**TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE**

1 Samuel 15:1-35 (Key Verse: 15:22b)

To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Through Msn. Gideon’s message last week we saw a clear contrast between a personal and a God-seeking initiative. Saul wanted to avenge himself on the Philistines and thus made a personal and foolish oath that dragged down his entire army’s morale and eventually made them sin by pouncing on meat with blood in it. Jonathan on the contrary went forward believing God would act on behalf of him and his people. Even at the time of Saul’s rash decision to put him to death, the people recognized how Jonathan won a victory with God’s help and thus rescued him. In today’s passage, we see Saul’s ultimate fallout with which God had to reject him as king. It is a painful reminder of how one can fall from grace losing all God’s favor through sins. What did Saul do and what can learn from his failure? May God help us to establish a personal relationship with Him first and to learn obedience that is better than sacrifice.

1. **Totally Destroy and Do Not Spare Them! (1-11)**

Look at verses 1-2. Samuel solemnly tasked Saul with a mission, with God-given authority, claiming his position as the one who appointed him as king over the people. The message from God to Saul through Samuel was about punishing the Amalekites because of what they did to Israel at the time of Exodus. The Amalekites were the descendants of Esau, Israel’s ancestor Jacob’s twin brother. So, they were related to the Israelites like a brother. However, when the people of Israel were on their way to Canaan and were weary and worn out due to the long journey, the Amalekites sneaked behind and pounced on the weak such as the elderly, women and children. They were ferocious wolves. In our Friday meeting, someone pointed out that the Amalekites also had no fear of God even though they possibly heard about God’s miracles performed in Egypt and the Red Sea. So, after Joshua the general defeated the Amalekites, God said to Moses that He would completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven (Ex 17:14). Now it was the time for God to fulfill His promise. And with this promise in mind, God had yet another item on his agenda: giving Saul a second chance. Previously, Saul was twice in errors. It’s like the bottom of the ninth, two outs, two strikes and you are given a chance to hit a home run to win the World Series. Or you throw a Hail Mary in the 4th quarter of Super Bowl.

Look at verse 3. The specific details are given for the mission. Note the terms, “totally destroy” and “do not spare them.” This includes women, children and infants not to mention cattle and all kinds of flocks. Some may say this total destruction is outrageous and harsh. But this was “Herem (חרם) punishment or judgment” whose original meaning was “uncompromising consecration to God.” So, by totally destroying them, it would be considered as a holy sacrifice to God fulfilling His righteousness and justice. We could see the same concept at Jericho where God commanded Joshua to totally destroy the city and never to build it again.

What did Saul do? In verses 4-9, we see Saul mustering more than 200,000 foot soldiers plus 10,000 Judah reserves to attack the city of Amalek. Right before the campaign, Saul asked the Kenites to leave the Amalekites so that they might not be collateral damages. Saul cited the reason why to them: that they showed their kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Surely, Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, was a Kenite shepherd who became a pathfinder for them (or their eyes and ears) in the wilderness.

Then Saul attacked the Amalekites in all directions. Saul actually destroyed almost all the people in Amalek. However, there was a problem. Saul and the army spared Agag king of the Amalekites and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs. Everything that was good they spared but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

Look at verses 10-11. How did God respond to Saul’s campaign? He regretted that he made Saul king because he turned away from him and did not carry out his instructions. In our Friday meeting, we were told that it was the same expression God used at the time of Noah’s flood. At this, Samuel was also angry and cried out to God all that night in the hope that God would change his mind. What was the problem? Again, in our Friday meeting, some said Saul’s score was 95% and is good for an “A” grade. At the same time, others pointed out that 95% is not 100% and anything falling short of 100% is an “F” grade. Ro 3:23 well-points out how all people are “F” graders: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Ro 3:23). Saul’s problem was not carrying out God’s instructions 100%. So, falling short is the problem. Sometimes, we are like that, hesitant and afraid of finishing something 100% for various reasons. At that time, what can we do? Let us fix our eyes on Jesus who endured the cross and finished the task 100% (Heb 12:2; Jn 19:30)! 100% is impossibility but with Jesus, we can do it!

1. **To Obey is Better Than Sacrifice (12-35)**

Look at verse 12. Perhaps, Samuel could not sleep at all that night and as soon as he saw the daybreak, he hurriedly went to meet Saul. However, what was Saul doing? He was setting up a monument in his own honor! It would be the worst combination for Saul to turn back to God: his incomplete task and self-honor. When Samuel finally reached him, Saul preemptively greeted him, saying, “The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord’s instructions.” He possibly had some guilty conscience in him and yet with a little bit of excitement and exaggeration, thought that he could tone it down and even earn Samuel’s blessing. Yet Samuel did not buy Saul’s such smooth gesture. Instead, he figuratively chided him asking why he could hear the bleating of sheep and the lowing of cattle. Saul’s excuse was that the soldiers brought them to sacrifice to God. At this, Samuel got mad and said to Saul, “enough!” Or he was restoring an order like a judge does in his court! He asked Saul to listen to God’s message first and Saul obliged.

Look at verses 17-19. Here Samuel reminds Saul of his humble origin and God’s great blessing upon him by making him king over Israel. He also reminds him of the task that the LORD God asked him to do: complete destruction of those wicked people, the Amalekites; waging war against them till they would be wiped out. With that, he demanded him of an answer why the disobedience and why doing evil by pouncing on the plunder.

Saul’s answer was remarkable at this time. He still believed that he obeyed God and reiterated that the plunder was only meant for devotion to God (and possibly plus alpha) in order to sacrifice them to God.

At this, Samuel’s great teaching moment comes: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” He added that rebellion and arrogance would be like the sin of divination and the evil of idolatry. Surely, Samuel knew what God really wants from his own experience and from his deep Bible study in his heart. Saul kept making an excuse of why he or his soldiers brought the plunder of cattle and flocks by saying that it was all for offering sacrifices to God. Of course, sacrifices are important in our Christian life. Apostle Paul once urged us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, which was our last year’s ministry key verse (Ro 12:1). In fact, making a sacrifice was what God did first to Adam and Eve when they committed a sin and felt lost, ashamed and afraid. He clothed them with those sacrificial animals’ skin, which would become a model of atonement in the later days. At the time of Exodus, God established a well-structured sacrifice system among His people so that they would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and eventually foreshadowed the ultimate sacrifice, our Lord Jesus Christ. And this sacrifice system has been renewed and re-established in our worship service. However, Samuel tells Saul (or us) that to obey is better than sacrifice. How can we reconcile this with our concept of sacrifice? Well, if Adam obeyed God in the Eden, we wouldn’t have had to have a sacrificial system in the first place. Also, what God really wants from us is not some fat portion of rams or offerings but a strong personal relationship with Him. Our heart, our mind, our love and our devotion to him that no one or nothing could intervene with. As Solomon once described, “love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave (SS 8:6).” So when we love God dearly like as strong as death, we could obey him no matter what, risking even death-like loss or a mountainous amount of disadvantage we might encounter. One good example of this type of obedience is Abraham’s obedience. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac as an offering. Abraham did not understand it but did not hesitate to obey God. He almost killed Isaac to sacrifice him until the angel intervened. God was so much moved by his death-like obedience and blessed him most amazingly. How about Jesus? The Book of Hebrews author aptly describes Jesus’ obedience this way: “… he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb 5:7b-9).” Obedience is the source of salvation! May God bless our obedience abundantly!

The remaining part of this chapter is not encouraging. Now Saul put a little blame on the people or on his fear of people. In last week’s passage, he ignored the people and made an oath that resulted in backlashes, so, this time, he possibly tried to appease the people by letting them whatever they wanted. Yet his focus was not re-establishing his personal relationship with God by genuine repentance. He kept calling God as Samuel’s God (or your God) and begged Samuel to forgive his sin and honor him among the elders. When Samuel said “no” to his request and tried to turn to leave, his robe was torn and it became a not-a-good omen to his kingship.

With Saul’s persistent request, Samuel went back with Saul only to put to death Agag king of the Amalekites. The king thought, “Surely the bitterness of death is past” but Samuel surely made sure that he was put to death as the concluding mark for God’s mission originally assigned to Saul.

Look at verse 35. Samuel did not hate Saul after all. In fact, he loved him dearly. That is why he never saw him again but continued to mourn for him in the hope that God might forgive him and use him again. You may know or may not know about this but all of our Bible teachers, missionaries and gospel workers are like this Samuel. We wish our Bible students nothing but good regardless of their situations. I still remember, dream and sometimes pray earnestly for one Bible student who was like van Gogh. He looked like Gogh, drew like Gogh, and talked like Gogh. I kept asking God of curing him and giving him a devout wife.

In conclusion, we learned how God gave Saul a second chance by tasking him with a mission of total destruction of the Amalekites. Regardless of excuses, anything that is not 100% falls short of glory but with Jesus we can try to be 100%! We learned that our sacrifice is essential but establishing a personal relationship with God is a priority and a must. By loving God dearly like as strong as death, we can obey him like Abraham or Jesus did. That is what God wants from us! May God bless our obience and our shepherd-like heart like Samuel’s toward Saul!