this and rebukes Saul for his folly and disobedience. The second incident, recorded in the rest of Chapter 13 and in Chapter 14 is different in character, and at first things seem to go well. First Jonathan, Saul's son, along with his armour-bearer, makes a successful raid on the Philistines. Then God gives the Israelites a great victory by sending panic upon the Philistines. Saul is then determined to pursue the fleeing Philistines and inflict great losses on their army before dark, and swears a rash oath. He says, "Cursed be anyone who eats food before evening comes, before I have avenged myself on my enemies!" I assume that Saul knew the story of Jephthah, who swore a similar oath which led to the death of his daughter, but he clearly had learnt nothing from it. In this case it is Saul's son Jonathan who offends against this oath. Jonathan is unaware of it, and eats some wild honey. When Saul discovers this, he says that Jonathan must die. He seems to believe that God desires that a rash oath be fulfilled at the cost of a young life. On this occasion, unlike the case of Jephthah's daughter, the life is saved. It is saved because some of Saul's soldiers have a true instinct for what would please God. **Read 14:45.**

Saul's Failure and Rejection: the Beginning (15:1-3) We now come to a third and decisive failure by Saul, which again reveals a lack of understanding of what God requires. The basis of this incident is set up in the first few verses of Chapter 15 - **read 15:1-3.** Before continuing with the story, I think that I need to say something about God's command through Samuel concerning the Amalekites. If this command makes you feel uncomfortable, then I share your feeling. I don't think that I can offer a totally satisfactory explanation of what is conventionally called "Holy War", but I'll try to say something helpful. **1. This is an Act of Judgment by the Sovereign God.** God, who will eventually judge all people, sometimes exercises severe judgment within human history. Where this is in the form of total destruction, it is an act of judgment upon determined

opposition to his purposes. **2. There was Room for Forgiveness.** There is evidence in the biblical record that those who turned to God could be saved from destruction. A striking example is the preservation of Rahab and her family when she puts her faith in God and aids his people before the fall of Jericho. **3. God's People not Exempt from Severe Judgment.** When God's own people were persistently disobedient, they too suffered severely under God's acts of judgment, although they did not suffer total destruction. I particularly have in mind the fall of Israel to the Assyrians and of Judah to the Babylonians. **4. In the New Testament Era, "Holy War" is Against Satan.** Consider Ephesians 6:12 - **read.** We are called as Christians to fight against the forces of Satan, looking forward to their eventual destruction. But we are called to seek the good of other human beings, even our enemies.

Saul's Failure and Rejection: the Story Completed (15:4-35) We soon see that Saul is victorious over the Amalekites, but he doesn't obey God's command. **Read 15:8-9.** Note that Saul is clearly not motivated by a desire to show mercy. He keeps the best of the plunder for himself and his followers, and spares only the king, probably as a trophy of victory for his own glory. When Samuel meets Saul, and accuses him of disobedience, Saul offers the justification that he has kept back the best of the plunder to sacrifice to God at Gilgal. This is probably dishonest, but Samuel's response is to condemn it even if it is true. **Read 15:22-23.** Samuel tells Saul that he has misunderstood the character of God, and therefore what pleases God. He has thought that God will be pleased with sacrifices, even though he has disobeyed God in order to offer them. Saul will continue as king for some time, but he will continue without God's favour, and God will direct Samuel to anoint David as God's choice to replace Saul.

Conclusion Are we better than Saul? Do we have a better understanding of what our God is like and how to please him? It is tempting to say "yes". After all, we don't offer animal sacrifices in place of obedience. But do we sometimes offer other substitutes for obedience? Do we think that God might be satisfied with regular church attendance? Or with lots of words about how much we want to serve him? Or with large offerings of money? Paul has told us what God wants, and interestingly he uses the metaphor of offering a sacrifice. **Read Romans 12:1-2.** God wants us to offer ourselves to him. God wants us to give thanks for his mercy to us through Jesus Christ by serving him with glad obedience. And God wants to transform our lives by the renewing of our minds.