

I Samuel

Lesson 24 - Chapter 15 Continued

We spent most of our last lesson talking about Amalek. 1st Samuel 15 is primarily about the Lord's instructions to His earthly king (Saul) to carry out the total destruction of Israel's oldest earthly enemy, most of who were descended from Esau. And it is this historical reality that was at the heart of one of the several "fingers" of remarkable spiritual truth that I said we'd explore in our study of this chapter.

I know that last week was a lot to assimilate; and some of it was perhaps a bit unnerving especially the part about how Amalek essentially represents the entire gentile portion of the world's population (with one notable exception) that opposes Him. The gentile Church has been more used to thinking of ourselves as God's good guys and the Hebrews as something less. But the Biblical reality is actually somewhat different.

We discussed that way back in Genesis upon the selection of Abraham as the father of a people set apart for God (God's covenant people) the world became divided and separated into two distinct people groups; but I probably haven't (until last week) hammered home the sobering consequence that natural born gentiles face as a result of that divine division. Upon the Father's act of dividing the world's humans into Hebrews and gentiles, natural born gentiles became identified as the enemies of God. Gentiles continue to be the natural born enemies of God's Kingdom. Natural born gentiles were (and remain) enemies of Israel. And this is because natural born gentiles are born with the spirit of Amalek (again, with one notable exception that I'll explain in a moment).

Natural born Israelites (Hebrews) on the other hand are born as God's chosen people. Natural born Hebrews are born as friends of Adonai. Natural born Hebrews are born as members of God's Kingdom. Natural born Hebrews are born as enemies of Amalek. And this is because natural born Hebrews come from a line of selected people who have been redeemed by grace, and so redemption is naturally theirs; but that redemption comes with a major IF.

You see the redemption of the Hebrews down in Egypt (although given to them as an act of grace) was conditional. Each individual Hebrew was given redemption **by grace** and they remained redeemed IF they trusted God and obeyed His commandments (that would be given to them at Mt. Sinai just a few short weeks after their redemption). The condition was that IF they ever turned away from God and rebelled to a severe enough extent, THEN God would react by voiding that redemption on a case by case basis. So when it came to the all-important issue of redemption and harmony with Yehoveh they were in a similar, but not quite the same, boat as gentiles. It was possible for a Hebrew (in most cases) to honestly and sincerely repent, turn from his rebellion, atone and come back to the God of Israel, and be restored to his natural born identity as God's friend. But a gentile begins life in an entirely different position and status before God than does a Hebrew. A gentile had to give up his natural identity as a gentile and voluntarily join himself to Israel on a physical, spiritual, and national basis in order

to have redemption. That is, until the time came for God's Messiah to appear and begin His earthly ministry.

So now here is the lone exception to the rule that all gentiles are as Amalek, God's natural enemies. In His mercy the Lord devised a plan for the gentiles of the world to no longer be counted as Amalek, if that's what we wanted. Under God's plan a gentile COULD apply for a transfer of identity, but the transfer was entirely conditional. IF a gentile would trust, by means of faith, in Israel's Messiah, THEN that gentile would be counted as a Hebrew (a friend of God). That gentile would have his Amalekite identity and spirit exchanged for a Holy Spirit and a Hebrew identity. He'd remain a genealogical, physical, national gentile but on a divine spiritual level God would declare him to be (and view him as) part of Israel (His chosen and elected people), and thus no longer part of Amalek.

Therefore as Paul says in Romans 11, we gentiles certainly shouldn't boast about our new identity and status. We've done nothing to merit it. We are joining Israel, Israel isn't joining us. Gentiles are exchanging our identity for their identity; they aren't exchanging theirs for ours. We are participating in Israel's Messiah; Israel isn't participating in a gentile Messiah. However if you asked the modern religious leadership of a number of mainstream Christian denomination Jesus is now the gentile Messiah and Jews need to give up their Jewish identity in order to accept our gentile identity. What a tragic, misinformed, arrogant, rebellious doctrine. It couldn't be more Biblically unsound (Old or New Testament) or could it possibly be more of an affront to Christ, Yeshua HaMashiach, who (as a Jew) came first to His Jewish brethren and only afterwards to the gentiles...conditionally.

Thank the Lord that as His redemptive plan enters into the end game there is a movement of the Holy Spirit in every corner of this planet, among Believers of every race, nation, and denomination, to give up all the tired old anti-Semitic doctrines that have grown out of these manmade traditions that were created for no other reason than a desire to rip apart what God has joined together. Folks, millions of Christians have been operating under a case of mass mistaken identity for centuries.

Now with that "finger" explored about as far as I'd like to take it, let's move on. There are other fingers that today's lesson will uncover. Open your Bibles to 1st Samuel 15. We're going to read a few more verses.

RE-READ 1ST SAMUEL 15: 1- 23

So Saul followed God's instruction to attack Amalek and destroy them. Since this was Holy War, the Law of the Ban (the Law of Herem) was instituted. We discussed this at length last week but briefly Herem is a God-ordained law that bans the Israelite soldiers from taking any of the spoils won from the defeated enemy for their own use. Instead the spoils of war are to be gathered together and destroyed, usually by fire. It was by this symbolic (and in some ways physical and tangible) means that the spoils of Holy War were given to God the Commander in Chief of Israel's army. Obviously if the spoils were destroyed the soldiers couldn't use them.

But we're also given a definition of what the list of banned spoils of this war against Amalek

consisted of; and if we were to go back into earlier battles of Holy War we'd find that exactly which items were banned under any particular circumstance was entirely at Yehoveh's discretion. As concerned Amalek, everything was to be banned; and this included all human beings (men, women, elderly, children, babies), and all domesticated animals, and all of the Amalekites' possessions, and all of their buildings, etc. If the Amalekites owned it, it was to be destroyed. If it WAS an Amalekite, he or she was to be killed (pretty simple and pretty definitive but apparently not to King Sha'ul).

Despite a full understanding of the meaning and terms of the divine ban, Saul went ahead and captured spoils that included the best (and even the merely ordinary) domesticated animals and all things that seemed good and valuable to him, rather than following the Lord's instructions to destroy them all without exception. Further, King Saul left the head potentate of Amalek (Agag) alive.

Verse 10 tells us God's attitude about this decision of Israel's king: "I regret setting up Sha'ul as king, because he has turned back from following me and hasn't obeyed my orders".

Now because we're going to see this same basic thought repeated in this story, and even concerning some other folks later on in the Scriptures, I'd like to discuss it for a few minutes. The thought I'm referring to is that the Lord "regrets" doing something (in this case naming Saul to be Israel's first king). The Hebrew word being translated is **nacham** and it is a form of the word **nachum**. **Nachum** means to comfort, or to have compassion, or to console. It is interesting (and no coincidence) that the village where Christ ultimately operated out of the most, Capernaum, is in Hebrew **Kapher-Nachum** meaning, the town of comfort and compassion. **Nacham** is similar but instead means to regret, or to console one's self. Thus depending on your Bible you'll see the English word "regret" or most usually "repent" as the translation of **nacham**.

But we have to be cautious and discerning in ascribing the actual sense of "repent" or "regret" in this case because so many times in the Bible words are chosen that makes God seem to have the same kinds of reactions and emotions as do His human creations. But God is not a man and so in many instances the words chosen are but figurative or anthropomorphic; that is a non-human is assigned human qualities. I've been asked by a lot of people about this conundrum and it is not a simple task to explain it; but I'll give it a try. The fact is that God lives in the spiritual sphere and we live in the physical sphere. God is spirit, we are flesh. The spiritual sphere might have limits, but they are far beyond the limits of our 4 dimensional physical sphere and we have no way to know what those spiritual limits might be. But one of the limits that we physical beings have that God and the other spiritual beings don't have is vocabulary. Another and equally important limit is that while we flesh and blood beings have no means to see into the spiritual sphere, spiritual beings have full knowledge and insight into our physical sphere. Spirits don't communicate among themselves with the spoken word in the same sense as does humans (at least as far as we know) using vocal chords and an alphabet. Even they did, they have things existent in their sphere of spiritual reality that we don't, and we can't grasp, and that can't exist in a purely physical universe. So when we humans are communicating with one another about the spirit world or about spirit beings (and especially about the Lord) we're stuck; since we have no (or exceedingly limited) visibility into that

spiritual world we have virtually no other choice than to employ human terms to speak about spiritual things even if those terms aren't the best fit. Unfortunately it's as close as we can get, and as a result we sometimes tend to subconsciously bring God down to our level and assign Him with our frailties and attributes and (at times) limitations.

When it comes to the Lord "repenting" of making Saul a king, we must realize that how this term applies to God is quite different than how it applies to human beings. For a man to regret or repent means to have a change of mind or heart. Usually it implies a mistake or an error of judgment that is being corrected. If we repent of our sins it means that we realize our error, and we change and stop sinning that particular sin. But for God to regret or repent means that a relationship or circumstance **outside of Him** has changed. In other words, God sets the boundaries for good and evil and they never change. God is near to a man who is good, and not near to a man who is evil. So if a man (like Saul) begins as good and behaves by doing good, then God is with Him. But when a man changes and moves away from being good into being evil God is no longer with Him; but who moved? God didn't move, the man moved. God didn't change, the man changed. God didn't alter His definition of good and evil, man simply moved from good TO evil. So here for God to repent or regret means that God is acknowledging that the circumstance has changed and thus the status of Saul's relationship with God has changed. The man changed the circumstance thus causing the change in status.

Truthfully I can't say with any conviction whether or not the Lord has something in His nature closely resembling our emotions. But here in this particular case we must not take **nacham** (regret, repent) to mean that the Lord has been surprised by Saul's rebellious actions, is hurt by them, and realizing His error in judgment is now experiencing a let down and so wishes He had chosen someone else to be King of Israel (the way a human being might react).

So later in this passage after making a declaration that the relationship status between God and Saul had changed, we hear that it was because "Saul hasn't obeyed my orders" (in other words Saul changed, God didn't change). Here we encounter a very familiar Hebrew word that might surprise when you find out what it is: **shema**. We have discussed this important Hebrew word before, and the most famous place we find it is Deuteronomy 6:4. This passage is known by the Jews as the **Shema Yisra'el**, and among gentile Christians as the **Hear O Israel**. The thing is that **shema** doesn't mean merely to hear or to listen; it inherently means to hear and obey. It is a forceful term. Sha'ul certainly heard the Lord's words, but he didn't obey them thus he didn't **shema** Yehoveh.

Samuel, as God's Prophet, was the first to learn (directly from the Lord that the status of the relationship between Yehoveh and Saul had changed (and the reason for it); and it devastated Samuel. Samuel was assigned by God with indicting Saul for his disobedience and to inform him of the consequences of this new reality. We're told that Samuel cried all night to Adonai. The Hebrew is **charah**; that is Samuel "**charah**" all night to God. And while "cry" isn't necessarily wrong, it kind of misses the point. **Charah** used in this context means to experience an intense, hotly burning anger or upset. To be disgusted and bewildered beyond the pale. So Samuel was greatly agitated and vented his burning hot feelings towards Saul to the Lord.

Now as much as it must have tweaked Samuel's sense of piety that God's anointed king would rebel in such a grievous manner, the truth is that it was Samuel who had publically anointed Saul. Samuel had sung Saul's praises, stood before the people and announced his kingship. Samuel had given up his own role as Israel's leader in order to be obedient to the Lord, and compliant with what Israel's tribal leaders demanded (a king to lead them). All Israel acknowledged and accepted Samuel's divine status as Judge and Prophet; so was Saul Samuel's mistake? Had Samuel misunderstood the Lord (or even disobeyed the Lord) and chosen the wrong guy? Samuel was embarrassed, bitter, disappointed, angry, and probably concerned for his own reputation on account of Saul's great sin and now his very visible fall from grace. Saul's failures made Samuel look bad. Who among us would have slept a wink that night?

But Samuel (who installed Saul as king) now has the awful task of deposing Israel's first king on God's behalf. No doubt as much as Sha'ul would suffer humiliation Samuel would experience depressing consequences as well. After all, if Samuel's divine assignment was as God's oracle to Israel's king; and in God's eyes Israel no longer had a king, then what exactly were Samuel's position and status and duties?

Verse 12 explains that after a horrible sleepless night of pouring out his wounded soul before the Lord, Samuel sets off to carry out his unpleasant duty of informing Saul that the Lord has removed him as King of Israel. Where exactly Sh'mu'el planned on meeting Sha'ul is not clear. However as he gets ready to leave someone informs him that he ought not to bother to go there because Saul has been busy erecting a monument to himself at Karmel and is now on his way to Gilgal.

This Karmel is not the Mt. Carmel of the north of Israel that we're all familiar with; rather it is the modern site of Tel el-Kirmil that is about 7 miles south of Hebron. The monument King Saul was erecting no doubt was commemorating the victory over Amalek (a very typical Middle Eastern thing to do). But not only had the Lord long ago ordered His chosen people NOT to erect standing stones, but apparently it was common knowledge that Saul was giving all credit and glory for his victory over the Amalekites to himself. Under some circumstances that actually wouldn't have been as bad an idea as it is in this case. Most of the battles and skirmishes that we read about between Israel and her enemies weren't technically considered as God-ordained Holy War, so Holy War rules didn't necessarily apply. They were generally fought at the current King of Israel's prerogative and impulse, even if they did often have God's backing. But with Holy War it is God who has ordained it, led it, and is the Commander in Chief. It is God's War. It is God who has predetermined the outcome. So for a human to take credit for victory in Holy War approaches blasphemy. One can only imagine how much more this news of a monument stoked the fire that burned in Samuel's chest over what Saul had become.

So Samuel goes to Gilgal and there finds Saul after his return from the monument ceremony at Karmel. King Saul greets Samuel with a happy, joyful blessing that Samuel immediately rejects. Truly, Saul was living in his own little fantasy world, utterly blind to the spiritual danger he was in. Saul tells Samuel that he has fully carried out what the Lord ordered Him to do (in dealing with Amalek). Samuel then asks Saul that if that's so, where did all those cattle and

sheep come from. Uh oh, busted. Saul's response makes it clear that he understands what he has done wrong, but feigns ignorance combined with "it's not my fault".

Verse 15 begins Saul's self-defense by saying, "THEY brought them from the Amalekites" (the "they" meaning his soldiers). And this was because, "the PEOPLE spared the best (of the animals)". And why did they do this thing? Because the PEOPLE want to "sacrifice to Adonai your God". Wow. Talk about burying yourself. King Saul didn't seem to know when to shut up. When I was a young man, regularly doing rather dumb things that young men do and thus finding myself in a bind, my father used to say to me: "Tom, when you find yourself in a hole, put the shovel down and stop digging". I can only assume that King Saul never got that kind of sage advice.

Notice also that King Saul called Adonai, "your God" (Samuel's God). Trust me; this was not some idle Hebrew expression. The "your" exposes the nature of how Saul saw himself in relation to the God of Israel. It's not that Saul would have said that Yehoveh is not his God; it's just that Saul didn't indentify with Yehoveh in a way that we expect he would and should. In Christianity we correctly talk about the enormous gulf between an intellectual knowledge OF God, and a personal relationship WITH God. I don't think I need to carry on about which of these obviously applied to Sha'ul.

Knowing what he did was wrong, King Saul is quick to add (at the end of verse 15), "But we completely destroyed the rest". Here we encounter another of those "fingers" we need to follow, and the first one involves a principle that each and every one of us is regularly guilty of and need to think deeply upon. It is that following a commandment of God a little bit is just as disobedient as not following it at all.

Here we have a situation where Saul destroyed MOST of what he was supposed to destroy, but he kept the rest (blaming it on the people, to boot). And the excuse was that nobody was going to keep the spoils (at least not all of them), rather they were going to offer them to God as a sacrifice. On the surface that certainly sounds like a good thing. Who could be against offering God a sacrifice?

Here's the thing, though; the Law of the Ban didn't give Saul or his soldiers that option. The law was: destroy everything. How often have you, or I, or our Church or Synagogue leadership made a decision that legally violates one of God's commandments, but we do it for a reason that certainly sounds good or logical or merciful or profitable to us? Or we make a decision to follow a commandment part way, because part way is doable but going all the way is pretty tough.

I suppose I could just let this principle float in the air like a non-threatening cloud; lofty, lovely, far away and not really pertinent to anything in particular. But I think a short detour from teaching is in order to preach a warning (once again) against the casual Christianity that has overtaken us. Especially in the latter part of the previous century entire new Christian denominations sprung up that adopted a "hear no evil, see no evil" approach to life. Others said that obedience is essentially legalism, and legalism is bad, so to actually think that God still has rules is counterproductive to a Believer's walk with Christ. King Saul (here in 1st

Samuel) is about to lose more than his kingship; his relationship with God is going to be terminated over this issue of (what in his mind) is partial obedience (which as it turns out is but an oxymoron) and so I think we need to pay attention.

Thus some familiar, common applications are in order so that we can see where this principle actually fits within our modern lives; so here are a range of some examples to contemplate that are certain to make most of us uncomfortable (and don't go running out the door if you hear one that pertains to you or you'll give yourself away!) It's generally theologically accepted that the Biblical command for a proper tithe of one's income for a Believer is 10%. And while we won't get into whether that is on your net or your gross income my question to you is, do you actually set aside 10% and give it to whatever Judeo-Christian organization or congregation you feel led? Or perhaps do you set aside only about 5%? Is giving half a tithe, a tithe (after all, "tithe" literally means "a tenth")? Is a tithe optional or variable depending on your circumstance? Does the Lord give you partial credit for partially obeying His instruction to give back some of what He has provided for you?

How about the use of symbols that represent Him or some attribute of Him? Do you have or use symbols that on the one hand seem to be prohibited by God's commandments, but on the other hand you find have been useful and effective in presenting the Gospel or in outwardly expressing your inward faith? Is overlooking the commandment not to use animals, or humans, or birds, or things that swim in the sea, or any created thing as symbolizing God (other than something He has directly ordained in the Scripture) OK provided you have what seems for you to be a good and righteous reason for doing it?

How about observing Halloween or some other paganized celebration that is a usual and accepted part of our culture? It's not a question of what Halloween has always been about (and it's not good); but if you decide to change it's intent and meaning to something that's "just for fun", does that mean that God's commandment to stay away from joining with others into pagan celebrations to "other gods" (and especially demons) no longer applies because you have a better or different reason for doing it? Do you disagree with the holiday to some level and see it as something that is questionable, but on the other hand think that you don't want to be seen as extreme if you don't participate, or that if kids are going to celebrate it you might as well give them a safe place to do it?

Let me frame this in a rather humorous but well-known and rhetorical question commonly used in our society: is it possible to be just a little bit, but not entirely, pregnant? You see this is exactly what is going on with Saul and his soldiers. It's not an issue of whether they know of, and accept the legitimacy of, God's Law of the Ban. Rather it's an issue of obedience and application. It's an issue of expecting God to bend to our thinking, rather than us bending to His. It's an issue of believing that if we do some portion of a commandment that perhaps it ought to be good enough since (after all) God is above all else a kindly and merciful being. Does anyone honestly believe, deep down, that God ever looks the other way at our disobedience or that we can rearrange His commandments to harmonize with our wants and needs? Of course not; rather we go ahead and do what pleases us, what is comfortable, what is politically correct, what is trendy, what is traditional and customary, and then confidently expect that God will accept our explanations and rationalizations.

Here's another way to think about it: this really all boils down to a matter of faith and trust. When it comes to the commandments not to steal and not to lie and not to murder we can all agree on those things and understand the logic and reason behind such commands. Frankly, it doesn't take much faith or trust to follow those commandments. Most non-Believers don't think it's OK to lie, steal, or murder. But what about the other commandments that may not be so easy for us to understand what God's purpose is for them? The ones that complicate our lives and cause us to question their usefulness? Why is it so necessary that we observe 1 very specific God-ordained day out of 7 for a day of rest? Why can't it be any day that we choose? Why is one day any better than another?

Why is it so bad to live with someone in peace rather than marry them as long as you feel a commitment to them? Why is it against the Biblical commandment for two people of the same sex to be married as long as they love each other? What's so wrong with eating Pork or shellfish? Why can't we choose to ignore certain Biblical holy days of old and instead devise our own newer observances to the Lord and deem them as holy? These things all take a lot more faith and trust to deal with than not murdering someone because they are not entirely straightforward and the effects of obedience and disobedience to them aren't always immediate or recognizable. In some cases they fly in the face of what our society says we even ought to concern ourselves with.

The temptation before Saul and his soldiers was just too great. The value of the things they were ordered by the Law of Herem to destroy was overwhelming; it made no sense to them. Since God is a spirit being and has no need for any of these things, then what's the harm in letting the people who fought the battle and put their lives on the line have a small share of these spoils and reap a small benefit? After all, wouldn't a loving God WANT that added prosperity for His chosen people?

But even more (if Saul is to be believed) then his and the peoples' PURPOSE for saving these animals (that were supposed to have been destroyed) was actually to offer them to God as a sacrifice on the altar of burnt offering back in Gilgal. So what's the problem? Either way God gets His due, right? In both cases the animals are burned up to ashes in a ritual procedure designed to honor the Lord, aren't they? Why would God be so incensed with this "minor" technical breach of legality that He would actually remove Saul from office and permanently abandon him?

So here is yet another crucial spiritual truth to follow in 1st Samuel 15. First, there is no "minor" infraction taking place here; there is a significant difference between spoils of war being banned for God and destroyed, and those same spoils being taken home and then offered for a personal sacrifice. The difference is that the spoils of Holy War already belong to God; they're His. The spoils were in possession of the enemy, then transferred to the Lord; they didn't (at any point) belong to the soldiers. So in the burning up of the spoils as a ban God is merely receiving what is rightfully already His property.

But a sacrifice is something entirely different. The sacrificial animal was the property of the worshipper. The sacrificial animal represents a real cost to the worshipper; he either raised it or bought it. So for Saul to take what already belongs to God, then to take some of it and offer it

back to God on an altar is a terrible fraud. It's like stealing your parents' money, going out and buying a new TV with it, and then turning around and giving that TV to them as a gift.

Second, the destruction of the ban by definition takes place on unclean pagan ground. It is officiated over by secular officials (usually Israeli military officers) and is burned up using a common fire (what the Torah refers to as "strange" fire). An authorized and holy sacrifice on the other hand must be officiated over by Levitical priests. It must also follow a rigid protocol and take place on holy ground, upon the holy altar, using holy fire. The animals must ONLY be animals that are Torah approved for sacrifice (kosher). The destruction of the banned spoils of war can be of both clean and unclean things; but unclean things can never be offered as a sacrifice to the Lord. Human beings can at times be part of the banned spoils of war (like with Amalek), but NEVER can human beings be sacrifices to Yehoveh.

Third, God didn't instruct Saul and his soldiers to gather the spoils from Amalek and return them to Gilgal for a sacrifice. Rather He ordered the spoils destroyed on the spot. Saul and his soldiers were directly disobedient to a very straightforward command. They all were without excuse. They all were responsible for their great sin (but Saul was the MOST responsible because he was their leader).

Saul and his army fell victim to one of the greatest stumbling blocks that lie waiting in ambush for us all: the never ending search for "why?" Why would God want things this way when another way might be better? Why should all of these wonderful valuable animals be burned up and destroyed instead of being given to God's people and put to good use? Why isn't being mostly obedient counted as being fully obedient?

Dear friends, I tell you now as I've told you in the past: one of the worst habits we Believers have adopted over the years is to regularly ask God "why?" and then to count it as merit on our part. To search the Bible for "why?" is an invitation to disobedience and disaster. Our constant search for "why?" is really only to satisfy our intellect so that we can (theoretically) see if God's logic agrees with our own. But in spiritual reality to regularly ask "why?" is the opposite of proceeding in faith and trust.

Instead we need to be constantly searching for "which". Which Scriptural pattern or principle of God applies to our situation? When discovering the "why?" instead of "which" becomes our goal, rebellion will not be far behind.