

Saul's Reign: Strike 3! (Part 1)

1 Samuel 15:1-16

¹ And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. ² Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. ³ Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'" (ESV)

We are going through the Book of 1st Samuel. I did the first 12 chapters last year, and we started out on chapter 13 [this year]. To give you the big picture, the purpose of this book was to persuade Israel that they needed a king. Not just any king, but a king like David. It was probably written after they came back from the exile about 535 B.C. or so. A king like David had sort of gotten them into exile in the first place, so the logical question in the first place is, "Should we have another king like that?" The author of this book makes the case that, "Yeah, you do need a king like David." And part of the way he makes the case that we need a king like David is showing us the kind of king we don't need. If you remember, Israel made a mistake, not in asking God for a king, because that was always His plan, but their mistake was asking God for a king like the other nations. God basically said, "If you want a king like the other nations, who will enslave your sons and make your daughters part of his harem, and take all of your land, that's what kind of king you're going to have." So, He gave them Saul. Much like the kings of the other nations, Saul was physically imposing. He was a head taller than anyone in Israel. I'm sort of changing my mind. I used to call him "spiritually dull." The young Saul I thought was spiritually dull. Now that I'm getting deeper into looking at the life of Saul, it's more than dullness. There is almost a pathology with Saul. On one hand he gets it, on the other hand he doesn't get it. On one hand he understands what he should do, on the other hand he does not understand what he should do. At the end of the day he never embraces who he is or Who God is.

As we are going through this book, the author shows us three strikes against Saul. Here is why Saul is not the king you need, not a king like David. The first strike was in chapter 13 where Saul burned offerings that he should not have burned, and God took the kingdom away from him. Last week, and the week before, and the week before we looked at strike two in which Jonathan provoked the Philistines and God caused all this confusion, and then Saul came in sort of Johnny-come-lately, made a rash oath that really no one could follow, especially his son Jonathan. Saul ended up in disgrace in the eyes of the people and really in the eyes of God. So that's two strikes against him. Before we head into the third strike, it is interesting to notice that the verdict on Saul's whole reign is actually given at the end of chapter 14. I'll read it for you quickly. In verse 52 it says,

⁵² *There was hard fighting against the Philistines all the days of Saul. . . (ESV)*

So the king of Israel, the king that they had was supposed to come and bring them peace and prosperity. And yet with Saul as king there was fighting all the days of his life. There was never any peace under King Saul. So today we are going to look at strike three against Saul, or at least the first part of strike 3 which is actually all of chapter 15. Some of you have said, "Man, as we've looked at Saul, it's been really convicting. I see myself in Saul. Gosh, I don't know what to think about it every time I walk out." If that's how you've felt, there is a lot more coming. If you've felt convicted by looking at Saul's life before, chapter 15 is really going to unearth a lot. The reason I said, "With Saul it is almost like a pathology" is because with sin and me it's like a pathology, too. My conscious alternately accuses me and defends me, trying to own things and not own things. We are going to see all of that in the life of Saul and especially in this coming chapter.

I've been giving you principles instead of points. I'm going to give you three principles this morning as well. I'll give them as I go. The first principle is just this if you are a note taker: God's capacity for patience is unlimited. God's capacity for patience is unlimited, however His practice of patience is not. In other words, God has the capacity to be infinitely patient, however there's a point at which He says, "No more," where He decides that He no longer will be patient and He decides that He is going to act with judgment. You need to know that because, generally speaking, when you look at a passage like this, the first part I read to you, if you don't consider any context, God can seem very harsh, can't He? Did you notice the command that was given to Saul? Let me read it to you again.

¹ *And Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord. (ESV)*

In other words Samuel is telling him, "This is a non-negotiable command from God."

² *Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. ³ Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'* (ESV)

For one thing, it is one of those, "Thus saith the Lord" things, and whenever you hear, "Thus saith the Lord" that means He means it. So to Saul, "Thus saith the Lord. I want you to go in and destroy Amalek for what they did to Israel when they came out of Egypt, and I want you to not spare anything. Is there anything you don't understand about 'anything,' Saul? Male, female, child, infant, sheep, oxen, everything that there is there I want you to completely and utterly destroy it."

If you don't know any context you say, "Man, that is just harsh. That is just cold." And yet when you consider the context it begins to make sense. Instead of seeing God as harsh, you actually see Him as compassionate. When I was reading this passage earlier this week, the movie "Bruce Almighty" came to mind. Jim Carey is Bruce and he gets angry at God whom he doesn't really know, and he basically calls to Him, "Oh, smite me, oh smiter." When he thinks of God he thinks God is all about smiting. And yet, when you consider the context of this passage, God is actually all about patience—to a point. Why is God telling Saul to go and utterly destroy Amalek? Amalek is basically a people group. Why? The answer is in Exodus. I'll read it to you quickly. I'm going to read you the end of the story where Joshua is fighting against Amalek, and it's where Moses has to have his arms held up by Aaron and Hur, and whenever he puts his arms down they lose the battle and whenever they are raised they win the battle, and so his two sidekicks hold his arms up. Well, that battle is against Amalek, and Amalek attacked Israel before they even got to the desert. You hear me talk a lot about Israel being in the desert and complaining and whining and that kind of thing. Well, before they even got to the place where they could do some good complaining, Amalek attacked them. Here's what God says in verse 14 of Exodus 17.

¹⁴ *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."* (ESV)

In Deuteronomy 25 He gives a little more info, which is interesting. In Deuteronomy it's basically all these categorized laws. Laws about murder, laws about men and women, and then at the end you have this sort of section that's miscellaneous laws. The very last thing that God says in that miscellaneous law section is this:

¹⁷ *"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, ¹⁸ how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. ¹⁹*

Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.” (ESV)

What does this have to do with the patience of God? The answer is everything. Because that happened 300 years prior to the command given to Saul. In other words, the Amalekites had 300 years to be reconciled. The Amalekites had 300 years that God gave them to turn and embrace the blessing bearer. Remember how Abraham was the original blessing bearer and then Israel would be the one who bore God’s blessing to the nations? Depending on how you are related to Israel is how God would relate to you. They had 300 years, and yet 300 years later they still were defying God and defying Israel, and God has decided, “No more. I warned them that judgment was coming, and now Saul, it’s your job to mete it out.” What is interesting when you begin to think about judgment is that everyone wants judgment. They just don’t want it to happen to them.

I remember when I got to college. I was in the Army for four years and then I went to Florida State after, and I grew my hair out so I could blend in a little bit, and then cut it again (obviously). But, I went to Florida State and I took a few religion classes, and it drove me crazy because the professors there basically drew a very sharp distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament was mean, spiteful, smiting, capricious. The God of the New Testament was loving and kind and patient. And yet, that’s just wrong because when you look at the Old Testament you see the patience and grace of God. When you look at the New Testament, frankly, there’s a little bit of smiting going on there. So what is it? Is God mean and spiteful and judgmental or is God loving and kind and peaceful? The answer is both. God is completely and utterly just. It’s against His character, it’s against His nature not to punish sin. He must or else He wouldn’t be just any more. On the other hand He is infinitely kind and infinitely merciful, so where do those two things meet? The answer, of course, is in the cross of Jesus. At the cross of Jesus, as the Psalm says, “righteousness and peace kiss each other.” [Psalm 85:10] What you see at the cross is all the judgment of God being poured out against sin, and He doesn’t hold back a wit. And yet also at the cross of Christ, what you see is all the love and mercy and lovingkindness of God as well because the wrath that is being poured out is not being poured out on you, it’s being poured out on the person of His very own Son. Jesus bears all of the sin that we should have borne ourselves, and then offers us complete forgiveness if we but trust Him. The question is, “Have you trusted Him? Do you know Christ? Have you trusted Jesus?” Have you said, “God I realize that I am a sinner and I need to trust in the fact that you punished my sin in that person, Jesus”? If you haven’t, I’m glad you’re here. But you need to know that God has the capacity to be patient with you forever, but His practice is not to be. There will come a day when you will have to stand before God and He’ll say, “Who represents you? Which king? Someone like Saul or the only king who can help you, Jesus Himself?” So when you look at these passages where it seems very harsh, realize that God is on hand is actually being patient, but also He must punish sin. The glory that you and I know is that He has punished it somewhere else, in the person and work of Jesus. That leads us to the next point.

God’s capacity for patience is unlimited but His practice is not. In other words there comes a point where He will not be patient any longer. The second principle we’ll look at, and if you’re a parent here, if you’ve not said this to your kids outright, you have thought it before. The principle is just this: Partial obedience is disobedience. Partial obedience is disobedience, and disobedience is sin. You don’t have to write all this. Partial obedience is disobedience. Disobedience is sin and sin puts you in the same place as the Amalekites.

A couple of things you see from that first passage and also from Exodus are these – that God is completely committed not only to His own justice, but to guarding and to protecting and to loving his covenant people. Because Amalek attacked God’s covenant people, God said, “I won’t abide by that.” One of the things you ought to keep in mind when you think about that, “that God is completely committed to his covenant people” is when you look around and

you watch the news any given day of the week you have to ask yourself, “Is God committed to the church?” “Is God committed to us?” “Did He promise that He would never fail us or forsake us?” That’s important for you to know. Every night (you can ask my family) they make sure there are not throwable objects for me to throw at the television, because as you look around and you wonder, “Where’s the economy going? Who’s going to be the next president? Who’s in Congress?” All of these things. It really does not matter at the end of the day. It’s important but at the end of the day, no matter who becomes president, no matter who is in Congress, no matter where the economy goes, the question you have to ask yourself is, “Is God committed to preserving, protecting, and loving His church?” The answer according to the Bible is, “Yes.” God is not going to fail us or forsake us.

Leading into the next point, basically you need a king who can lead you in that. So Saul gathers everybody, and the question is, “Is Saul going to obey or not?” Because God said in 1 Samuel 12, “The only thing that you need to do to be successful, Saul, is just obey the word of the Lord.” So what does Saul do? Let’s look at it.

⁴ So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah. ⁵ And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. ⁶ Then Saul said to the Kenites, “Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt.” So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. ⁷ And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. ⁸ And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword.

File this away in verse 9:

⁹ But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction. ¹⁰ The word of the Lord came to Samuel: ¹¹ “I regret 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.

How does Saul respond to the word of the Lord, which is pretty unambiguous, which didn’t leave him a lot of wiggle room? It’s almost an editorial comment. There is a group called the Kenites who are with the Amalekites, and they showed Israel kindness. So, it’s really not a bad thing that Saul told them, “Hey, we’re getting ready to attack and if you guys are smart you’ll scam.” They did. Did you notice how different Saul’s army is now than a couple chapters ago? A couple chapters ago when the Philistines were provoked, Saul had 600 men against 30,000 Philistines. Now Saul is the one with the huge army. So there’s no reason that Saul shouldn’t be able to actually fulfill what the Lord has asked him to do. He has a huge army, and it says that he actually does that; he sweeps through and geographically speaking, concurs everything that the Amalekites had. In other words, there’s no reason, there’s no excuse for saying, “You know, we went in to fight and they really put up a good fight, so therefore we couldn’t do everything.” What we know is that Saul was able to sweep through and so there’s no excuse for him not to do what the Lord commanded, and yet what didn’t he in fact do? He spared Agag, the king of the Amalekites, and all the best of the sheep and oxen, and that kind of thing. Why did he do that? The simple answer is probably pride. We’re going to see later about Saul’s pride. You see in the Ancient Near East it was a big deal once you killed your enemies, to actually take the king and parade him through your own home town to show the people how great you were. And of course saving the best of the sheep and the oxen, that was money to them. Why would they throw away good money? Notice also it says that Saul and the people did this. That’s going to be important in the last part of this text. When God hears of this, God comes to Samuel at night and says that, “I regret that I made Saul king.” I regret it. Whenever these Biblical writers want you to think of something before, they use other passages in the Bible to actually rouse your emotions, at least if you’re Hebrew. The language where God says that, “I regret that I made Saul king over Israel” is almost word for word from Genesis chapter 6 where humanity had just gone off the deep end. It says that

every thought and intention of their heart was evil all the time, right before Noah, and it said that God regretted that He had made man on the face of the earth. It's the exact same language, and the author probably wants you to think, "That's how bad Saul is." Saul is so bad in God's mind, and God's heart is so broken over Saul that it makes Him feel exactly like He felt before He had to flood the earth. That's how bad Saul is. He says, "I regret that I have made him king." You see, because you need a king who is not going to disobey the Lord or show partial obedience, but the only king who can help you is a king who is fully and completely obedient. Right? A king that is not obedient does you no good. In chapter 12 God said, "The only thing you need to do, Saul, is obey the word of the Lord." However the king goes, that's how Israel will go. Saul was disobedient and would eventually suffer for it and all Israel would suffer for it. What you and I need, what Israel needed was a king who would be obedient because the king is the one who represents you. There is a king, one king from the line of David who is utterly and completely obedient. His name is Jesus. Jesus our King lived the life you should have lived and He died the death you should have died. Everyone has a king. Everyone follows someone, so is it going to be a king like Saul who's in and out, or is it going to be a king like Jesus who's completely and utterly obedient on your behalf? That leads to the next principle.

You see the last principle is just this: You need a king who is willing to bear your guilt and your blame, not a king who is willing to shift it and dodge it. You need a king who is willing to bear your blame, not a king who dodges it. What do I mean by that? We'll notice finally here with Saul in verse 12.

¹² *And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal."* ¹³ *And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord."* ¹⁴ *And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?"*

Imagine that you are Samuel. On one hand I sympathize with Saul because he does not get it. Samuel totally gets it and he totally spent the whole night angry, crying out to the Lord. It's not intercession; he's not pleading for Saul. It is basically complaining to God about what a bad king Saul is. So Samuel is angry and frustrated. He has to go clean up after Saul again, and on the way down he is looking for him. "Has anyone seen Saul?" "No, he went down to Carmel." Samuel looks over and sees what? That Saul has built a monument to himself. Saul has built a monument to himself. So not only did Saul completely disobey God, but he's actually pretty proud of it. The question is, "Saul, what are you thinking here?" Either he really doesn't know, either he's completely clueless, or he's hoping that no one is really going to notice. That God and Samuel are going to be more impressed by the good things that he has done than with his obedience. So he comes down, and imagine the hubris of Saul to Samuel. If you don't know, hubris is basically incredible pride. Someone told me the definition of hubris. A few years ago some boys shot their parents and killed them, and then when they went before the judge they had the audacity to ask for mercy on the basis of the fact that they were orphans. That's hubris. That's incredible pride. That's just craziness. So Saul sees Samuel coming and he says, "Blessed be you to the Lord! I have performed the Lord's command!" Samuel who has a way with words says, "Then what is this bleating of sheep that I hear, and the lowing of oxen?" If Saul was like his son Jonathan or if Saul was like David who would come after him, what would his response to that be? "Phoooo. You got me. I thought you wouldn't notice all the sheep and oxen around. But since you have, I'm busted. I disobeyed the Lord, would you please forgive me? I beg the Lord to forgive me. I've sinned against the Lord." Instead of owning his sin and bearing the blame, what does Saul do? The first thing Saul does is he actually throws the people in his care under the bus. He throws them under the bus, or down the stairs, or whatever metaphor you want. It's not good. He does it to his own people that he's responsible for. Notice how he responds to this accusation. After Samuel says, "What is this bleating of sheep and lowing of oxen?"

¹⁵ *Saul said, "They (that is, the people) have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction."*

Did you notice how slippery Saul's words are here? When he's confronted about this sin the first thing he does is blame the disobedience on the people. "The people, they brought all this stuff from the Amalekites." And then he adds this little gray middle ground where he says, "For they were going to sacrifice them." In other words that might be a good thing. He's not sure. And if it's a good thing he has at least left a little bit of wiggle room for him to take some credit there. And then when they talk about the obedient part of this mission, they brought them. "They were going to sacrifice them to God and we destroyed all the things that were bad." So what does Saul do? Frankly he does the same thing you and I do almost every day of our lives. I can only speak for myself. When someone confronts you about something, what is your first response? Let's take a hypothetical situation and you are a husband and you happen to leave stuff lying all over the bedroom floor, hypothetically. And your wife comes and says, "Honey, you know it's been 17 years now. I have a great capacity for patience. Can you do something about this stuff on the floor?" Is your response to say, "You know, honey, you're right. I'm a horrible husband, I leave stuff all over the place. I'm going to do my best." Or is your response to say, "Yeah? Well the kitchen is still dirty." Or is your response to say something else? You see when you do that, you're actually blame shifting and you're dodging instead of dealing with your own sin. You're actually pointing out something else. We do that all the time, and Saul did that. When he was confronted with his sin, he said, "You know, it's really their fault." It's always someone else's fault. You don't need a king who is constantly saying, "It's someone else's fault." What you need is a king who will say, "It's my fault."

How can you have a king who's completely obedient, who's able to say, "It's my fault"? You need a king like Jesus, because Jesus is the only king who says, "I didn't do anything wrong, but I'm willing to take the blame for it. I didn't sin. I didn't blame shift. I didn't do anything wrong. I've been completely and utterly obedient but Father, I will take the blame for all of them out there." That is the kind of king you need, a king who does not shift blame or dodge blame, or throw you under the bus, but you need a king who is actually willing to take your blame upon himself even though he has not anything. You need a king who will represent you like that. The question is, "Do you have one? Do you really believe that about Jesus?" Some of you are not Christians, right? You have to ask yourself that question. "Have I ever trusted Jesus to bear my blame even though He didn't deserve it?" Some of you have been Christians all of your life. You need to ask yourself that question, "Do I really trust Jesus even though supposedly I believe that He took my blame." Because if He has, why do you still blame shift? Why do you still point your finger? Why are you so defensive? Why are you so worried? Why are you so religious? The answer is that you may not believe it as much as you think. The question is, "Will you?" I love the way that Samuel deals with excuses. It reminded me of when I was in the Army. In the Army when someone would say, "What's your excuse, Private?" Your only excuse was to say, "There is no excuse." They didn't waste a lot of time listening to why you did this or that. So Saul begins to give this excuse, "The people did it. They were going to sacrifice, but we did the right part." What does Samuel say? He just says, "Stop. Just stop. You are wasting everyone's time, Saul. I'm going to tell you what God has said about this." This is a great place to stop, to just stop.

Think about your life even as you go through this week. What are the kind of things you are afraid to take blame for? What are the kinds of things you are ashamed of? Look to the cross and say, "Jesus, you have taken that for me. You've taken my blame. You've taken the shame. You've taken the guilt. I don't have to take it any more. I don't have to do that. I'm free now." Think about that.