



It is King David who defeats the Philistines, Edomites, and other enemies, freeing Israel from oppression, but it is often overlooked that his predecessor, King Saul, had his own share of success. 2 Samuel 14:47 says that “wherever he turned, he inflicted punishment on them.” In fact, some of this success seems to have contributed to his downfall. After Saul gets anxious about Samuel’s late arrival in 2 Samuel 13, he offers a sacrifice in desperation and claims priestly authority. Samuel tells him that the kingdom will be taken away and given to another (2 Sam. 13:13-14), but the fact that Samuel continues to advise him suggests that there is opportunity for restoration. If there is a chance, Saul seals his fate with his victory over the Amalekites.

In 2 Samuel 15 the Lord commands Saul to destroy the Amalekites completely as judgment for what they did to Israel during the Exodus. Saul and the Israelite army attack the Amalekites and defeat them, but when they see “the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs,” they decide to keep them rather than destroy them as commanded. They also keep the Amalekite king alive as a trophy of the victory.

When Samuel calls out Saul’s disobedience, Saul attributes it to the soldiers’ desire to sacrifice the best to God. The excuse might seem plausible, but the context and a series of bad decisions make Saul’s self-reliant attitude clear. When Samuel goes to talk with Saul, Saul is setting up a monument to himself on Mt. Carmel. Then after Mt. Carmel Saul goes to Gilgal where he presumably intends to sacrifice the animals kept as plunder. Even if he plans to sacrifice them, doing so will desecrate Gilgal as a place of worship rather than honor God. Gilgal is the place where Israel consecrated themselves to God before entering the Promised Land. It commemorates everything that Saul is ignoring. Where the Israelites under Joshua consecrated themselves and then completely destroyed Jericho and devoted it to God, Saul fails to do the same with the Amalekites as commanded. He is more like Achan, who stole God’s property at Jericho, than like Joshua.

Despite another opportunity to repent, Saul doubles down on his excuse. It is all supposedly to honor God, but “to obey is better than sacrifice,” and since Saul has “rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected Saul as king” (15:22-23). With that rejection, Saul becomes desperate, admitting that he had sinned, but still blaming his men for his disobedience. Finally, he begs Samuel to return with him so that Saul might worship the Lord with him. Unfortunately even in this request Saul’s concern is more with being honored in the sight of the elders than with worshiping God (15:30). Samuel returns with Saul, but his real reason is to finish the Lord’s command and execute Agag (15:33). With the Lord’s command fulfilled, Samuel never again speaks with Saul. Like all of us, both David and Saul struggle with the temptation to be self-reliant, but their responses when confronted with their pride and isolation are very different. Saul’s obstinate self-reliance leads to his downfall, while David’s humility and repentance bring renewal.

Discussion Questions

What concerns you about the future, especially related to personal life, family, and church life? What, if anything, brings hope and peace when you think about the future?

Who do you talk to about your concerns and fears? Are they willing to say difficult or uncomfortable things, and how do you feel and respond when they do?

How has God called you to serve in his kingdom? How might you have been distracted from that calling, and how can you reprioritize his kingdom in the ways that you serve family members, colleagues, friends, and others?