The Fall of Saul
1 Samuel 15:1-28

We're looking at the life of David. But before we get to him we're taking a couple of weeks to look at his backstory.

And if you remember Israel was in moral and civil chaos, with everyone doing whatever they wanted. But one woman, Hannah, was different. And she swam against the tide of her culture, and she longed for a son who would serve God all his days. And God answered her prayers and she gave birth to a son called Samuel. And Samuel grew up to be a great prophet and leader in Israel. But the people knew Samuel wouldn't last forever, and they didn't fancy being led by his sons, so they began to demand that Samuel appoint a king.

Now, depending on where you're from, you might think that asking for a king to rule over you is about the worst possible idea anyone could come up with! Or, if you come from where I come from, you think, well that sounds a pretty good idea. After all, the mark of a civilised country is that you have a king or a queen!

But God saw it differently. And if the US War of Independence, or the French Revolution were fought to be free of the power of kings, Israel's demand for a king was a demand to be free of God - because God was to be Israel's king. As God says to Samuel in 1 Sam 8:7, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them."

You see, look at the reason the people give for their demand: 1 Sam 8:19-20, "There shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles." They wanted to be like everyone else. But God hadn't called and chosen and rescued Israel from slavery to be like everyone else, but to be different from everyone else, to be a shining light to the nations, that this is what it's like to have God as your king, to have him as the one who fights for you.

So, in asking for a king, what they really want is to be done with God, and to find their security and identity in something, or someone, other than God.

The problem is that there's always a price to pay when you do that, isn't there? Make something other than God your security, or your identity, and it will begin to demand things of you. And Samuel made that clear to the people. And he tells them, in 1 Samuel 8, that if you want a king to rule over you, don't you realise he's going to make your children his servants and slaves? Don't you realise he's going to tax you and take your property from you? You think having a king in place of God is going to give you the kind of life you long for, but in reality you're going to end up serving and slaving for him.

And that's not just true for ancient Israel. It might be career, or money, or your self-image and what your friends think of you, make something other than God your god, make that your king, make this the thing that if you've got it then you can feel ok about yourself, and you feel secure, then you'll end up enslaved to it - because like some ancient king it will demand ever more from you.

And yet, God does give Israel what they want, and he tells Samuel to anoint as king a young man called Saul. But on the day when both Saul and Samuel know he's to be made king, and all Israel has gathered together, Saul goes into hiding, because he's tall and self-conscious, and he's eventually found hiding among the luggage. And, at first, that seems like an amusing bit of trivia, until you see how things pan out with his rule.

Because in the chapter we're going to look at today, God rejects Saul as king. And the question is why? What goes wrong with Saul - a man who clearly had huge potential? Well, I think the answer has plenty to teach us about ourselves.

Reading: 1 Samuel 15:1-28

We're going to look at three things: The Sin, The Reason and the Remedy.

The Sin
In the chapters before chapter 15, Saul shows a pattern of, at best, partial obedience to God's commands. And yet, despite that, chapter 15 doesn't open with a rebuke but with a fresh chance to listen to and obey God. Verse 3, "Now go and strike [the people of] 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."

Now, before we look at Saul, what do you think of that? I mean, doesn't that sound worryingly like ethnic cleansing, or jihad? I mean, we might be able to accept a just war fought in self-defence - but total war, with no prisoners and no mercy, and killing women and children and animals? Is this right?

Well, whole books have been written on this subject and we can't hope to cover it all. So I just want to say a few things before we look at what the passage is really about.

Firstly, the Amalekites are not targeted because of their race or their ethnicity, but their sin. They were Israel's archetypal enemies, and as God says in v2, they attacked Israel as they were leaving Egypt and when they were at their weakest. And they didn't do that in a fair, army-meets-army battle, instead they attacked the stragglers in the column - those who were lagging behind at the back. And who would that have been but women and children and the elderly and the sick and the exhausted? And the Amalekites were brutal and they used asymmetric violence to gain wealth and slaves.

So this wasn't a war of conquest, or of Israelite imperialism, but of divine justice against sin. And no one was to get rich by it - no bounty was to be taken, no slave labourers were to be seized. Saul and his forces were to be the exact opposite of the Amalekites, who did use violence for gain.

But secondly, in the West, we tend to think of justice as being individual, don't we. You stand or fall as an individual. But in other cultures there's a much more communal side to justice. And if someone does something wrong, there's a sense in which the whole community is responsible, because the whole community played a part in raising this person. And the Bible teaches both an individual and corporate

responsibility for sin. And here, this is about communal justice, but that's not all the Bible has to say about justice.

But thirdly, this passage isn't all the bible has to say about God, either. And you have to read episodes like this in the whole context of Scripture, that tells us that whilst God is just, and that when he judges sin no-one is left standing, he is also loving and kind and merciful to rebels. And it tells us that God is in the process of saving a world trashed by sin, and making it new, and that he does so at the supreme cost of his own Son - the only truly innocent victim, to save people like us who are no better than these Amalekites. And so when God acts in judgement like this, he does so to stop the world- and life- and people-destroying effects of sin.

And so through Samuel, God gives Saul the opportunity to be his servant of justice and righteousness. And as such, to receive no reward for the task.

And to start with, things go well, don't they? Saul musters his troops and leads them into battle…. until he sees the plunder. Until he decides what to do with Agag, the king. Verse 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.'

So Saul obeys God's command… in part. But whilst they were ok with killing women and children, and giving up all the worthless stuff to destruction, the valuable stuff, and the king, and the stuff they wanted for themselves, that Saul and his men keep.

Now, can you see the tragic irony there? The Amalekites are being punished, at least in part, because they've grown rich by warfare and used violence for gain - and yet here is Saul, king of God's people, behaving in exactly the same way. And that's why his sin is taken so seriously. He's tasked with destroying evil, but himself increases it.

Now, have you seen the YouTube video of the little boy whose mother finds a half-empty pot of chocolate sprinkles, and asks her son whether he's eaten them? And she asks him multiple times, 'John, have you eaten the sprinkles?' And multiple times he says, 'no'. The only problem is that John has sprinkles stuck all around his mouth and nose. And when his mum asks him to open his mouth, they're embedded in his teeth! But still he goes on denying having been anywhere near the sprinkles.

And when Samuel comes to Saul, Saul boasts of his obedience, v13, "I have performed the commandment of the Lord." I've obeyed! And Samuel replies, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen?" John, you've got sprinkles on your face; Saul, I can hear, I can see, the evidence of your disobedience. But he's in self-denial.

And that's when Saul deploys his first excuse - v15, "The people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen *to sacrifice to the Lord*." It's interesting, isn't it, how often we try and put a religious spin on our sin: I'm not arrogant, I just have strong religious convictions; I'm not racist, I just think God has chosen my nation, or people,

to be special; my lack of generosity, that's good stewardship; or my problem with anger - that's not a problem - it's righteous anger.

And so Samuel reminds Saul of God's command. And listen to Saul's reply: v20-21, "I *have* obeyed the voice of the Lord… But…" And he tells Samuel that it was really the people under him who took the spoil; and he tries to shift the blame. But that *but* is the *but* of disobedience, isn't it? Samuel, I did obey… but. It's a selective obedience. An obedience when it suits me.

As Eugene Petersen says, 'Saul was *nearly* always obedient, at least he always *nearly* obeyed. He only ever did what *he* wanted, as opposed to what God wanted, on a *few, rare, odd* occassions. And when he did there was always a plausible, even religious reason for it. But that is what most disobedience is like: not absolute defiance but a nibbling away at the edges of God's authority.'

And we're all guilty of that, aren't we? Of nibbling away at the edges of God's authority; of partial obedience; or of the self-delusion and denial that says, 'everything's fine, Samuel', when around us is the evidence that all is not right right with our lives.

The question is, though, how do you react when you're made aware of it? How do you respond when your friend, or wife, or husband, or kids calls you out on your life not matching your words? Do you deny it, or make excuses and try and shift the blame like Saul? Or, like David when he was confronted with his sin, do you acknowledge it, and confess it, and repent of it?

You see, look again at what Samuel says to Saul in v22-23, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry." In other words, God is after more than the outward stuff of religion, or the partial obedience of 'when it suits me I'll do it'; he's after our hearts - the living sacrifice of a heart after his, of a life given over to him.

And Samuel says that a failure to obey God's word is equivalent to divination. And divination is seeking direction and guidance from idols, or demons. Because, when you're wanting to be the one who decides for yourself what's right and wrong, when you want to create your own future, when you want to be the one who sets your own path in life, you're seeking a future and a direction apart from God, which is just what those who run after idols are doing.

It's why the Lord says in v11 that Saul has 'turned back from following me'. And it's because he's a man pursuing his own paths, and who's rejected God's authority, that God rejects him from his position of authority.

But the question is, why did it go this way for Saul? He had so much going for him, - how did it all go so horribly wrong?

The Reason

Cast your mind back to the day Saul was anointed king. Why do you think he went into hiding? Well, look what Samuel says to him here in v17: “Though you are little in your own eyes…”. And Saul may have been tall, he may have been head and shoulders over everyone else physically, but he didn’t feel it, in fact, he seems to have been driven by insecurity, by a need to prove himself, and build a reputation for himself. And that’s what’s going on here.

Saul gives in to the people when they push him to do what he knows to be wrong. Why? Probably, because he’s worried about how he’ll seem in their eyes. He takes the valuable stuff, when he knows he shouldn’t. Why? Because money and possessions and wealth offer him a sense of power and prestige. He’s tasked with being an instrument for God’s justice - but what’s the first thing he wants to do afterwards? Verse 12: Build a monument, a statue, to himself - because he needs to know he matters, that he’s someone. He’s told to kill Agag the king, but he doesn’t - so why spare him? Because in that age, if you had a vanquished king in your court, or eating at your table, or in your prison, it was a huge status symbol, it told everyone else, I’m more powerful than this king, I’m a king of kings.

And when Samuel confronts him with his sin, Saul tries to shift the blame - because that’s not the real me, I’m better than that; that’s not the image I want to project. And when he does finally admit his sin, what he’s really concerned about is his public image - ok, maybe I have sinned, but Samuel, please honour me before the people.

And it’s this search for significance, it’s this need to appear to be someone, to build a reputation, to have people think well of you, and be swayed by what others think of you, that can lead us, like Saul, to do bad things.

I mean, think how this can work out in your life. Obviously, you don’t go and build a stone monument to your achievements, but do you try and build a monument to yourself on social media, and feed off the likes? Are there times when you’re more influenced by what your peers, or colleagues, or friends say, than what God says - and your fear is misdirected? Are you tempted to think that having more - more money, or more prestige, or a better title, or a nicer home will make you? And in getting more you compromise. Or do you use external pressure - from others, or from time, or work, as an excuse for choosing what, deep down, you know to be wrong?

So just like Saul, you and I can be tempted daily to build our identity, or our reputation, or our sense of self-worth, on wealth, or image, or research output, or what others think of us. And if we go down that path, we’ll start making bad choices. And then, when it comes crashing down, we might well be sorry for our sin, but like Saul it’ll be a sorrow because we’ve been caught, or will lose face - not because we know we’re wrong.

Ok, but if that’s the sin behind Saul’s downfall, and the reason for the sin, does his story offer us any hope for how we can avoid it?

The Remedy

Look at how Samuel reminds Saul of how he became king in the first place: v17: “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?

The Lord anointed you king over Israel." In other words, Saul, you know that you're a nothing and a nobody, but God chose you - and chose you for greatness. And Saul didn't have anything to prove to anybody - because God had chosen him by grace. And if he had only rested in that, and allowed that to be the ground he stood on, he wouldn't have needed to worry about what others thought of him; and he wouldn't have had to worry about his self-image, or building monuments to himself. He could have stood secure in the knowledge that though I am nothing, God has chosen me and made me king.

But listen, God does exactly the same for us in the gospel. And here Samuel tells Saul that God is going to take the kingdom from him and v28, give it "to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you." And the kingdom will pass to David, a man after God's own heart. But just like Saul, David too will sin and fail. And it won't be until the true neighbour, David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus comes, that there will be a king who perfectly listens and perfectly obeys. And rather than using power and position to bolster his own self-image, he gives all those up. And he leaves his throne to take the lowest place, to become truly small in the eyes of the world.

And Jesus takes these words of Samuel, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice' and says, it's not for the externals of religion that I've come - 'I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.' And at the cross he died in the place of sinners, for all the times that like Saul we fail to obey, or partially obey, for all the times we try and build our own reputations. And there, at the cross, he secured our forgiveness. But not just our forgiveness. Because in rising again, and pouring out his Spirit on those who trust in him, he gives us new hearts, and new desires so that we want to listen and are able to obey.

And he takes nobodies like us, like Saul, and lavishes his grace upon us, and lifts us up, and makes us royalty in Christ - sons and daughters of the king. And knowing that frees you from the need to have others approve of you - because you know what your heavenly Father thinks of you. And that will mean you won't compromise or make those wrong decisions, because your identity is rock solid secure in him. And when you do screw up, you won't try and shift the blame, or make excuses; instead you'll confess and repent of it, because you know it's by grace in Christ that you stand. A grace that both humbles you and exalts you, that tells you you're small but then lifts you up to greatness and gives you an identity that wealth or image or social media-likes can never give you.