

I Samuel

Lesson 23 - Chapter 15

It is always a challenge for me to know how long to remain in any chapter or book, because if we go too fast we miss the impact of certain vital God-principles that are presented to us, and if we go too slow and methodically we'll become so focused on the details that we'll lose the big picture. Every word of God's Word is important. Every chapter of every book of the Bible is there for a reason. But there are some chapters and passages that have a depth and gravity to them that are worth all the time and mental energy that we can muster to explore them; and yet even when we have done all that it seems that we can do to ferret out what is there, we instinctively know in our spirits that we have only scratched the surface and leave that study with a sense of unfinished business. 1st Samuel chapter 15 is such a chapter and despite the significant amount of time we'll dedicate to it, it won't have been enough.

We have some important history to deal with, and important God-principles to absorb and in some cases re-examine. This history and the principles that are contained in it are like connecting tissue that binds together what came before with what will come after. This chapter has hidden fingers that stretch out in many directions and we're going to explore several of them. So this is going to get pretty detailed; if you're a note taker, have plenty of paper and an extra pen or pencil handy. If you're not a note taker, you might want to convert.

We read all of chapter 15 last week, and this week we'll read it again, but in sections.

Let's start by re-reading verses 1 – 3.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL 15: 1 – 3

Some undefined amount of time has passed since the Battle of Mikhmas Pass as described in 1st Samuel 14; it could have been months, maybe even a few years. Samuel has been silent for a while but now the Lord has determined that it is time to deal with a very wicked people that are the supreme earthly enemy of Israel, Amalek, and so the Lord sends His Prophet to Israel's King with the order to commence a Holy War. The source of the hatred that Amalek has for Israel is difficult to explain. But we need to explore it because their hatred for Israel is the primary reason for God's hatred of Amalek. Just who or what Amalek is (and why they are so important), is difficult to trace; however their position as apparently the supreme nation of evil and enemy of Israel in God's eyes, and as a type or pattern that will show up again in the End Times, means we need to understand all that we can about Amalek's identity.

What we do know of Amalek is that they are (at least partly) descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother. Amalek was a nation of desert dwellers living in the upper Sinai, the region of the Negev, and ranged as far as the Arabian Peninsula. Esau, given the nickname of Edom (which means "red"), had as his firstborn a son named Eliphaz. Eliphaz produced a son with a foreign concubine, Timna (a Horite), and this son's name was Amalek. And if this is all there was to it

then it would be simple enough to say that the Amalekites were the descendants of Esau through his grandson Amalek.

However in Genesis 14:7 in Abraham's time (well before Eliphaz's concubine bore Amalek) there was already a people group in existence called the Amalekites. This nation of people was living in the desert regions of Canaan, pretty much where we still find them now in 1st Samuel 15 some 700 years later. We do know that the Horites (Amalek's mother was a Horite) also lived in that same region and likely had by now closely intermingled with the Amalekites. Very possibly it was merely that Esau's grandson Amalek got his name because his mother (and perhaps father) had become closely associated with the Amalekite people, and it was quite usual to name a child in a way that more or less dedicated that child to (or identified them with) some clan, or tribe, or deity. In other words, what we have here is a chicken-and-egg problem. Which came first: the Amalekite people, or the person of Amalek, grandson of Esau? Or were the Amalekites of Abraham's era an entirely different, though similarly named, group of people than the Amalekites that Saul was instructed to fight?

Here we'll follow in some depth one of those "fingers" I just talked about because it addresses an important Biblical principle: God divided and separated the earth's population into two groups and elected one group as His people and thus the remainder were not His people.

Our examination of this "finger" begins with an interesting account in Numbers 24:20 that dealt with the identity of Amalek. The pagan prophet Balaam, a seer from Mesopotamia who had been hired by King Balak to curse Israel as they entered his territory (about 400 years prior to the time of Samuel), wound up blessing Israel and cursing Israel's enemies. And one of the enemies that he cursed was Amalek.

CJB Numbers 24:20 He saw 'Amalek and made this pronouncement: "First among nations was 'Amalek, but destruction will be its end."

Now part of the problem in identifying and defining Amalek lays in the translation from the original Hebrew; where this passage in Numbers 24 says, "First among nations was Amalek"; it can also be translated as "first among the gentiles was Amalek." However the word that is being translated into "first among" is **reshit**, which more literally means "beginning" (the first words of Genesis are **be-reshit**, "in the beginning"). So perhaps a more accurate translation into English would be, "the beginning of the gentiles" or even better, "the beginning of the gentile nations" (stay with me). So we have, "the beginning of the gentile nations is Amalek, but destruction will be its end".

However as we now look at the phrase, "but destruction will be its end", we also see some problems with the usual way it is presented in modern English. Depending on your bible version you will find this phrase rendered, "but its end is utter destruction", or "its fate is to perish forever", or some such thing. The Hebrew word that is variously translated as "its end" or "its fate" is **aharit**. And because the Bible employs various kinds of prose, we see that a form of the word **aharit** is chosen because it is the antonym, (the opposite) of the word **reshit**. **Aharit** is "the end", while **reshit** is "the beginning". So the pronouncement is that while Amalek is the **beginning** (or the first) of the gentiles their **ending** will be destruction.

But even more interesting is that the exact grammatical form of the word **aharit** used in this passage is **aharito**, which means “remnant” (or in the sense used here, “all that remains”). Thus we wind up with this construction when we apply the Hebrew sense to it: “The beginning of the gentile nations is Amalek, but all that remains of them shall be destroyed forever”.

Thus we see the prophetic nature of Amalek as the archetypical enemy of God and therefore of His set-apart people of Israel. Amalek was the first nation (and by definition, a gentile nation) to attack Israel. And, of course, it is gentiles who are the enemy set apart for destruction because it is gentiles who are always set over and against Israel, God’s chosen. Thus it is that the only way for a person born as a gentile (a natural enemy of God’s people since the moment he divided the world into Hebrews and gentiles) to escape from being judged by Yehoveh and eternally destroyed is to JOIN Israel and leave behind the gentile (the anti-Israel, anti-God, anti-Christ) identity. Those gentiles who have accepted the God of Israel and His commands and redemptive plan are declared by God as being spiritually joined to Israel and so from an eternal heavenly perspective they no longer share the same fate as the first recorded gentiles (Amalek) to become openly hostile to the redeemed of God

So in yet another context and setting about how gentiles relate to Israel from a spiritual and eternal perspective, listen again (as we’ve done many times) to Paul in Romans 11:

CJB Romans 11:16 Now if the hallah offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole loaf. And if the root is holy, so are the branches.¹⁷ But if some of the branches (Israelites) were broken off, and you- a wild olive- (gentiles) were grafted in among them and have become equal sharers in the rich root of the olive tree,¹⁸ then don’t boast as if you were better than the branches! However, if you do boast, remember that you are not supporting the root, the root is supporting you.

You have heard scores of times that as gentiles it is necessary that we be grafted into Israel; and that it is needed in order for natural-born gentiles to partake in the benefits offered by the Hebrew Messiah who is from the tribe of Judah, and thus belongs to Israel. So it is equally important to understand that essentially just as we are SPIRITUALLY grafted in TO Israel, we are also SPIRITUALLY removed FROM our gentile status. We are cut off and removed from a Wild-Olive tree (the gentile tree trunk) and grafted onto the Olive tree of God (the Hebrew tree trunk). And why is that important? Because from the moment God divided and separated the world into two distinct people groups (Hebrews and gentiles), one group (Hebrews) were to be those who formed and maintained the Kingdom of God on earth, while the other (gentiles) by Biblical definition automatically represented those who OPPOSE and seek to destroy God’s Kingdom on earth.

Let me quickly remind you that I’m speaking of the cutting-off and then grafting-in being accomplished on a spiritual level, not on a bodily, physical level. Gentiles do not magically have the genes rearranged in our bodies and become Hebrews upon the acceptance of the Jewish Messiah Yeshua. Nor do we become qualified to gain national citizenship to the earthly nation of Israel.

From a higher level, Amalek represents all gentiles who oppose God and God’s chosen. Thus

(by means of Yeshua) some gentiles will become identified from a spiritual perspective as "Israel" and be saved, while "those who remain" spiritual gentiles (spiritual Amalek who is opposed to God) will eventually be forever destroyed. This is as fundamental as it gets to the underlying Biblical relationship between gentiles and Israel, it explains exactly what it is that separates the eternally saved from the eternally damned, and it also demonstrates Amalek's real spiritual and prophetic identity.

On the other hand, from a strictly earthly, physical perspective (and from the perspective of King Saul and the Prophet Samuel in chapter 15) the Amalekites were in that day seen as closely associated with the descendants of Esau, likely because Esau's grandson Amalek became the head of that nation of people that had existed even from Abraham's day. Amalek (from a physical, political perspective) doesn't seem to have been any greater threat for the tribes of Israel in that era than any other nation such as Ammon, or Moab, or Philistia.

As concerns our modern time and the way we need to view it currently, let me be clear that other than the fact that Arabs are gentiles, we cannot necessarily say that the modern Amalekites are the Arabs or the Palestinians. First, (ethnically speaking) Arabs came from Ishmael (Isaac's brother), not from Esau. Second, the Palestinians are a genetically mixed bag and cannot be seen as one particular race or nation of people. And third, ALL gentiles who continue to oppose God and Israel (not just Arabs or Palestinians) are counted as spiritual Amalekites no matter what nation they call home or which race or ethnicity they belong to.

OK. So with this understanding of who Amalek was and is, and how this transcends time and nationality, let's move forward with more of our lesson.

Amalek had wantonly attacked Israel while they were but a mob of rag-tag refugees out in the wilderness, having just fled from Egypt. For this great evil against His redeemed, the Lord pronounced this sentence upon Amalek:

CJB Exodus 17:14 ADONAI said to Moshe, "Write this in a book to be remembered, and tell it to Y'hoshua: I will completely blot out any memory of 'Amalek from under heaven.'"

And as Israel neared the end of their 40-year journey and approached Canaan, the Lord again said:

CJB Deuteronomy 25:17 "Remember what 'Amalek did to you on the road as you were coming out of Egypt,¹⁸ how he met you by the road, attacked those in the rear, those who were exhausted and straggling behind when you were tired and weary. He did not fear God.¹⁹ Therefore, when ADONAI your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies in the land ADONAI your God is giving you as your inheritance to possess, you are to blot out all memory of 'Amalek from under heaven. Don't forget!"

The key word, fellow physical gentiles, is: "he did not fear God". Amalek (the epitome of gentiles) chose to attack Israel because they did not fear the God of Israel (meaning that they did not honor and accept Him). Yehoveh says that those who oppose Him and/or are against His chosen people Israel do not fear Him. I hope that no one who is listening to this lesson is

against Israel, let alone against God. But if in your mind you believe that you can stand with the God of Israel but at the same time (out of some kind of political or philosophical belief you hold dear) you can stand **against** God's people Israel, then you need to rethink your position. God counts standing against His people as standing against Him. Such an untenable position makes you Amalek (not an identity anyone with hope of an eternal future wants to be labeled with). This by no means says you must agree on every point with Israel, or endorse its government's actions, or even side with every Jew. But you must have a love and concern in your heart for Israel (honoring them as God's chosen) that is well above any humanitarian concern for those gentiles who are openly Israel's enemies; else you risk it all.

The Lord, through Samuel, makes two things abundantly clear: that a) King Saul is to let nothing remain of Amalek, and b) that this is a Holy War. You say, 'where does it say Holy War'? Well it is masked by the English translation of "completely destroy" in verse 2; but more literally the Hebrew says that Saul is to put Amalek "under the ban". The Hebrew word used is **herem**, and we've discussed the Law of Herem on a few occasions. But let's talk about it again.

The Law of Herem, the Law of the Ban, is the central principle of Holy War; it means that everything that is confiscated during a war action belongs to the Commander in Chief. This law was not at all unique for Israel among Middle Eastern nations, except that Israel was the only Middle Eastern society in which their God was the Commander in Chief (all other times it was a nation's king). And the idea was that in that era the spoils of any conflict were considered part of the soldiers' pay. However this was at the discretion of their king. He might reward them with a bonus (so to speak) of a portion of the spoils of war, or he also might "ban" them from taking any of the spoils for themselves and instead they were merely to gather it all up and turn it over to their king for his benefit.

So the idea of **herem**, ban, as concerned Israel was that unless the Lord gave specific instructions to the contrary, it was automatically assumed that all God-ordained conflicts (Holy Wars) had the ban instituted, thus barring the Israelite soldiers from keeping any of the spoils for themselves. Israel was still to gather the spoils of war and turn them over to their Commander in Chief, Yehoveh. But the means of doing that was quite unique and it has greatly bothered and upset Jewish and Christian scholars to this day (we'll talk about that in a minute).

Since God is a spiritual being and not a man, He has no barns or storehouses for fine fabrics, and wine, and olive oil. And since the Lord doesn't need riches of silver and gold; and since He also doesn't need cattle and sheep and goats for food, then how exactly are these banned spoils of war to be turned over to Him? By destroying them (usually with fire). Destroying the spoils accomplishes two things: 1) it keeps God's people from partaking of any of the benefit of the spoils, and 2) by turning the spoils to ashes it essentially returns these things to their natural elements, which is like returning them to Creation, which is like returning them to the Creator.

Now it's one thing to burn down cities and villages, destroy produce and domestic animals, and prohibit precious metals and valuable jewelry from falling into the hands of the Israelite

soldiers; but what about the utter annihilation of the enemy people that has been ordered? Notice that verse 3 has God telling Samuel to tell Saul that NONE are to be spared: not women, children, or even infants. If that doesn't make you squirm a little bit, I don't know what will because one of the basic questions that most Christians ask at some point is what happens to babies or small children who die before they have any real opportunity to know about Messiah and make a decision. And the usual answer is that they are deemed by God to be innocent. So why aren't the infant Amalekites deemed innocent here in 1st Samuel 15? Tough topic to be sure.

Holy War is not geo-political war. Holy War is also not religious war. Holy War is not about spreading the religion of the Hebrews, it's more about keeping the religion of the gentiles from infecting the religion of the Hebrews within the territory of the Kingdom of God (which for now, was Canaan). Further, not just any kind of war that Israel decides to enter into is Holy War. ONLY when God orders it and directs it is it Holy War. Thus only when God orders it and directs it CAN the God-ordained Law of Herem come into play.

Now I tell you this because I'm not sure I've ever found an otherwise good and faithful Christian commentator who has NOT tried to find a good reason why the Law of Herem not only no longer applies, but will NEVER apply again. Let me give you a couple of quotes from folks who are some of the best known and most revered commentators but who also can be at least somewhat considered "Hebrew Roots" oriented.

Here is what Alfred Edersheim says: "This accommodation of the Law to each stage of man's moral state, together with the continuous moral advancement which the Law as school-master was intended to bring about, and which in turn was met by progressive revelation, renders it impossible to judge of a Divine commandment by trying to put it as to our own times, and as applicable to us".

R.P. Gordon says that, "Like the whole concept of holy war, it is far removed from the Christian code of the New Testament and must be seen in the context of the provisional morality of the Old Testament".

Both of these examples are of folks trying to find a way around the problem because it bothers their personal sensibilities and Western notions of civility. But more to the point, even their reference to the so-called New Testament Christian Code as having the Holy War concept abolished falls apart unless one removes the Book of Revelation and the Battle of Armageddon from our Bibles. And this is where modern Believers can really get off track, by essentially apologizing for God or deciding that the very nature of the Lord has changed at the turning of the page from Ezra to Matthew, or explaining that we worshippers of the God of Israel have gained such morality and refinement since the days of Abraham, Samuel, and David that we have risen above the need for Holy War and thus God has essentially canceled it. Of course, then how do we explain away Armageddon, the Jezreel Valley being filled up to a horse's bridle with the blood of the enemy as extracted by Messiah Jesus, and the absolute annihilation of every last human on earth (of any age, sex, race, or nation) who prior to the start of the Battle had not turned their lives over to Yehoveh?

There are no prisoners taken at Armageddon except perhaps for the Anti-Christ and his false prophet. No unbeliever will be saved to serve the Saints or given yet another chance to accept Messiah.. Armageddon will operate under the same instructions that Samuel has given Saul for eradicating Amalek. Why? Because Armageddon IS the culmination of the Holy War against Amalek (the people who are against God and His chosen) and it is also the culmination of the Holy War for Canaan, God's Kingdom land. How many songs do Church congregations sing on Sunday mornings speaking of the End Times' mighty warrior Jesus, of the great and terrible day of His return, and how everything that is not for the Lord and of the Lord will be burned up and destroyed on that day? Everything. The words are often accurate but the problem is that the singing of them doesn't seem to bring about any kind of honest or sober mental picture into the minds of the worshippers of just what it is that is taking place in their song.

We have in Armageddon the classic Old Testament Holy War complete with its Law of Herem, the ban. God has ordained this Holy War, God is the Commander in Chief, and thus none of the spoils of the Holy War of Armageddon can be awarded to God's soldiers; all is banned. All must be destroyed as the standard means of turning the spoils over to Yehoveh. Men, women, old, young, animals, buildings, you name it. If it belongs to the enemy, it is to be destroyed without mercy and without exception. Again: the destruction of Armageddon is not about "getting rid of it"; it's about obedience to the Law of Herem. It's not destruction for the sake of destruction; the Holy Scriptures clearly explain the destruction by fire is the means by which the spoils of Holy War taken from God's enemies are to be set apart and turned over to the Lord. And note please: this is NOT the same thing as a sacrifice. We'll get to that matter in the next lesson or so.

As we'll discover later in this chapter, King Saul would have made a good Christian. He just couldn't bring himself to FULLY obey God's Word and thus destroy everything belonging to the enemy that had value in his eyes; it didn't make any sense to him. And even when the Lord told Saul that he had disobeyed and had NOT followed the Law of the Ban by proceeding with total destruction, Saul argued that he had. It's just that in his own heart he thought he had a better way go about this than God's way. Saul saw what he did as good; that God's way was a bit too harsh and destructive and perhaps outdated. After all, hundreds of years had passed since the time of Moses. Surely God could see that His worshippers had gained such an advanced state of knowledge and morality that they could now make those judgments on their own no matter how contrary that those judgments might be to those old laws given so long ago at Mt. Sinai

Let's read a few more verses.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL 15:4 – 9

King Saul followed Samuel's instructions and called for the Israeli militia to assemble at a place called **Telaim**, meaning "place of the lambs". Telaim was located about 35 miles south of Hebron. Note that just as in 1st Samuel chapter 11 the army of Judah is mentioned

separately from the rest of Israel because of the political divisions and tribal alliances that had been formed. Let me remind you that as of this time Judah and Simeon were aligned to form the southern tribal territory of Israel, while Saul's tribe Benjamin was aligned with 7 other tribes to form the northern tribal territory of Israel. Those Israelite tribes on the east bank of the Jordan had divided loyalties, and generally on a clan by clan basis either remained independent or their loyalties leaned toward either the northern or southern coalition. Let's also be clear that all of these alignments ebbed and flowed and evolved with regularity over time (as we'll especially see when David comes into the picture).

After Saul reviewed the troops (and though it is not mentioned he would have taken a census of the army), they marched to confront the Amalekites at a place generically called "the city of the Amalekites". In other words we're not given its name. Further the Hebrew word used here that is usually translated as "city" is *ir*, and *ir* doesn't need to be translated as "city" and thus imply a large walled city. It can also mean "town", which in Bible-speak is a substantial population center but it doesn't have protective walls.

Now no valley is big enough to hide the 210,000 men at Saul's disposal, so no doubt this was a garrison of Israelite soldiers who lay in wait with the remainder near by enough to join the battle against Amalek pretty quickly and as needed.

Living near this city of the Amalekites was a tribe of people called the ***Ken***, or Kenites. We have heard of them before. Since these people had been a friend of Israel, Saul didn't want them to accidentally get in harms way and so suggested that they pack up and leave for a time.

Verse 6 says that the Kenites were "kind" to Israel, but that significantly misses the impact of the original Hebrew word, which was ***chesed***. ***Chesed*** is a word denoting righteous actions and deeds of great mercy and charity. So the Kenites were highly regarded by both God and Israel as genuine gentile friends of Israel who deeply cared for Israel's well being. But so there is no misunderstanding: they were not Israelites and so not redeemed people. A gentile then, as now, can demonstrate great mercy and charity towards Israel but that doesn't (of itself) save them. Trust and faith in the God of Israel is the only way in any era to redemption.

Saul saying that he "might destroy you along with them" was not a threat; it was just that in this kind of warfare it's near to impossible to tell friend from foe in the heat of battle. But even more, this was not going to be a war between two opposing militaries in order to achieve some political objective; King Sha'ul's divine instructions were to destroy the civilian population of Amalek. Unlike usual warfare of that era, no distinction was to be made between non-combatants and the soldiers; all were to be annihilated. Therefore it would be easy to mistake some of the Kenite civilians for Amalekites; the Kenites wisely fled the area temporarily.

Once the Kenites were clear of danger Sha'ul's forces attacked beginning at a place called Havilah, and continuing all the way to Shur that bordered Egypt. Academics are fairly certain that this was located along a river usually known as the Wadi of Egypt, as this formerly flowing (but now dry) river was called. This Wadi was the natural boundary between Canaan and Egypt.

As is so typical of Biblical style, we are spared any gory details of the battle. We don't even know how long it lasted; all we know is that the defeat of the Amalekites was swift and sure. You see, any Hebrew hearing this story (and eventually reading it) would have taken for granted that victory was assured. To have written about it would have been anti-climactic. The Lord God ordained the Holy War so it was simply a matter of doing it; the outcome was taken for granted.

But with verse 8, a problem arises: Saul decided to take Agag, king of the Amalekites, alive and hold him captive. The entire Amalekite population of the area was indeed slaughtered, but the only domestic animals (belonging to the enemy) that were destroyed were the weak and sickly. The best animals (even the merely healthy) were captured as booty. Even personal possessions of the Amalekites that were deemed as valuable and desirable were confiscated and brought to Saul. As verse 9 says, "...they weren't inclined to destroy those things". But everything that was worthless in Saul's eyes was destroyed.

Now why exactly Saul captured Agag we're not told, and there is all matter of speculation as to why. Perhaps Agag agreed to surrender rather than fight if his life was spared. Or perhaps King Saul thought it diplomatic and fitting that a king of so great a nation be spared. There is further speculation that Agag was not the king's name but rather a title, like Pharaoh, so that every person who held that office was given the same title. In fact in the book of Esther we find that Haman is called "the Agagite", probably a well known insult of that era, signifying an enemy of Yehoveh and of Israel.

I think we've spent enough time with this today for you to already know that what Saul did was direct disobedience to the Law of Herem and God's oracle to Saul as given through Samuel.

Next week we'll follow this story further and examine some of the other principles that come barreling out at us.