

# Saul – the Failed King

Saul was the first king of Israel, and his reign wasn't very successful. He was weak-willed and vain, and ultimately God rejected him. However, we can learn from his poor example.

There are two important events in the life of King Saul which make particularly interesting reading: his failure to completely destroy the city of Amalek as God had commanded him; and his brutal massacre of the city of Nob. There is a lot for us to glean from comparing these two incidents – Saul's actions are recorded for us to learn from.

It is not our purpose to judge King Saul as a person, because we are told that the Father *'has committed all judgment to the Son'* (John 5:22). Interestingly, despite recognizing that Saul's actions were frequently ungodly, David lamented for Saul (and Jonathan) when they died in battle and described Saul in remarkably complimentary terms (see 2 Samuel 1:19–27). Perhaps we can take from this that we can learn from the actions of 'bad' characters in the Bible but we should leave judging them as individuals to Jesus.

## Not Finishing One Job

Saul was given the divine instruction to obliterate the neighbouring tribe of the Amalekites. This seems harsh, but God provided the reason why they were to be destroyed – they had tried to wipe out God's people when they were just nomads, heading for the Promised Land. Now God would punish them for their cruelty.

*Thus says the LORD of hosts: "I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Samuel 15:2–3).*

Saul carried out this command very well to begin with:

*So Saul gathered the people together and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand men of Judah. And Saul came to a city of Amalek, and lay in wait in the valley. Then Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart, get down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the children of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. And Saul attacked the Amalekites, from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is east of Egypt (v4–7).*

However, things took a turn for the worse after this, when Saul chose not to follow God's command exactly, but to do things his own way.

*But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed. Now the word of the LORD*

came to Samuel, saying, “I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments.” And it grieved Samuel, and he cried out to the LORD all night (v 9–11).

Saul had only partially followed God’s command and clearly this was entirely unacceptable to Him. Saul tried to convince Samuel that he had carried out God’s commands (see verses 13 and 20) but after trying to blame the people (see verses 15 and 21) he finally confessed his sin, “because I feared the people and obeyed their voice” (v 24). This disobedience was incredibly significant – it led to God rejecting Saul as King of Israel.

So Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you” (v28).

## **Violence to the Defenceless**

There are striking similarities between this incident and a later incident recorded for us in 1 Samuel 22. David was anointed by God and would be Saul’s successor. But Saul spent a considerable amount of time and effort chasing David and trying to kill him. The incident in question occurs when Saul needed to find out where David was hiding.

Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who was set over the servants of Saul, and said, “I saw the son of Jesse going to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. And he inquired of the LORD for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine” (1 Samuel 22:9–10).

Saul was deeply unhappy with the fact that Ahimelech the priest had helped David in what he saw as a conspiracy against him (see verse 13). Ahimelech made his defence:

*Who among all your servants is as faithful as David, who is the king's son-in-law, who goes at your bidding, and is honourable in your house? Did I then begin to inquire of God for him? Far be it from me! Let not the king impute anything to his servant, or to any in the house of my father. For your servant knew nothing of all this, little or much (v14–15).*

This did nothing to appease Saul’s wrath and Saul unleashed his fury upon Ahimelech and the other priests who were living in the city of Nob.

*And the king said, “You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house!” Then the king said to the guards who stood about him, “Turn and kill the priests of the LORD, because their hand also is with David, and because they knew when he fled and did not tell it to me.” But the servants of the king would not lift their hands to strike the priests of the LORD (v16–17).*



Saul's own Jewish servants knew better, and they would not attack the priests. They were defenceless, and were God's representatives. But there was a man who would!

*And the king said to Doeg, "You turn and kill the priests!" So Doeg the Edomite turned and struck the priests, and killed on that day eighty-five men who wore a linen ephod. Also Nob, the city of the priests, he struck with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and nursing infants, oxen and donkeys and sheep—with the edge of the sword (v18-19).*

Here we have a vicious slaughter, carried out just to appease Saul's pride, and without any moral justification or command from God.

## Striking Lessons

When we compare the descriptions of these two events, the similarities are startling!

- ❖ Saul (partially) destroyed the people of Amalek with the edge of the sword.
- ❖ He struck Nob with the edge of the sword.
- ❖ Saul was commanded to put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey in the city of Amalek.
- ❖ He put to death both men and women, children and infants; also, oxen, donkeys, and sheep in the city of Nob.

What we are being taught is that Saul was more than capable of fully destroying the city of Amalek, which is

proven by the fact he utterly destroyed the city of Nob. His failure with Amalek was not one of ability, but of desire. He simply chose not to carry out God's commands, because it suited his purpose, or was more convenient.

The details which connect the two incidents portray a sad irony in the life of Saul. If only he had been faithful to God, and so had destroyed Amalek like he destroyed Nob, he would not have found himself in the terrible situation of being rejected as king. In this case, he would also not have been relentlessly persecuting David, the godly man who would succeed him. And then the massacre at Nob would not have occurred at all.

## Making the Right Choices

In the heat of the moment, we can all make foolish decisions which may have dreadful consequences. It is highly unlikely that the consequences of our mistakes will be as horrendous as the callous murder of eighty-five people, but the principle remains.

*He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly (Proverbs 14:29).*

The most important thing is to listen to God's Word, and to obey Him. Samuel had wise words for Saul, and for us:

*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 heed than the fat of rams (1 Samuel 15:22).*

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