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God Rejects Sha'ul

First Samuel 15: 1-35

God rejects Sha'ul DIG: Why did Sha'ul make a burnt offering to the LORD? Why did Samuel react in anger? Why did Sha'ul not kill the king of the Amalekites? Why did he keep the plunder? Why were these things sinful? Why did Ha'Shem demand the complete destruction of the Amalekites, including their possessions? What does this reveal about the character of God? Did ADONAI change His mind regarding Sha'ul? What does this reveal about God's expectations for those in authority over His people? In what ways did Sha'ul make expedience more important than obedience?

REFLECT: The people thought Sha'ul had won a great victory, but in God's sight Sha'ul was a failure. What was the key difference? When you see how Samuel dealt with Agag, what lessons can be drawn from that example concerning how believers should deal with compromise and sin in their own lives? In what ways are you more like Sha'ul than Samuel? In what ways are you more like Samuel than Sha'ul? Is your life characterized by obedience or by expedience? What area of obedience might the LORD be asking of you this coming week? How can we make sure not to be a failure in God's sight?

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

This is a pivotal chapter in the life of **Sha'ul**. **ADONAI** gave **him** another chance to prove **himself**, but **he** failed again, lied about it, and was judged. **Sha'ul** had a habit of substituting saying for doing and of making excuses instead of confessing **his sins**. No matter what happened, it was always somebody else's fault. **He** was more concerned about looking good before people than being good before **God**. Consider **the five stages** in this event that cost **Sha'ul** the kingdom, and eventually **his** life.³²³

1. Disobeying God (1:11): When **Samuel** appeared suddenly to **Sha'ul**, it was to point out to **him** that **he** was **king**, not by popular demand, but **the LORD's** choosing. **Samuel said to Sha'ul**, "**ADONAI sent me to anoint you king over His people, over Isra'el. Now listen to what ADONAI has to say. Sha'ul's duty was to carry out God's commands.**

Here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Isra'el, how they fought against Isra'el when they were coming up from Egypt. Now go and attack the Amalekites, and completely destroy (Hebrew: *cherem*) everything they have. Do not spare them, kill all the men and women, children and babies, cows and sheep, camels and donkeys (15:1-3).

It was an ancient injustice, not a recent one, that **Sha'ul** was sent to avenge. **The Amalekites** were descendants of **Esau**, the unbelieving brother of **Jacob (Genesis 35:19-26)**, inhabiting the desert between the southern borders of Judah, south of Beersheba, and Egypt, but extending south to the Sinai Peninsula. It was in this last region that **they** had tried to prevent **Isra'el** from reaching the Sinai after **their** miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds (see the commentary on **Exodus**, [to see link click Cv - The Amalekites Attacked the Israelites at Rephidim](#)). And for that opposition to **God's** saving purpose, **the Amalekites** were doomed to destruction (**Numbers 24:20** and **Deuteronomy 25:17-19**).

It fell on **Sha'ul** to carry out the sentence of **Ha'Shem**. This made **the king's** assignment quite different from all the other battles that **he** led (see [Cj - The Summary of Sha'ul's Wars](#)). **He** was to engage in a holy war.³²⁴ Some people find it difficult to believe that **the LORD** would command an entire nation to be destroyed just because of what their ancestors had done (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy** [Ag - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh](#)). Some of these critics, however, may rely more on sentiment than on biblical truth, not realizing how long-suffering **YHVH** had been with those **nations** and how unspeakably wicked **they** were (**First Samuel 15:18** and **33**). **God's covenant with the Jewish nation** includes the promise: **I will curse those who curse you (Genesis 12:3)**. And **God** always keeps **His** word!³²⁵

It was to be a war carried out on **Ha'Shem's** behalf. The victory was to be **the LORD's**, so there was nothing to be gained for the army. All the spoils of war would belong to **ADONAI** because they were holy. **People** and **property** alike were put under **the cherem** ban (see **Leviticus** [Ff - Cherem](#)), and set apart for destruction. *No one* was to take possession of **them**. It would be easy to understand the viewpoint of **the soldiers** who would be tempted to complain that **they** had put their lives on the line for nothing. Nevertheless, the principle was well understood, for it had operated in the battles against **Jericho** (see the commentary on **Joshua** [Bd - The Sin of Achan](#)) and **Ai** (see **Joshua** [Be - The Defeat at Ai](#)), and underlay the conquest of Canaan.

As a result, it came about that the **sinful** nation of **Isra'el** (see [Bq - Give Us a King](#))

became the agent of **ADONAI** in defeating another **sinful** nation. It was a necessary stage in the progressive revelation of **God** to bring about the salvation of mankind, and we need to see it in that light, not forgetting that **Isra'el's** unfaithfulness met a similar, though less total, destruction at the hands of **the Assyrians** (see the commentary on **the Life of Solomon Dn - The Kings of Isra'el**) and **Babylonians** (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule**). This incident is a reminder that **it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).**³²⁶

So Sha'ul responded immediately by **rallying the fighting men and mustering them at Telaim — 200,000 foot soldiers, and another 10,000 men from Judah. Sha'ul arrived at the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. Sha'ul said to the Kenites** (see the commentary on **Numbers Dy - Balaam's Sixth Oracle**), **"Go away, withdraw, leave your homes there with the Amalekites. Otherwise, I might destroy you along with them, even though you were kind to the Israelites when they came out of Egypt."** **So the Kenites moved away from among the Amalekites. Then Sha'ul attacked the Amalekites, starting at Havilah, and continuing toward Shur, at the border of Egypt (15:4-7).**

While we admire **Sha'ul** for being careful to protect **the Kenites**, **he** wasn't so careful to **obey God's will. He completely destroyed the Amalekites, putting them to the sword, but he took Agag their king captive.** Not only that, **Sha'ul's** army took **the best of their sheep and cattle, also the fat of calves and lambs . . . everything that was good.** There is a clear hint that **Sha'ul** wanted to keep on the right side of popular opinion with **his troops. The Amalekite people** were dispensable, but it seemed to be a pity to destroy such excellent stock!³²⁷ **But everything that was worthless or weak they completely destroyed (15:8-9).** **Sha'ul** committed the same **sin** as **Achan** by stealing things that were dedicated to **YHVH**; however, **Achan** stole only a few articles, while **Sha'ul** stole on a large scale. What's worse, **he** led **his** whole **army** into **sin.**³²⁸

Then the word of ADONAI came to Samuel, saying: I am grieved (Hebrew: *nacham*, carrying the idea of comfort and consolation, often in the context of grief or distress) **that I have made Sha'ul king, because he has turned back from following Me and hasn't obeyed My commands (15:10-11a).** Did **YHVH** change **His** mind? Heaven forbid! The Bible teaches us that **God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).** Therefore, we must conclude that **God** doesn't change . . . people do, situations do; however, **God** still achieves **His** ultimate aims. We can see this in a positive light how **Ha'Shem** dealt with **the Ninevites** (see the commentary on **Jonah Ax - The Ninevites Believed in God**). **Jonah** was sent to the cruel, violent city of **Nineveh** to proclaim **God's**

message. If **they** did not repent, **God** was going to wipe **them** out. But, **when God saw that they had turned from their evil** (Hebrew: *ra'ah*) **ways, He relented** (Hebrew: *nhm*) with compassion **and did not bring on them the destruction** (*ra'ah*) **He had threatened** (Jonah 3:10).

A human being repenting normally suggests that he or she has sinned and needs to turn from wickedness (Hebrew: *ra'ah*). Since we know that **Ha'Shem** is free from sin, the idea of **His** repenting seems contradictory until we discover that the Hebrew verb **relent** (*nhm*) can also be translated *moved to pity*. Therefore, when Scripture speaks of **God relenting**, it doesn't mean that **He's** done something wrong or made a mistake; rather, that **He's** chosen a compassionate response as a result of another's decision. **God** really hadn't changed **His** mind . . . **the Ninevites** had.³²⁹ Furthermore, as **Jeremiah 18:7-8** makes clear, prophetic pronouncements of judgment were not absolute, but conditional: **At one time, I may speak about uprooting, breaking down and destroying a nation or kingdom; but if that nation turns from their evil, which prompted Me to speak against it, then I relent concerning the disaster I had planned to inflict on it.**

So, what we see in a positive light regarding **the Ninevites**, we see in a negative light concerning **Sha'ul**. **ADONAI** had promised **an eternal kingdom** for **Sha'ul** if only **he** would **obey**. **Sha'ul** had experienced **the LORD's** favor in defeating **the Ammonites** (see [Bz - The Ammonite War](#)), but at the first sign of adversity, **he** failed the test. The penalty was severe. **Samuel said to Sha'ul, "You did a foolish thing. You didn't observe the mitzvah of ADONAI** (making a sacrifice without being a priest), **which He gave you. If you had obeyed, Ha'Shem would have set up your kingship over Isra'el forever (13:13).** So, **God** didn't change, **Sha'ul disobeyed**, and was rejected. **The LORD** does not change **His** mind in the sense that **His** purposes change, but **He** could no longer use **Sha'ul**, who was fully responsible for **his** attitudes and actions. **The sovereign God** is so fully in control that **He** takes in stride the **sin** of human beings and adjusts **His** plans when necessary.³³⁰ **God** would still achieve **His** ultimate purpose, as far as **Isra'el** is concerned, only with **David** as **king**.

This made Samuel very sad, and he cried to ADONAI all night (15:11b). What exactly was it that caused **Samuel** to be so **very sad** (even angry)? In the first place, **Samuel's** theology was being put into question. Against **his** better judgment **he** had cooperated in **king-making**, announcing that **Sha'ul** was the one whom **the LORD** had chosen (**First Samuel 10:1, 24 and 11:15**). Now it appeared to **him** that **Ha'Shem** had changed **His** mind, and **Samuel** couldn't come to terms with this challenge to **God's** sovereignty. In the second place, what was to become of the leadership of **Isra'el**? Now, the nation was in

worse shape than ever. Last but not least, **Samuel** was torn within **himself** by **the Divine Word**, and needed to settle **his** own turmoil before **the LORD**. The personal cost of ministry is seen in the life of **Samuel**, and in this passage in particular.³³¹

2. Sha'ul lies to Samuel (15:12-15): In the eyes of **the soldiers** and **the Jewish people**, **Sha'ul** had won a great victory over a long-time enemy, but in **God's** eyes **he** was a failure. Expecting that **Sha'ul** would still be in **the Negev**, **Samuel** set off southwards, only to find that **he** had gone the wrong direction. **Early the next morning Samuel got up and went to meet Sha'ul; however, Samuel was told, "Sha'ul went to Carmel to set up a monument for his own honor** (in Judah, not the Carmel on the upper Mediterranean coast), **but now he has left and is on his way down to Gilgal" (15:12). The king** was so impressed with **himself** that he went to **Carmel** and erected **a stone monument** in **his** own honor and then went to **Gilgal**, where **he** had previously failed **God** and **Samuel** (see [Cc - Samuel Rebukes Sha'ul](#)). Was he trying to avoid **Samuel**? Perhaps, but **he** failed. It was fifteen miles from **Samuel's** home in **Ramah** to **Gilgal**, perhaps a day's journey for **the** old prophet.



When Samuel reached him, Sha'ul said: May ADONAI bless you! Sha'ul's greeting was sheer hypocrisy. **He** had no blessing to give **Samuel**, and **he** had not **obeyed the LORD**. First, **he** lied to **himself** in thinking **he** could get away with lying, saying: **I have carried out ADONAI's commands (15:13).** Then **he** lied to **Samuel** who already knew the truth. **But Samuel answered, "If so, why do I hear sheep bleating and cows mooing?"** **Sha'ul answered: The soldiers spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to ADONAI your God. But we completely destroyed the rest (15:14-15).** **He**

even tried to lie to **God** by saying **he** would use **the** spared **animals** for **sacrifices** (**First John 1:5-10**)! **Sha'ul** even blamed **his** own **troops** for sparing the spoils, saying: **The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites**. It was always somebody else's fault.³³²

Sha'ul's behavior reminds us that spiritual leaders who would seek **God's** blessing must be willing to **obey** the Bible's commands even when they are unpopular. **Paul** encouraged **Timothy** that along with false teachers and imposters, the Church would be plagued with people who **will not endure sound doctrine, but having itching ears they will gather for themselves teachers who will tell them whatever they want to hear, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths** (**Second Timothy 4:3-4**). **Timothy**, however, should **continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed** (**First Timothy 3:14**), and faithfully **preach the Word** (**First Timothy 4:2**). **Sha'ul** would have **obeyed ADONAI** if only **he** had killed **Agag** and forbidden **his** soldiers from taking **the Amalekites' sheep and cattle**. Then things would have been done according to **Ha'Shem's** actual commands. The same is true of messianic rabbis, pastors, parents and individual believers today, who obey **the Lord** when they insist that all things be done in accordance with **God's** clear commands in **His Word**.³³³

3. Sha'ul argues with Samuel (15:16-23a): **Sha'ul** might have discounted the significance of **his** compromises, but to **YHVH**, **his** disobedience had the gravest of repercussions. Then **Samuel** said to **Sha'ul**, "**Stop! I'm going to tell you what ADONAI said to me last night.**" "**Tell me,**" replied **Sha'ul**. **Samuel** then said: **Although you were once small in your own eyes (9:21), did you not become the head of the tribes of Isra'el? ADONAI anointed you king over Isra'el! Now He sent you on a mission and told you, "Go and completely destroy those wicked Amalekites; keep making war on them until they have been exterminated."** **Why did you not obey ADONAI? Why did you seize the spoils and do evil in the eyes of ADONAI"** (**15:16-19**)?

But Sha'ul began to argue with **God's** servant, and lied a second time when **he** declared: "**I did obey ADONAI,**" **Sha'ul** said. "**I carried out the mission that ADONIA assigned to me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king.** And for the second time blamed **his** army saying that **the soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder**. And for the second time **he** used the feeble excuse of dedicating **the best the animals to God, in order to sacrifice them to ADONAI in Gilgal** (**15:20-21**).³³⁴

But Samuel replied: **Does ADONAI delight in burnt offerings** (see the commentary on

Leviticus [Ai](#) - The Burnt Offering: Accepted by God) and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? In a memorable prophetic utterance, **Samuel** pronounces for all time the futility of attempting to rely on ritual sacrifice when what is required is obedience. No ritual can make up for a rebellious heart towards **God** and **His** commandments, because obstinate resistance to **YHVH** elevates self-will to the place of authority, which only belongs to **ADONAI**.³³⁵ **To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of sorcery, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry (15:22-23a).** In other words, to flagrantly reject the clear teaching of **God's Word** is practical apostasy. **Sha'ul** might well have gone to occult mystics to gain divine revelation, as **he** later will do (see [Dj - Sha'ul and the Medium at Endor](#)), if he was going to follow **his** own inventions. **Sha'ul's** will was **his** real god. In practice, **he** had dethroned **God** from **his** heart.

The ultimate contrast with **Sha'ul** is the true **King** of **God's** people, the righteous **Lord Messiah**. When **Yeshua** presented **Himself** to **YHVH** at the end of **His** earthly ministry, **He** gave a report very different from **King Sha'ul's**. **I glorified You on earth, having accomplished the work that You gave Me to do (John 17:4).** Perfect obedience was the memorial that our **Lord** erected in **His** life. This is why **God the Father** accepted **Yeshua** and **His** ministry on behalf of all those who trust in **Him**. **When Messiah came into the world, He said: Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for Me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings You were not pleased. Then I said, "Here I am - it is written about me in the scroll - I have come to do Your will, My God" (Hebrews 10:5-7, quoting Psalm 40:6-8).**

What, then, do we give in gratitude to **ADONAI** who already has everything? Does **God** need **sheep** or **cattle** from us? Does **He** need our money, or songs, or prayers? We should no doubt offer these to **God** in thanks and love. But if we really want to please **YHVH** (and what could be more worthwhile than that!), we will do **His** will, as it is written in **His** Book, in the name of **Yeshua Messiah**, the true and righteous **King** who offered no other sacrifice to **God** than **His** own obedient life, shedding **His** precious blood for our sins.³³⁶

4. Sha'ul is rejected by God (15:23b-26): **Because you have rejected the word of ADONAI, He has rejected you as king.** In the face of **Samuel's** blistering rebukes, **Sha'ul** finally realized that **he** must admit what should have been obvious: **Then Sha'ul said to Samuel, "I have sinned. I violated ADONAI's commandment and your instructions also. I was afraid of the soldiers and listened to what they said.** Still failing to understand the gravity of **his sin**, **Sha'ul** pleaded for pardon and restoration. **Now, I beg you, forgive my sin; and come back with me, so that I can**

worship ADONAI.” But Samuel repeated his statement of Sha’ul’s rejection, which could not be reversed. Sha’ul needed to live with the results of his own decisions. The prophet said to him, “I will not go back with you, because you have rejected the word of ADONAI, and ADONAI has rejected you as king over Isra’el.”



5. Sha’ul is rejected by Samuel (15:27-35): As Samuel was turning around to leave, Sha’ul took hold of the tzit-zit of his robe in an attempt to salvage some shred of his reputation, but he it tore (see the commentary on [Numbers Cl - Tzit-zit and Blue Thread](#)). This provided a vivid picture of the kingdom being torn from Sha’ul. Samuel said to him, “ADONAI has torn the kingdom of Isra’el away from you today and given it to a fellow countryman - one better than you. Moreover, the Eternal One of Isra’el will not lie or change his mind, because he isn’t a mere human being subject to changing his mind.” But Sha’ul, unwilling to lose face in front of everyone, begged Samuel, saying: I have sinned; but in spite of that, please show me respect now before the leaders of my people and before Isra’el by coming back with me, so that I can worship ADONAI. So Samuel relented, and followed Sha’ul back, and Sha’ul worshiped ADONAI (15:27-31).

Samuel had not quite fulfilled his prophetic tasks. Though he was old (8:1) and so far as we know had never killed anyone in his life, he needed to complete what Sha’ul had left undone, and devote Agag, the Amalekite king, to the LORD by putting him to death. Then Samuel declared: Bring me Agag the king of Amalekites. Whereas Sha’ul had torn off the tzit-zit of Samuel’s robe that symbolized obedience to God’s Torah, Samuel showed his spiritual commitment by tearing apart the Amalekite king in fulfillment of Ha’Shem’s command.³³⁷ Agag came to him confidently, thinking, “Surely the passions of the battle have now cooled, and I will be spared.” But Samuel said: Just as your

sword has left women childless, so will your mother be left childless among women. Then Samuel cut Agag to pieces before ADONIA in Gilgal (15:32-33).

Then Samuel returned to Ramah, and Sha'ul went up to his house in Gibeah of Sha'ul (15:34). First Samuel 15:35 indicates that Samuel did not see Sha'ul again until the day he died, though Samuel, who knew Sha'ul from his youth, mourned for him. Yet, later on, **Sha'ul** was with **Samuel** at **Ramah (19:24)**. The key to this apparent discrepancy is that the Hebrew verb translated *to see* can mean *to give attention to, to take heed, or to regard with interest*. The point is that just as **ADONAI** was through with **Sha'ul** as **king**, so was **Samuel**. **The prophet** didn't have *any interest* in **Sha'ul** as **king** for **the rest of his life**.³³⁸ **Thus, ADONAI was grieved that He had made Sha'ul king over Isra'el (15:35).** Is it ever too late to repent? Clearly it was for and **Sha'ul**, just as the writer to the **Hebrews** says it is possible for people to arrive at the place where they have rejected the light forever (see the commentary on **Hebrews Ci - If We Deliberately Keep on Sinning, No Sacrifice For Sins is Left: The Danger of Apostasy**). **Samuel** knew, perhaps by **God's** revelation, that **Sha'ul** was too far gone, so **his** only recourse was to **grieve**. Perhaps you are **grieving** for someone.

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** for being so wise and loving. **You** see into all hearts and know when the situation is right for **You** to show compassion, or when **You** need to act in discipline or punishment. It is such a comfort to me that the reward for my faith is eternal life, and that I will have an eternal home in heaven with **You**. Living for the applause of men is so hollow and empty and is over before it has begun. Living for **You**, even during severe trials, is the wisest thing to do. When I keep my eyes on the future and life with **You** forever in heaven, it makes the trials seem so small. **I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).** In the Name of **Him** who sits at **Your** right hand. Amen*