

Obedience is better than Sacrifice

1 Samuel 14 & 15

Key Bible Texts

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Key Bible Verse(s)

“And the men of the garrison answered Jonathan and his armour bearer, and said, Come up to us, and we will shew you a thing. And Jonathan said unto his armour bearer, Come up after me: for the Lord hath delivered them into the hand of Israel.” (1 Samuel 14:12)

“And Samuel said, Hath 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 hearken than the fat of rams.” (1 Samuel 15:22)

Background to the Study

Even though Saul was the king and leader of the Children of Israel, in this chapter Jonathan was the one who stood out as the hero. Jonathan believed that numbers did not matter to God. He believed that God would stand behind His promises and work for Israel, and he and his armour bearer were brave enough to believe God and take action. Saul and his men were camped under a tree, and Ahiah the priest was with them. The ephod, in v. 3, was a part of the priest's robes, which contained the Urim and Thummim. The Urim and Thummim were two flat stones or plates used for finding God's will. The meaning of the names are “curses” and “perfection,” and their relative positions when they came out of the ephod indicated a yes or no answer from God. This way of finding God's leading was also referenced in v. 19 when Saul said, “Withdraw thine hand.”

Jonathan, however, asked God directly for a sign as to whether or not he and his armour bearer should go up to the Philistines (v. 9). God sent help in the form of an earthquake. The result was confusion among the Philistines and a disorderly retreat in which the Philistines killed one another. Israelites came out of hiding to fight, and some Israelites that had been in the Philistine army changed back to Israel's side. Sadly, Saul made rash and unwise decisions. His oath that no one should eat caused his men to be faint and tired when they should have been fighting. Then once the oath had expired, they were so hungry that they did not prepare the food properly and ate it with the blood, which was a violation of the Law. Jonathan was not aware of his father's command. He ate some honey and nearly had to die when the lots that were cast showed he was guilty. Saul was not willing to admit that he had made a mistake and a rash command. He would have allowed his son to be killed, but the people rescued Jonathan.

In chapter 15, God gave Saul another opportunity to choose complete obedience to His instructions. Explicit commands were given, but v. 9 gives an accurate account of what transpired. To “utterly destroy” may seem like a harsh directive, but the Amalekites lived by using guerrilla terrorist tactics. They attacked nations and took their riches and families. Descendants of Esau first fought the Children of Israel not long after the exodus from Egypt. After Israel arrived in the Promised Land, the Amalekites attacked them and continued their raids whenever they possibly could. They wanted to wipe out Israel. Additionally, their idolatry was a threat to Israel’s obedience to God. Saul’s actions were a direct violation of God’s commands. Then Saul was hypocritical enough to tell Samuel that he had followed God’s directions. When Samuel challenged him, Saul blamed the people. When God said, “It repenteth me” in v. 11, He was not indicating He had made a mistake in making Saul king, but He was expressing His sorrow at Saul’s disobedience. Later in v. 29, Samuel said that God would not repent, meaning He would not change His mind or His course of action. “To obey is better than sacrifice” is a phrase that defines a Biblical principle – giving something to God cannot replace a heartfelt desire to do God’s will. How could Saul expect God to accept sacrifices of animals that God had commanded should be killed? Samuel’s words were not discounting the Law and Israel’s worship system. Rather, he was challenging Saul to look at his hypocrisy. Although Saul finally said, “I have sinned,” a truly contrite admission of guilt before God never took place. Vs. 30 reveals that Saul wanted to save his reputation as king. He was more concerned about heeding the people than he was about obeying God. His rebellion cost him the kingdom. Saul had failed to follow God’s commands, but Samuel was obedient and made sure that God’s instructions were accomplished. Note Samuel’s grief for Saul and his legacy of failed assignments.

A TESTIMONY FROM OUR DAY

My father gave me a bit of advice when I embarked on my first experience as an employee, and his words illustrate the importance of heeding those in authority over us. He said, “You may not always agree with your boss’s instructions or methods, but perform as instructed just because he is your boss and he signs your check!” He was not referring to being asked to do something sinful or illegal, of course. He was warning me not to do things in my own way, but rather to simply follow directions. How often do people desire to substitute some other action for obedience? Yet, “obedience is better than sacrifice.” Any number of goodworks or positive actions cannot take the place of following instructions. This is especially true when it comes to yielding ourselves to God and doing His will. One man testifies of how sinful and desperately unhappy he was. He said, “I thought I was going to lose my mind. Hoping to shake the feeling, I started going to church. I thought that maybe giving money to the church would help. I even tried to ‘help the poor’ by making about fifty sandwiches to take downtown and hand out to the street people. Nothing helped.” He was trying to rid himself of guilt by making “sacrifices.” This man came to a church service one evening, and the minister asked, “Who are you serving?” The man knew that he was not serving God. At the end of that service, he went forward to an altar of prayer and cried out from the depths of his soul, “God, have mercy on me!” God answered and changed his life. He found out that obedience to God was what mattered. In today’s text, Saul had followed his own judgment and the will of the people rather than obeying God. He told Samuel that they had saved the cattle to sacrifice them to God. However, God was looking for obedience, not Saul’s excuses and plans. God is looking for obedience in our lives too. Let’s do what God says to do today!

A Closer Look

Question 1

Why do you think Jonathan did not tell his father that he was going to go over to the Philistine garrison?

Question 2

You may not be facing a Philistine stronghold today, but you may be facing daunting difficulties. How can you show the same type of faith that Jonathan showed?

Question 3

Contrast the actions of Jonathan in 1 Samuel 14:6-15 with those of Saul in 1 Samuel 15:2-9. What was done right? What was done wrong?

Question 4

Compare verses 3 and 9 of chapter 15. What are the differences between what God commanded and what was performed?

Question 5

Why do you think Saul listened to the people rather than obeying God's instructions?

Question 6

What are some blessings that result from our obedience?

Take Home

God wants to be glorified in your life. He can be if you will trust Him as Jonathan did. Who knows how He might use you today! Also, God is looking for those who will obey Him. Will you?