

1 Samuel 15:1-35

Obeying and Worshipping

Introduction

A sad situation, a sad result, and a sad man! This is King Saul. Whilst he may have had quite an auspicious beginning, he changed drastically and ended being a man rejected by God. The key statement within this passage of scripture has to be chapter 15:22 *“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”* The message being put across here is, *“Obedience versus Worship”*. This could be quite a controversial subject.

1. Some comments about the Historical Setting

This is a narrative passage and for this reason it is important for us to begin with the writer himself and ask ourselves what he is intending to convey by recording this narrative. We do not want to spiritualise or allegorise this passage or any other narrative. What we do not want to draw from this narrative is a conclusion that Christians can lose their faith and fall from grace. Saul does not represent the Christian who has a new heart and then loses it. This was not the intention of the writer when he recorded this passage, e.g. the NT Epistles; Teaching of Jesus etc.

When handling a narrative portion of scripture we must remind ourselves of the cardinal rule. We do not derive any doctrine or theology from a narrative. All our doctrine must become from the didactic portions of the bible, e.g. the passages that are designed to instruct and teach.

What is the writer seeking to convey? I suggest that historically the writer is showing the failure of the monarchy. When the monarchy was first introduced it was never intended to eclipse the Theocracy. The nation of Israel is entirely different from any other nation. Here God was the King. This is the meaning of Theocracy. The ultimate ruler was not the Monarch nor the people through Democracy. If Israel had a king then even the king was to be subject to the will and commands of God. The king in Israel was not to be supreme. He only ruled and operated under the direction of Yahweh. God's will was then conveyed through the prophet. Thus the king was to be subject to the prophet.

In the books of Samuel we have two kings contrasted. In the first place we have Saul who characterises the wrong kind of king, and we have David who characterises the right kind of king. All further monarchs were to follow in the footsteps of David not Saul. Thus the writer is showing what a king in Israel should not be like. He is, in a sense, showing Israel that their demand for a king was not a wise action on their part.

Additionally, in relation to the statement made in verse 22 the writer is demonstrating the dangers of a wrong kind of theology that puts Religion before Obedience. Later in Israel and Judah would arise a belief system that could be called, the National Theology. This teaching, supported by the priest and professional prophets put the cultic elements of the Sinaitic Covenant above the moral. It favoured an obedience of the ceremonial code over against the moral ethical code. In other words, it became common for the people to think that God would be satisfied with sacrifices and the performance of the ritual, and that the moral aspects of the Covenant could simply be

set aside. God would accept the people so long as they continued to produce the sacrifices but it did not matter what their lives were like.

Thus the teaching of Isaiah 1:12-17f *“When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? “Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow”*. It almost seems as if Yahweh is rejecting the sacrificial ritual in favour of the moral laws. He is not. What He is saying is that unless Israel perform moral deeds He will not accept their worship.

The same is recorded in Jeremiah 7:1-5f *“This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: `Stand at the gate of the LORD's house and there proclaim this message: "Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly.....then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever”*”.

In a sense, both of these passages are an exposition of the statement of 1 Samuel 15:22. One could say that the writer of 1 Samuel can see how the National Theology of Israel and Judah would develop, and how people would place more emphasis upon the sacrificial ritual than the demand to live holy and obedient lives.

2. Some comments about the narrative

I want to make some general comments about this passage and deal with some problems that may arise for us. This is a difficult portion of scripture that can cause problems for us as we consider the ethical implications.

In verses 1-3 we read of Yahweh commanding wholesale slaughter of the Amalekites. God tells Saul, through Samuel, that he is to kill every *“man, woman and infant”*. What does this mean? Why does God order the death of even the children?

I have some suggestions, although this cannot be considered as the final answer.

In the first place we must acknowledge that in the history of Israel we have more than just one nation fighting another nation. The life and existence of Israel was crucial to the future plans of God in the bringing of His Messiah into the world. In those days there was always constant war. Nations were constantly seeking to destroy other nations. It was the survival of the fittest. Israel had to defeat the Amalekites once and for all otherwise they would have constantly been a threat to Israel with the possibility of being destroyed themselves. Thus we have the command that all surviving people must be destroyed. God could not allow this nation to continue with the danger that one day Israel might become its victim.

When, under Joshua, Israel entered the Promised Land, the original intention of God was for Israel to completely destroy all the nations of Canaan. This is the crucial passage, *“When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations--the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you-- and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.* (Deut 7:1-6).

All this was to ensure that the people of Israel remained in existence and that they maintained a holy and separate form of lifestyle. Remember, God is planning ahead. He is planning on introducing Jesus into the world. Thus, there must be a people and a land preserved until *“the fullness of time”* (Galatians 4:4). The History of Israel is about a relatively small group of people, almost unbelievable weak and fickle in their spiritual loyalties, battling against mighty heathen forces which were degrading, seductive and ruthless. Israel must succeed. For centuries throughout the Old Testament it appeared that survival of Israel, and with it the purposes of God for our salvation, hung on a thin thread.

Furthermore, whilst it is usually accepted that only the men engage in warfare, it was common in those days for the women also to play an active part. One has only to think of Jael who killed Jabin with a tent peg (Judges 4) and Jezebel in the days of Ahab plotting the death of Naboth. Furthermore, what would have become of the women without their men to provide and protect them?

The children pose a more difficult problem. But children have a habit of growing up and becoming mature adults. Thus the nation had the potential to rise again through its children. Furthermore, Israel could not take prisoners. What would they do with all the children? They did not have refugee camps in those days or orphanages. There were no provisions for prisoners. If the children had been left alive it is probable that they would have become victim to some other cruel nation taking them as slaves, abusing them physically and sexually. Also there would be left no adults among the Amalekites to protect and provide for the welfare of the children. The alternative to death would be even worse.

In the following verses (4-9) we have an account of Saul’s partial fulfilment of God’s purposes. He does slay the Amalekites but spares the life of Agag and keeps the best of the animals. Saul was most selective in regard to his obedience.

Samuel is clearly dismayed at Saul’s response (verses 10-14). But Saul tries in vain to offer a reason for his disobedience and attempts to manipulate the situation turning it back on God again, *“Saul answered, “The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, (vs 15). Here is very clever reasoning. “Yes, you are right, I have not completely fulfilled God’s wishes, but surely it makes sense for me to use what I have spared to sacrifice to God, does not that make more sense?”*

Then in verse 21 he tries another method and this time he is found blaming the people, *"The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder,..."*. Notice how all through this passage Saul keeps referring to Yahweh as *"your God"* (vs 15, 30). It is as if Saul does not want to be associated with God, so He is Samuel's God.

As a result of this terrible blunder, Samuel tells Saul that he has now lost the kingdom, that God has rejected him from being king and that the kingdom will be given to another man, who, of course, is David. Samuel uses the tearing of his gown as example of what God will do, *"Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbours--to one better than you"* (vs 28).

It is not without difficulty that Samuel has to give this prophecy to Saul for it leaves him feeling very unhappy, *"Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him"*, (vs 35).

The point about Yahweh grieving also over Saul must not be taken to mean that God either repents (AV, RSV) or that He makes mistakes, *"And the LORD was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel"* (vs 35) . Remember, this is merely a narrative; it is not a passage from which doctrine is extracted. We do not learn from this passage that a Christian can fall from grace, neither do we learn that God makes mistakes over which He grieves. This is a narrative and the writing is describing God from a human perspective. God feels for people, He shows human emotion. This is the only way that we can understand God from our viewpoint. It is similar to other passages of the bible describing God's *"hand"*, or *"arm"*, or His *"ear"*. From our human standpoint it appears that God was upset over what had happened, He was not pleased, but it grieved Him.

3. Some comments about practical observations.

Whilst we steer clear of spiritualising a narrative or forcing it to teach doctrine, we do, nevertheless, make statements about certain principles to be found in the passage. We must do this bearing in mind always the writer's main purpose in recording the passage. This is why it was important for us to spend some time describing the historical scene.

Let me remind you briefly of what the passage is all about. The writer is showing the dangers of thinking that God will be pleased with worship when the heart is disobedient. It is all about *"Worship versus Obedience"*. Later in Israel the National Theology will instruct people to pay homage to God through the ritual and pay little heed to the morality and spirituality of their own lives. A view of God will arise in which He is seen as a Deity who is merely interested in the performance of ritual paying little concern for the lifestyle of His people. It is this that the writer wishes to guard against. Saul was the first believer in the National Theology.

I have three applications from this passage, which I wish to make from verse 22 *"To obey is better than sacrifice"*.

1. Obedience is preferred to Worship

I do not wish to be misunderstood when I make this statement. Worship, of course is a vital ingredient in the Christian response to God. Indeed, worship is of the highest priority. It will be an occupation of ours in glory. The whole of creation itself and salvation is designed to bring glory to God and, as the angels in heaven do not cease to praise and worship God, so we must take our part.

However, I do not read in scripture that worship is such an important issue as obedience when it comes to salvation. Let me put it this way. The writer to Hebrews states, *"without holiness no one will see the Lord"* (Hebrews 12:14). I do not read of the necessity of worship presented in this manner. Holiness / Obedience are rated very highly, so high in fact, that it is imperative for an entrance in heaven. I do not read of worship in this manner.

When Jesus stated to the Pharisees *"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt 5:20) He was demonstrating the importance of obedience over and above worship. The Pharisees were masters of worship and ritual. One has only to read the words of the Pharisee in Luke 18:12 *"I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get"*, or the words of Paul in Philippians 3:5 to learn of the strict religion of the Pharisees. Yet, Jesus insists that it is not their worship that must be improved, but their *"righteousness"*. For Jesus, this *"righteousness"* was so important that without it one could not enter heaven.

Now, this is not teaching salvation by works. I am seeking to promote the kind of teaching that James presents. The point that James makes is that works, or holiness and obedience become the only valid evidence of a living and saving faith. This is his main statement, *"In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead"* James 2:17. In other words, if you say you have saving faith it must be evidenced by your sanctification. Your level of obedience will be the evidence of your faith. This is what he means by saying, *"But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do"*, James 2:18.

The proof, therefore, that we are Christians comes not from our worship. It comes from our obedience to God and His Word. Whilst worship is a valid and important function, holiness is essential as it is the main source of assurance. John puts it as boldly as this, *"We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands"* (1 John 2:3).

When Jesus spoke about worship and obedience He stated that there was a certain priority, *"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift"* (Matthew 5:23-24). He did not say, *"Carry on with your worship but sometime later you can resolve the problem with your brother"*. No, Jesus says, stop the worship, go away and get the matter sorted, get the sin dealt with, and then, and only then, return to worship. Obedience before worship.

It is interesting to note that Jesus' last words were about obedience and not worship, *"....and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"*, Matt 28:20.

This, of course, is what was meant by Samuel's words to Saul and Isaiah's teaching in his first chapter, and Jeremiah's complaint in chapter 7 of his writing. They never intended to say that worship or sacrifice was of no meaning, but that worship itself must not precede obedience.

It is for this reason we are more likely to place emphasis upon our worship than our obedience. This leads on to our next statement.

2. Worship is easier than Obedience

It was easier for Saul to offer the produce of his battle as sacrificial worship than to fully obey the command of God. It was easier for Israel to follow the National Theology by fulfilling the ceremonial part of the Sinai Covenant than to struggle with fulfilling the moral and ethical elements of the Covenant.

Worship is not a difficult process. Being visible within the Church is not difficult. Coming to Sunday Worship or attending the Prayer Meeting is fairly easy. Any kind of ritual or ceremony is easy. But obedience is different.

It is easier to *"offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name.* (Hebrews 13:15), than to *"offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship"* (Romans 12:1).

Worship can be merely words, sung or spoken. Worship can demand only our presence, posture, heart expression, and dialogue towards God. But obedience requires our action, effort, input, strength, discipline, and work. Worship, whilst it must be offered with the heart, can be enjoyable and pleasing to the mind. But obedience can be wrought with all manner of struggle, pain, heartache, battle, sweat and tears. The one can be a pleasurable and encouraging experience, but the one can be a tough practical piece of achievement.

Consequently, the temptation for us is to think that God will be pleased with our worship and that this will cover a multitude of sin. It is more pleasing to think that our attendance at Church will make up for the short-fall in our obedience during the previous week; to think that if we take Communion God will be satisfied and turn away from our sins, and to imagine that our heart-felt expressive prayers will blot out and eclipse our un-holiness.

The National Theology is not simply confined to Israel. We also can make the same mistake and think that it is better to *"sacrifice than to obey"*. If we wish to make an emphasis in our worship, to improve on the quality of our singing and music, to present a worship that is more biblical and refined, then let us be sure to offer to God lives that not only pour out praise but that also produce obedience.

3. Obedience is Worship

When Samuel made this statement, *"Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams"*, he was, of course, not, as we have discussed earlier, minimising the importance of the ceremonial law. Of course God delights in worship; it is pleasing to Him; it is His delight, He commanded it (see Leviticus).

Therefore, I suggest, that we take a new look at the meaning of worship. What is worship? *“Of course”,* says someone, *“This is not difficult to answer. One attends a place of Worship and joins in with the singing and praying. Or one prays and worships in the seclusion of ones own home”.* Worship is a matter of the heart expressing joyful adoration and commendation to God in response to blessings, in response to God Himself and for salvation.

Now, we have, I suggest, confined worship to something like this. It is seen as a performance either collectively or in private. I have nothing against this. The Psalms and other parts of the scripture give us an indication of the meaning and significance of worship in this manner.

However, I would like to suggest that worship can and ought to be taken a step further. Listen to the words of Paul from Romans 12:1 *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.”*

It is interesting to note the word that the NT apostles chose to use when they spoke about worship. Instead of using προσκυνέω (proskuneō) which is the usual word, used much in the Gospels, they used λατρεία (latreia). The former term signifies worship by falling down, bowing down (as in 1 Cor 14:25), whilst the latter has the meaning of service and in secular Greek indicated work undertaken by a servant. It is the word used in Romans 12:1 and also in Romans 1:9 (see also John 16:12). In Roman 1:9 Paul uses the term to mean *“service”* or *“ministry”*. It is, therefore, an inter-changeable term that can mean worship or work. It is the word used in Philippians 3:3 *“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship (Greek λατρεία) by the Spirit of God”.* The significance here is that worship and service become one and the same.

What is Worship? Again I ask this question. It is more than words; more than music; more than singing; more than prayer; more than expressions of the heart; more than attending Church; more than the prayer meeting. It has to be obedience. Worship, according to Romans 12:1 is when we are prepared to *“offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is our spiritual worship”.* Worship is taking the Word of God and putting it into practice; worship is changing our lifestyle to suit God’s anticipated life pattern for His people; worship is when we do what He tells us in the hard graft of life; worship is outside the walls of the Church building; worship is when we are away from our fellow Christians; worship is when we are alone with only God to see us.

You see, *“To obey is better than sacrifice”.* And, obedience is worship.

What is obedience? It is the practical manner in which we demonstrate our appreciation for all that God has done for us in Christ. Yes, we can thank Him with our words of praise, but what God is saying is, *“show me with your lives”.* Jesus once said, *“If you love me, you will obey what I command”* (John 14:15). He might have said, *“If you love me, tell me so with your songs of worship”.* But He did not. He said that obedience was the way to show that we love Him. See also John 14:22, 2 John vs 6.

Look at the cross; what is the most effective way to show our gratitude for the atonement? We could, of course, sing the most recent songs, attend the communion service, give our testimony. Yes, fine, but all this is still mere words. When Jesus died what did He intend to accomplish? Not merely the forgiveness of sins, but rather

to form a people who are “eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14). This is how Peter presents it, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). In this statement we have the two issues combined. There is the emphasis upon being a “holy nation” and a people who “declare the praise of Him...”.

It is, of course, not a question of “either or”, but, “and also”. We must maintain both worship and obedience. Indeed, worship with our lips will only become genuine when it emerges from a clean and pure heart. Then it becomes true, God honouring worship. The kind of worship that Saul wanted to offer after his disobedience was not worship at all. Worship that is proceeding from a known sinful heart is not worship, but a mockery of worship. The worship itself then becomes a sin.

Conclusion.

Don't allow your worship to become a substitute for holiness. God's chief delight is in your obedience. This is your chief worship. Then let the sacrifices of praise, the fruit of your lips, become an acceptable presentation to the living God.

God who knows our hearts, knows what is genuine worship. Through Isaiah He complained, “The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13). God does not want our performance, our display, and our ritual. He wants our hearts. He wants our obedience and then our verbal praises will mean so much to Him. The Psalmist wrote, “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart...” (Psalm 24:3-4).

One of the practical advantages of forming the custom of coming to Church each Sunday is that it becomes a motivation for inward examination. If we know that Sunday is drawing near, we know that we cannot come to worship if there is known sin in our lives. We have to be forgiven; we have to repent with evidence to show that the repentance is real. Thus, our Sunday habit becomes the very means by which we seek to obey before we come to worship.

Remember, “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22).

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