

1 Samuel 15

A confession

Friends, I want to start today's talk with a confession.

You see, I've been looking at this passage all week and I've begun to think that I might have made a mistake.

Now I'm still not sure about the nature of the mistake.

It could be that I was severely mistaken in even volunteering to preach on this passage.

Alternatively, it is possible that my mistake was to restrict the sermon to one twenty minute sermon.

You see, the more you look at this passage the more you find it brimming with difficulties.

And the difficulties are not really textual problems.

No, the problems are moral and theological.

And there is not just one of them.

The passage just overflows with them.

And so, as I faced the problem of having to speak to you this morning, I wondered what to do.

And in the end, I decided that I couldn't hide the problems from you.

Nor could I simply pass over them.

And so I decided on the following strategy.

First, I'm going to tell you what I think the main problems are.

Second, I'm going to tell you what I think can be said definitively from this passage.

Third, I'm going to tell what I think can be said from elsewhere in the Bible that might help us with what we find in this passage.

And finally, I'm going to explain what I think we should do in response to what we find.

The questions I have about this passage

The harshness of God

So, let's firstly have a look at the problems raised by this passage.

The first question has to do with the apparent harshness of God.

This can be seen in verses 2 and 3.

God talks about holy war and devoting things to destruction.

Now to those of us who were once God's enemies but have been forgiven in Christ, this seems barbaric and cruel.

But this is not the only area where God appears harsh.

Those of us who have read the Bible know about David and his sins.

We know that David was forgiven.

But Saul seems to get very strong treatment from God here when his sins don't seem that much worse than David's sins.

In fact, David's sins sometimes appear to be worse.

What's more, our feelings for Saul even seem to get some support from Samuel.

Take a look at verse 11.

The writer tells us that Samuel was angry.

Now we are not told with whom it was that Samuel was angry.

It is possible that he was angry with Saul because of his actions.

However, I suspect that he is angry with God.

And I suspect that he is angry with God because he has rejected Saul.

And I suspect that his crying out to God is all about beseeching God to change his mind.

Angry with God

My second question has to do with the anger of Samuel.

If it is that Samuel is angry with God, then what do we do with this?

Is it wrong?

If it is wrong, why doesn't God do something about it?

If it is okay, then is it okay for us to get angry with God.

Verse 29

The third question has to do with verse 29.

Verse 29 says that God does not recant, lie, or change his mind.

Well, the problem is that other parts of scripture tell us something very different.

For example, the books of Joel and Jonah and many other parts of the Bible tell us that God does change his mind.

So, what do we make of what Samuel says?

What I know about this passage

So, there are some of the questions that arise out of the passage for me.

There are some other smaller issues (e.g. the Kenites), but these are the ones of substance.

Now, my own view is that it is possible to answer each of these questions.

However, I'm not sure that I can answer do any of them justice this morning.

So, I want to say upfront this morning that if they are overwhelming for you, then I'm more than happy to talk with you about them.

I'm also happy to give you some give some guidelines as to how you might approach them.

But rather than spending time on them today, I want to tell you what I know about this passage.

You see, I think that while there are a number of problems with the passage, the central point of the passage is clear.

So, let me show you some of the things that persuade me about what this passage means.

Saul and the Amalekites

First, let's think about the Amalekites for a moment.

The judgment announced on the Amalekites is announced to Saul.

In Exodus 17 God tells Moses to write down as something to be remembered that he will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.

In Deuteronomy 25:17-19 Moses tells Israel that they are to remember what the Amalekites did and how they persecuted the people of God as they were journeying toward the land.

Whatever else Saul knows as he goes into this chapter, he must know that God loves his people.

He must know that God is a God of his word.

And he must know that God is a God of justice and holiness (cf. 1 Samuel 2:2).

He remembers sin.

He treats sin seriously.

He punishes sin.

Saul can have no doubt about these things.

He cannot go into the events of this chapter with the excuse of ignorance.

God's regret

Second, I want to think about verse 29.

And to do this, I'm going to use the Revised Standard Version of the Bible rather than the New Revised Standard Version.

Let's have a look at it on the overhead

²⁹And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent."

And now, I want you to look at the RSV translation of verse 11.

¹¹“*I repent 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.

Finally, I want you to look at the RSV translation of verse 35.

³⁵*And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel.*

Now you can see why I’ve chosen the RSV.

What the RSV does is that it uses the same English word for the same Hebrew word in all three places that it occurs in the passage.

Now the Hebrew word does have a broad range of meaning.

It can mean grieve, relent, regret, change mind, and a variety of other things.

But the original reader of the passage would have heard the word three times.

The first time, in verse 11, she or he would have heard that God does do this activity.

The second time, in verse 29, she or he would have heard that God does not do this activity.

And the third time, in verse 35, she or he would have heard that God does do this activity.

Now at the very least, this tells us that we should be careful about what verse 29 says.

It means that it may be a word particularly for Saul at this time.

Or it may be a word that is necessary for his pastorally.

Or it may be a word of Samuel’s that does not have the endorsement of God.

Or it may be that it has to be understood in the light of verses 11 and 35.

Whatever it is, we know that we need to treat it carefully.

Saul, Adam, and sin

The third thing that I want to say is that the core of this passage is about sin.

Let me show you what I mean.

Let’s look at how the passage starts.

Saul has a clear word from God in verses 2 and 3.

That word is clear.

And Saul's actions are clear.

Where God said 'do not spare' in verse 3, he spares in verse 9.

Where God said 'put to death' in verse 3, he takes Agag alive in verse 8.

Where God commands that he 'totally destroy' in verse 3, Saul and his army were unwilling to destroy completely in verse 9.

In other words, Saul acts as judge over God's word.

He hears God's word.

He knows God's word.

And he judges that word.

He assumes the position of ascertaining what is good and what is evil.

He takes over God's role.

It amounts to a turning away from God.

It is a rejection of God's word, which is tantamount to rejecting God himself.

And this is supported throughout the rest of the chapter.

For look at how Saul refers to God in verse 15.

He is not 'the Lord my God'.

Instead, he is 'the Lord your God'.

And the same thing occurs in verse 30.

Again, Saul talks to Samuel about worshipping 'the Lord your God'.

Now look at verse 12.

Samuel goes to meet Saul.

Saul has just returned from waging holy war for Yahweh.

But where is he?

Verse 12 spells it out for us.

It tells us that before he headed off to Gilgal, a place of worship (cf. verse 21), he went first to Carmel.

Before he went to Gilgal to honour God, he first honoured himself.

Look at it in verse 12.

We are told that at Carmel Saul set up a monument in his own honour.

It is clear from all of this that God has been supplanted in Saul's affections.

He has been replaced by Saul himself in Saul's affections.

Saul has become a worshipper of himself.

He has become an idolater.

But lastly, take a look at the encounter between Samuel and Saul in verses 13 to 15.

Samuel confronts Saul.

And Saul immediately passes the buck.

He was given the command by God but he accuses his men of doing wrong.

I wonder if you can see what is going on here?

Saul has broken the covenant obligations spelt out in Samuel 12.

He has spoken and acted proudly in a way that is condemned in 1 Samuel 2.

He has not lived under God's word according to the rules of kingship spelt out in Deuteronomy 17.

All of these echoes are there in this passage.

But the clearest echoes are from the garden of Eden.

Just as Adam and Eve were made rulers under God's rule, so was Saul.

Just as God told them what was good and evil for them, so God told Saul.

And just as they thought they knew better than God, so did Saul.

Just as they replaced the rule of God with their own rule, so did Saul.

Just as they became judges over God, so did Saul.

And just as they shifted blame from themselves to others, so Saul shifts the blame to others here.

With all this in mind, we can now understand verses 22 to 23.

“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the LORD?”

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

²³For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry.

Here in God’s new Eden of the promised land old sins are being repeated.

Adam is at work again.

And the sins of Saul and David and their successors will end in expulsion from the land just as they did in Genesis 3.

Please understand what I’m saying here.

My own view is that when we read this passage we spend too much time focussing on Saul the individual.

Saul is a representative here.

He represents the kings of Israel.

He represents all humans.

And he shows us what humans are like.

We know the will of God but fail to do it.¹

Or we know the will of God but distil from it the parts that we don’t like.

We make our own adjustments to what God is demanding of us.

We stand over God’s word and become judges of it.

A little adjustment here.

¹ The next four or five lines of application are indebted to comments by Bruce Birch in the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Volume II, 103.

A little self justification there.

We honour God in our own way rather than God's way.

And in so doing, we become idolaters...

Worshippers of self rather than worshippers of God.

And we who are readers of the Bible know what God does with such people.

He casts them out of his presence.

He punishes them for their sin.

He did it with Saul.

He did it with the Amalekites.

He did it with Adam and Eve.

And he will do it with us.

What I know from elsewhere in the Bible that helps me

Friends, I've told you what I think some of the main problems with this passage are.

I've also told you what I think can be said definitively from this passage.

What I want to do now is to tell you what I think can be said from elsewhere in the Bible that might help us with what we find in this passage.

And as we do this, I want to tell you that there are even some hints within this passage that lead us in the right direction.

The first hint is found in God's treatment of the Amalekites.

You see, as harsh as the words are about the Amalekites, we ought not to forget that hundreds of years have passed since their sin was committed.

God has held off judgment.

The second hint is found in God's treatment of Saul.

You see, Saul's sin seems deep and his repentance seems shallow.

But God allows him to continue as king for quite some time yet.

What's more, God allows his dignity to be preserved.

Samuel returns with Saul before the elders of the people.

But the third hint comes from the word that appears in verses 11 and 29 and 35.

You see, this word has a long history in the Bible.

It is a word that expresses God's grief and turmoil over sin.

It appears in this way in Genesis 6 where we are told that the Lord 'regretted' that he had made humanity.

And yet Genesis 6 to 9 tells us how God's mercy triumphs over judgment.

He starts again with humans.

And in Exodus 32 to 34 we are told that Israel sins with the golden calf.

And in the midst of this we are told that the Lord determines to punish sin by obliterating the nation of Israel.

But Moses intercedes, just like Samuel does here.

And as a result of the intercession of Moses, God changes his mind.

And the word used for this changing of mind is the same one that is used here in this passage.

And then, in Exodus 34 the Lord reveals himself to Moses and proclaims his nature.

He is the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

He does punish sin.

But his disposition is overwhelmingly toward mercy.

And as the Bible progresses, it is this disposition that causes the prophets to add an extra line to the statement about God in Exodus 34:6.

Listen to Jonah in Jonah 4.

He is explaining why he fled to Tarshish and he says:

'I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing.'

Did you hear the addition?

Jonah says that the Lord is 'ready to relent from punishing'.

And the word 'relent' is the same word that is used three times in 1 Samuel 15.

Can you see the problem we have?

On the one hand, we have a God who is grieved at sin.

He is a God who is just and holy.

He cannot relent concerning punishment.

But on the other hand, he is a God whose heart is disposed toward grace, mercy, love and forgiveness.

He is a God who yearns to relent from punishing.

How can these things be reconciled?

Well, we who are Christians know that it is this very problem that is solved on the cross.

For on the cross God treats sin as sin.

He does not change his mind regarding the evil of sin and its need for punishment.

He does not lie about his own nature.

He does not relent concerning punishment.

But at the same time, he does relent.

And his mercy triumphs over judgment.

He is both just and the justifier of the one who has faith.

This is the glory of the cross.

This is the beauty of what we see God do in Christ.

What I'm going to do as a result of this passage

Now, let me say that in many ways God's mercy in Jesus has a dual impact when I read this passage.

You see, I know that I stand in line with Saul.

Part of the reason that I feel for him is because I see myself in him.

I see his sin and in it I see my own.

I see his heart filled with self and I see my own.

I see his darkness of understanding and I see my own.

I hear his excuses and I hear my own.

I listen to God's judgment and I know what I deserve.

And then I look at the cross and in some ways I feel worse.

After all, it is my sin that has driven God this way.

But on the other hand, I am overwhelmed with God's love and surprising, unobligated love and kindness.

Who am I that God should have such mercy on me?

Who am I that God should relent from punishment?

Friends, in the light of such mercy we cannot come with the shallow repentance of Saul.

There must be no more excuses.

No more passing of blame.

Instead, there must be a rigorous dealing with sin.

On the one hand, we must be people who repent with gusto, with earnestness, with alarm and concern.

Knowing God's mercy we determine that we will rid ourselves of the things of sinful nature.

We will not allow sin to fester.

Rather, we will deal with it with rigour.

And on the other hand, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, we will clothe ourselves with the things we have seen in God.

We will daily put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

We will forgive as we have been forgiven.

We ourselves will let mercy triumph over judgment.

We will bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances we have against each other.

We will forgive as the Lord has forgiven us.

1 Samuel 15:29 (RSV)

And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent.”

1 Samuel 15:11 (RSV)

‘I repent 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.

1 Samuel 15:35 (RSV)

And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD repented that he had made Saul king over Israel.

