



Saul's Failure at Gilgal: To Obey is Better than Sacrifice (1 Sam 13&15)

Commentary: Week Seven

New American Commentary¹

5. Saul Demonstrates His Unfitness to Be Israel's King

From a secular standpoint Saul was ideally equipped to be king; he was regal in appearance, had a demonstrated capacity to protect Israel's material interests by devising and executing successful military strategies, and enjoyed popular support. However, as this section makes clear, Saul and his kingship were fatally flawed and doomed to failure. From the standpoint of Samuel and the biblical narrator, the reason for Saul's failure is simple: the king was a spiritual rebel against the Lord's word. Saul is portrayed in this section as committing two of the most serious types of sin that are possible in a religious system grounded in revelation: rejection of the divine word, expressed here through active disobedience, and supplementation of the divine word with additional authoritative instruction. The former is manifested in his disobedience to the Lord's command issued in [10:8](#); the latter, in the imposition of foolish additional requirements on Israelite soldiers beyond those prescribed by the Torah. Through these early actions Saul established a pattern of disobedience and poor judgment from which he would not deviate. As a result, his dynasty would cease upon his death.

The author makes a powerful thematic statement through his selection and arrangement of material at this point in the book. By placing a story of royal disobedience immediately after a stern warning against "doing evil" ([12:25](#)), the audience easily connects Samuel's promise that "your king will be swept away" ([12:25](#)) with the prophet's pronouncement that "your kingship [NIV, "kingdom"] will not endure" ([13:14](#)). The didactic purpose underlying the narrator's art is clear. Through the skillful use of historical narrative the author affirms the central tenet of the Torah: keep the Lord's command and he will establish you ([13:13](#)); rebel against his word and you will lose both your heritage and your destiny ([13:14](#)).

(1) Saul Disobeys the Lord's Command to Wait for Samuel ([13:1-16a](#))

13:1 As in the narratives of seventeen other kings of Israel and Judah, the author marked his transition into a discussion of core events of a king's activities by inserting a chronological note containing the king's age at the time of ascension to the throne as well as the duration of his reign. The Hebrew text regarding Saul (lit., "Saul was the son of a year [= one year old] when he became king, and he ruled over Israel two years") contains problems that have caused translators and commentators to deal creatively with this verse. The NIV states that Saul's age was "thirty," E. H. Merrill suggests he was forty; yet these are merely guesses and are unsupported by any text. Especially in light of [Acts 13:21](#), it is best to regard the extant Hebrew text as corrupted at this point and avoid speculation regarding Saul's age at the time of his ascension to Israel's throne.

1. Robert D. Bergen, *New American Commentary – Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 146-150; 163 - 175.

The NIV's declaration that Saul "reigned over Israel forty-two years" represents an attempt to align this verse with Paul's reckoning ([Acts 13:21](#)), yet it may contradict the writer's intentions at this point. Perhaps the writer purposely used the smaller number to indicate that Saul reigned only two years before the Lord disqualified him from kingship (cf. [15:26](#)); Paul's larger number would then represent the number of years Saul functioned as king, in spite of his rejection by the Lord.

[13:2-7](#) True to the elders' wishes (cf. [8:20](#)), Saul set about the task of defending Israel against foreign enemies. The apparent objective of the troop deployments described here was the removal of a Philistine administrative center at Geba in the Israelite heartland; the presence of this enemy outpost less than three miles from Israel's original capital would have constituted a severe threat to the early Israelite monarchy. Furthermore, since Geba was a city set aside for the Aaronic priesthood (cf. [Josh 21:7](#)), the return of this city to Israelite hands would have been a way of strengthening the worship of the Lord in Israel. The necessary first steps in this mission were assembling and deploying an armed force. Accordingly, "Saul chose three thousand men from Israel" (v. [2](#)) for the job, and divided them up into two groups.

Saul took command of the larger force, some "two thousand" men, and stationed them at Micmash (modern Mukhmas), about 4.5 miles northeast of the capital city of Gibeah. The location was strategic, since it was near a crucial pass on the Way to Ophrah, a road in Israel's central highlands that led to Geba. Saul's firstborn son Jonathan was given command of the remaining men, who were stationed "at Gibeah in Benjamin," Israel's capital at this time. Though others had volunteered for this military campaign, Saul chose not to use them and sent them "back to their homes."

Jonathan's forces attacked the Philistines at Geba (v. [3](#)) and, based on both Israelite and Philistine reactions, apparently met with considerable success. As a result of the assault, the Israelites had "become a stench to the Philistines," that is, had inflamed the passions of the Philistines to the point of retaliation (cf. [Gen 34:30](#); [Exod 5:21](#); [1 Sam 27:12](#); [2 Sam 10:6](#); [16:21](#)). As a result, they immediately "assembled to fight Israel" (v. [5](#)). The Israelites trumpeted news of Jonathan's attack "throughout the land" (v. [3](#)) and mustered a large force "at Gilgal" (v. [4](#)) in preparation for the expected Philistine response.

Though Israel anticipated a Philistine counterattack, they were totally unprepared for the magnitude of the Philistine reaction: "three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore" (v. [5](#)) were dispatched to Micmash, where they took possession of the site of Saul's original military camp. The Philistines' occupation of Saul's base appears to have been a tit-for-tat response to the Israelite occupation of their former center of operations at Geba. When the Israelites witnessed this overwhelming show of Philistine force, they understood "that their situation was critical" (v. [6](#)); troop defections (cf. [14:21](#)) and mass desertions quickly resulted. The deserters either hid (v. [6](#)) or left the Promised Land entirely, going east of the Jordan (v. [7](#)). Saul and the rest of the troops who did not leave "remained at Gilgal," where they were "quaking with fear" (v. [7](#)).

[13:8-16a](#) In accordance with the Lord's word (cf. [10:8](#)), Saul was in Gilgal, where he anxiously awaited the passage of the "seven days" (v. [8](#)) and the prophet Samuel's arrival. The king's timely obedience to Samuel's directive to go to Gilgal had likely saved his life since to have remained at Micmash would have meant certain defeat at the hand of the Philistines.

However, Saul's obedience was only partial; he had also been directed to wait until Samuel arrived and administrated over the prescribed sacrifices. Since sacrifices were normally offered up twice a day, in the early morning and at twilight (cf. [Num 28:1–6](#)), Samuel could have arrived at any time on the seventh day and still fulfilled his role in the process. Unfortunately Saul did not give Samuel an opportunity to do so but offered the “burnt offering” (v. [9](#); Hb. *’ōlâ*) himself. Before the king could offer up the “fellowship offerings” (Hb. *šēlāmîm*), however, he was interrupted by Samuel's arrival (v. [10](#)). Saul “went out to greet” (v. [10](#); lit., “to bless”) the prophet.

Samuel's curt response in the form of a question—“What have you done?” (v. [11](#); cf. [Gen 3:13](#))—makes clear that the prophet was not interested in social niceties at this time. Saul responded to the question defensively, blaming three other parties for his act of disobedience: his soldiers, who “were scattering”; Samuel, who “did not come at the set time”; and the Philistines, who “were assembling at Micmash” (v. [11](#)). He was “compelled” (lit., “forced himself”) to perform the sacrifice because he feared that the Philistines would attack him before he had “sought the LORD's favor” (v. [12](#)). It is ironic—and symptomatic of Saul's spiritual dullness—that the king believed he could obtain the Lord's favor through an act of disobedience.

Brushing aside Saul's excuses, Samuel condemned the king's actions as those of a fool. No line of reasoning, however compelling, could ever justify disobedience to the Lord. Saul had disobeyed the Lord's “command” (v. [13](#)) and had to suffer the penalties. The employment of the term “command” (*mišwâ*), used elsewhere to refer to Torah mandates (cf. [Exod 24:12](#), etc.), places Samuel's words spoken in his role as a prophet of Yahweh on the same plane as the laws given through Moses at Sinai. This equating of the authority of Samuel's words with those of Moses, through the use of *mišwâ* is in keeping with the theology of the Former and Latter Prophets, which recognizes every word spoken through divine inspiration as being equally authoritative (cf. [Pss 19:8](#); [89:31](#); [112:1](#); [119:6](#), [10](#), [19](#), [60](#), [96](#), [115](#), [131](#), [166](#), [176](#)).

The prophet mentioned two consequences resulting from Saul's disobedience, one with long-range implications and one with immediate implications. First, the Lord voided plans to prosper the Saulide dynasty's future: “He would have established your dynasty [“kingdom”] for all time. But now your dynasty [“kingdom”] will not endure” (vv. [13–14](#)). As in the case of the dynastic promises made to David, there was a conditional dimension to the agreement that required obedience to the Lord for covenant fulfillment (cf. [1 Kgs 11:11](#)). Second and more immediately, “the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people” (v. [14](#)). The term translated as “leader” (Hb. *nāgîd*) is the same one used earlier to describe Saul's present position as king (cf. [9:16](#); [10:1](#)). Unlike Saul, this new leader would be a man “after [the Lord's] own heart,” a phrase that may refer (1) to the person's profound commitment to the Lord or (2) to the fact that the Lord had selected that person.

The events included in the telling of this episode serve to create a tragic parallel between Saul and Adam (cf. [Gen 3](#)). Both men were the heads of their respective social institutions; both violated commands given them by the Lord; both expressed an unwillingness to take personal responsibility for their actions. Because of sin Adam lost the opportunity for eternal life in the garden; for the same cause Saul lost the opportunity for an enduring dynasty in the Promised Land. These parallels are not accidental but result from a consistent theological perspective that views loss of position and privilege as inevitable consequences of violating the Lord's commandments.

“Samuel left Gilgal” (v. [15](#)), apparently without offering up any of the sacrifices he had come to make (cf. [10:8](#)). The Hebrew text indicates that the prophet went to Gibeah, an assertion lacking in the LXX, while Saul and “about six hundred” men apparently went to reinforce Jonathan's forces at “Geba [“Gibeah”] of Benjamin” (v. [16](#)).

(2) Saul Makes a Foolish Vow Before the Lord [13:16b–14:46](#) - *Omitted notes 14:1ff*

[13:16b–23](#) Having established Micmash as their base camp, the Philistines sent out “raiding parties” (v. [17](#); *Hb. hamašhit*; lit., “the destroyer/ spoiler”) to control three of the roads that provided access to Micmash, one going northwest to Ophrah, one going southwest to Beth Horon, and one going east to the Valley of Zeboiim. A fourth detachment was sent later “to the pass at Micmash” (v. [23](#)) to prevent Israelite troops moving north from Geba. These Philistine troop deployments had the double benefit of securing the Philistine camp at Micmash while at the same time sealing off Saul’s camp at Geba from any reinforcements that might come from Israelite tribes to the north.

Clearly, Saul and his troops were very much at risk with the largest recorded Philistine army camped less than two miles away and all hope of assistance from the northern tribes being denied them. The situation was made even worse by the great disparity between Israelite and Philistine armaments. The Philistines possessed large numbers of metal weapons. But by strictly controlling Israel’s access to metallurgical technology and technicians, the Philistines effectively limited the entire Israelite arsenal to weapons made of wood and stone—arrows, slings, javelins, clubs, knives, and the like. Israel’s weapons could certainly be deadly, but they were inferior to those made of bronze and iron, the strategic metal of that day. The Philistine embargo was so effective that when armed conflict broke out between Israel’s royal army and the Philistines, “only Saul and his son Jonathan” had a metal “sword or spear” (v. [22](#)).

The Philistines’ control of Israel’s access to metal also meant that Israel had no blacksmiths (v. [19](#)). The men of Israel even had to rely on the Philistines to have their agricultural tools serviced—a step necessary to prevent metal in these implements from being reshaped into offensive weapons (cf. [Joel 3:10](#)). The Philistines used their monopoly on technology for economic gain as well, charging as much as a pim (“two-thirds of a shekel”) of silver, about eight grams, for simple repairs. No doubt this fee was considered outrageous and had the effect of oppressing Israel economically as well.

III. The Lord Gives Israel a King “After His Own Heart”

The previous chapter brought to a conclusion a major section of the narratives of 1, 2 Samuel. Chapter [14](#) highlighted different aspects of King Saul’s military conduct and achievements so as to demonstrate that the Lord had given Israel exactly what they were looking for in a king. Saul’s obtuseness and clumsiness in matters of faith, as well as his capacity to make blustery oaths he could not fulfill, showed him to be “a king such as all the other nations have” ([8:5](#)). On the other hand, his zeal in mobilizing and deploying Israel’s armed forces showed him to be one who would “go out before us and fight our battles” ([8:20](#)). Now that the Lord had given Israel what they wanted, the time had come to give Israel what they needed.

The reader has already been informed that the Lord had “sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people” ([13:14](#)). In this section the reader witnesses the unfolding of the Lord’s plan to do just that. After Saul mishandled a matter of profound spiritual and cultural significance, he was publicly rejected as king by Samuel, the most respected leader of the Yahwistic faith in his day.

The Lord’s plan to give the nation a man after his own heart, like so many of his other plans throughout history, emerged in a most unforeseen way. It began with a boy herding sheep near a small rural settlement at the southern fringes of Israelite-controlled territory. Initially overlooked by his father Jesse and even the prophet Samuel, David was nevertheless chosen by the Lord to become Israel’s greatest king. While still too young to be permitted to fight in battle, he was set aside for divine service through sacred anointing. David soon proved his fitness in both the spiritual and material realms by defeating an

evil spirit and a Philistine giant. Initially he was celebrated as a favorite of King Saul at the royal court but soon was scorned as the king's enemy when his constant successes caused him to become more popular than his master.

Saul's curses, however, could not stop the Lord's blessings. In spite of Saul's opposition, David married the king's daughter and became best friends with Saul's firstborn son. When forced to flee from his earthly sovereign, the man after God's own heart was rescued by his heavenly king: the Lord's Spirit, prophets, and priests all provided him with guidance, provision, and protection during David's days of fleeing from Saul.

Saul's vendetta against David led him to take away David's first wife (Saul's daughter) and deny David access to his best friend Jonathan. Saul employed Israel's military might against David and forced his son-in-law to seek refuge in two foreign countries—Moab and Philistia—as well as in the desertlike wilderness of Judah. In spite of it all, David twice passed up opportunities to kill Saul and even employed the services of his six-hundred-man militia to defeat Israel's enemies and give gifts to Israel's citizens. Until Saul's death David remained utterly loyal to his earthly king.

As the Lord's true servant, David redeemed his time as a fugitive by fulfilling the Torah mandates to war against the Amalekites and conquer the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the Promised Land. At the same time, he readied himself for the day when he would be made king of the Israelites by forging an effective fighting force and making alliances with key Israelite families.

As this section concludes, Saul's sin spawned a military defeat that brought his reign to an abrupt conclusion. Yet all was not lost, for following this midnight in Israelite history came the bright dawn of King David.

1. The Lord Rejects Saul

In this section Israel's first king was given the high privilege of fulfilling a prophecy made in the days of Moses, that of annihilating the Amalekites (cf. [Exod 17:14–16](#); [Num 24:20](#)). With this special opportunity came special responsibility, and unhappily Saul proved unwilling to carry it out faithfully.

In one of the most distressing passages in the Former Prophets, the Lord here deposes Saul from his position as the royal shepherd of the Lord's people. God's immutable action was taken as punishment for Saul's failure to fulfill Torah commands. It serves as an object lesson of how seriously God reacts to willful disobedience.

[15:1–3](#) The Saul narratives resume here following the succinct overview of Saul's military career, family, and administration that concluded the previous chapter. The absence of chronological details makes it impossible to determine when these events occurred, though it probably was early in Saul's royal career, not far removed in time from the incident of [13:9–14](#).

The account opens with the elderly prophet Samuel approaching the king unbidden to issue a startling command. The importance of the command is highlighted by the formal introduction given to it. Before revealing the Lord's command, Samuel first emphasized his credentials as an instrument by whom the Lord had previously touched Saul's life: "I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel" (v. [1](#)). Second, the prophet emphasized the divine origin of the message he was now communicating to the king: "This is what the LORD Almighty [lit., "Yahweh of Armies"] says" (v. [2](#)). This phrase, first found here and present only in the Former and Latter Prophets (seventy-six times), is always used by a prophet to introduce an authoritative revelation.

The message itself began with a rehearsal of the events and prophetic judgments recorded in [Exod 17:8–16](#) (cf. also [Num 24:20](#); [Deut 25:17–19](#)). In the Torah Yahweh had stated that he would “completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” ([Exod 17:15](#)) and would “be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” ([Exod 17:16](#)). Now Yahweh was giving Saul the awesome responsibility of fulfilling these Torah prophecies. Saul, who was noted for his military leadership, was ideally suited for carrying out this challenging task.

The command required Saul to “attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them” (v. [3](#)). The destruction was to include “men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.” This kind of warfare, called *herem*, was practiced only against peoples who had come under the Lord’s severest judgment (e.g., Jericho). It required the destruction of all people and possessions captured in battle. The task was a solemn and holy one since those Israelites who carried it out functioned as the Lord’s agents of judgment. The soldiers were not to profit from their assignment through the acquisition of slaves or booty; like Aaronic priests who offered up burnt offerings (*’ōlāh*) to the Lord, they were to receive no compensation for their efforts other than the satisfaction of having fulfilled a divinely mandated mission.

[15:4–6](#) Telaim (v. [4](#)) was a site probably located in the Negev of Judah. The second-largest force under Saul’s command mentioned in the Bible—210,000 men—was brought together for this solemn duty. The city of Amalek (v. [5](#)) is also an unknown site probably located south or southwest of Judah. The ravine where Saul “set an ambush” probably was the Brook of Egypt (modern Wadi ’el-’Arish), which served as a major road in the region. His troops were now poised for a frontal attack on the major Amalekite settlement as well as an attack on the Amalekites attempting to escape the main Israelite force. Before initiating an attack, however, Saul warned the Kenites, a nearby nomadic tribe with whom the Israelites had friendly dealings (cf. [Judg 1:16](#); [4:11](#)), to evacuate the area, which they did. Saul’s consideration for the Kenites was motivated by their “kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt” (v. [6](#)). Although this incident is not recounted anywhere in Scripture, the issue was an important one for Israel since they remembered those peoples who had refused them passage through their land (e.g., Edom, Moab, etc.).

[15:7–9](#) The preparations having been made, Saul’s attack extended “all the way from Havilah to Shur” (v. [7](#)), an expression apparently referring to the entire geographic extent of Ishmaelite territory (cf. [Gen 25:18](#)), a distance stretching from Arabia to Egypt. Such a widespread attack would have been technically possible due to the large numbers of Israelite troops mustered. This massive, sweeping attack was successful, and since no prisoners were to be taken, “all” Amalekites who were caught were “totally destroyed with the sword” (v. [8](#))—all, that is, except Agag, the Amalekite king (v. [9](#)).

Though Agag was only one man, Saul’s decision to “spare” him represented a flagrant violation of the Lord’s command (the same verb, *hāmal*, is used in v. [3](#) and can also mean “feel compassion”—e.g., [Exod 2:6](#); [Ezek 16:5](#)). So significant was Saul’s action to the writer that he recounted it twice, using two different verbs to describe the same event; Saul both “took Agag king of the Amalekites alive” (v. [7](#)) and “spared Agag” (v. [8](#)).

Joining Saul in his disobedience was “the army” (v. [9](#)), who also spared “the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good.” But they did not totally disregard the Lord’s command; whatever they did not want for themselves, they obediently gave over to God’s annihilating judgment (cf. [2 Sam 12:4](#), where Nathan’s “rich man” spared [*hāmal*] his own sheep and slaughtered the poor man’s lamb). This self-serving selective obedience by both Saul and those under his command represented an early attempt—repeated countless times throughout history—to pursue gain under the guise of serving God. As it always does, it would ultimately prove futile.

15:10–12 This incomplete compliance with the divine command prompted the Lord to give a further message to Samuel. This “word of the LORD” (v. [10](#)) came to Samuel in the night as a revelation of judgment similar in some ways to one he had received in Eli’s behalf ([1 Samuel 3](#)). The message apparently was lengthy (cf. vv. [16–19](#), [22–23](#), [26](#)); however, the only portion that is presented as a direct quotation from the Lord is found in v. [11](#). This passage provides a remarkable window into God’s emotions and concerns regarding Saul’s kingship.

First of all, God was “grieved” that he “made Saul king.” The only other occasion in Scripture where the Lord stated that he was “grieved” (from *n̄hm*) over peoples’ actions was when he observed the wickedness of humanity that led to the universal flood ([Gen 6:7](#)). The employment of the term here suggests that the Lord was deeply concerned—or, as H. V. D. Parunak asserts, suffered emotional pain—regarding choices Saul made of his own volition. In addition to the lexical linkage between v. [11](#) and [Gen 6:7](#), there are also similarities in the clause and phrase structures.

The degree of similarity suggests that the writer was making a deliberate connection between the Genesis and Samuel narratives. Certainly similarities exist between the outcomes of the stories. The sins of humanity in [Genesis 6](#) caused the Lord to destroy the sinners, yet they also gave rise to the Lord’s selection of Noah, a man with a remarkable heart for God (cf. [Gen 6:8](#), [10](#)). Saul’s sins here destroyed his kingship, yet they also served as a springboard for the Lord’s selection of David, a man after God’s own heart. Clearly both passages teach that God is aware of and responsive to choices made by people, reacting favorably only when people choose the option of obedience to the divine will.

Second, the Lord revealed that the source of his grief was Saul’s failure to follow his instructions completely. Saul’s partial obedience might have been acceptable to his contemporaries, but when weighed in the divine balances, it was found wanting. Nothing short of strict obedience to the Lord’s instructions was acceptable; anything less produced grief in heaven and pain and loss on earth.

Samuel, who was uniquely in tune with God’s heart, “was troubled” (lit., “became angry”) when the Lord informed him of Saul’s actions. In a sleepless, agonizing night “he cried out to the LORD.” The term translated “cried out” (Hb. *zā‘aq*) refers to an intense expression of grief or anxiety (cf. [1 Sam 4:13](#); [7:8](#); [8:18](#); [12:8](#), [10](#)), doubtlessly mirroring the Lord’s displeasure.

Rising at the first light of dawn (cf. [Gen 22:3](#)), Samuel set out to carry God’s message to Saul (v. [12](#)), but Saul was not where the prophet had expected to find him. Instead the king had set out on a journey that took him initially deep into the Negev to Carmel (Khirbet ’el-Kirmil, seven miles south of Hebron), where he “set up a monument in his own honor” (v. [12](#)) commemorating the recent victory he had achieved in the area. Yet Saul had not remained there; instead, he had gone “down to Gilgal,” an important military staging site that was also of great religious significance at this time (cf. [1:15](#); [7:16](#); [10:8](#); [13:4–15](#)). The sequencing of Saul’s actions—performing acts of self-interest prior to those of devotion to God—was reflective of his entire life.

15:13–15 When Samuel learned of Saul’s location, he proceeded to Gilgal for a second, fateful confrontation with the errant king. As on the earlier occasion ([13:10](#)), Saul initiated the dialogue with a blessing. However, in a departure from the first Gilgal meeting, Saul did not wait for Samuel to respond but immediately proceeded to brag about his obedience (lit.), “I have established Yahweh’s words.” For Samuel, and for the readers who are aware of the Lord’s words to Samuel in v. [10](#), Saul’s words are bitterly ironic. The king has indeed “established Yahweh’s words,” but the words he “established” are regarding disobedience (v. [10](#)), not obedience (v. [3](#)).

Saul’s boast of obedience was singularly unconvincing to Samuel since evidence to the contrary was “bleating” and “lowing” in their ears. Hearing these sounds that indicated a violation of *herem* warfare, Samuel asked Saul for an explanation.

As in the previous confrontation between Saul and Samuel at Gilgal, the king blamed others for any sins that were committed: it was not Saul but “the soldiers” (v. [15](#)) who “spared the best of the sheep and cattle.” But even so, he said, their violation of the ban was only apparent. These animals were not killed in the heat of battle, it is true; but their slaughter was only delayed so that Yahweh might be glorified. They would be used as a “sacrifice to the LORD your God.”

[15:16–19](#) Samuel had had enough of Saul’s contorted reasoning and excuse making. Before the king could make further excuses, Samuel cut him off to announce the Lord’s word. In the three verses that follow, Samuel reminded the king that though he was now “head of the tribes of Israel” (v. [17](#)), he could take no credit for it. It was the Lord who had taken him from being a nobody to being “king over Israel” (v. [17](#)). The Lord gave Saul that position so that he might serve as the Lord’s agent in carrying out the “mission” (v. [18](#)) to wipe out the wicked Amalekites. Unfortunately, instead of destroying wickedness, Saul increased it by doing “evil in the eyes of the LORD” (v. [19](#)).

[15:20–21](#) Saul, however, did not see it that way. As far as he was concerned, he “did obey the LORD” (v. [20](#)). Indeed, he went on the Lord’s mission and carried out a campaign against the Amalekites marked by acts of *herem* (“completely destroyed the Amalekites”). In the course of the battle Saul had succeeded in capturing “Agag their king” whom he “brought back”; in addition, the best of the livestock was set aside for sacrifice at a historic worship center. As Saul portrayed it, the army over which he exercised command had at least substantially fulfilled the requirements of *herem* warfare.

Nevertheless, the fact remained that Saul and those under his leadership had disobeyed the Lord’s command: they “took ... the best of what was devoted to God” (v. [21](#)). And Samuel, as God’s unyielding spiritual advocate, could not permit God’s primary political and military representative to get by with only partial obedience. Partial obedience was in fact disobedience. Saul’s sin was the sin of Achan, who had also spared the choicest of *herem* plunder from destruction (cf. [Josh 7:21](#)). Achan and his family died for his sin; Saul’s sin would bring him misery and death and would cause his family’s loss of kingship.

[15:22–23](#) In the most eloquent and memorable recorded quotation coming from Samuel’s lips, God’s judgment was pronounced against the king. The prophet’s words are expressed poetically in a series of four pairs of lines, with the climactic words of judgment being found in the final pair. Samuel began with a two-line rhetorical question that was asked in such a way as to expect a negative answer. He followed with the brief (three words in Hebrew) yet profound maxim that summarizes a central tenet of the Torah: “obedience surpasses sacrifice” (“to obey is better than sacrifice”; v. [22](#)). This truth is reinforced by the words “to heed is better than the fat of rams.” Clearly the Torah integrated sacrifice into the life of obedience to God; however, it never envisioned it as a substitute for obedience.

The third couplet (v. [23a](#)) provides two of the three logical premises that underlie the serious punishment announced at the conclusion of the final couplet. The first line of the third couplet states that “rebellion” (**Hb.** *merî*; v. [23](#)), or willful disobedience, is as serious a sin as the capital “sin of divination.” The conclusion of the couplet declares that “arrogance,” or insubordination (**Hb.** *’aven*), is equivalent to “idolatry” (*tērāpîm*), presumably since it likewise involves the removal of Yahweh from his rightful place in every person’s life, or as A. F. Kirkpatrick notes, “It elevates self-will into a god.” Interestingly, before Saul’s life ended, he and a member of his family would be connected with both divination (cf. [28:7–19](#)) and *tērāpîm* (cf. [19:13](#)).

In the climactic final couplet (v. [23b](#)) Samuel provided two crucial items: the most important premise leading up to the judgment against Saul and the judgment itself. The third and last premise preceding Samuel's announcement of punishment was the most personal one: "you have rejected the word of the LORD." Saul had "rejected" (Hb. *mā'as*) God's word by refusing to fulfill the stern requirements of God's command and permitting those under his charge to do the same (see the use of *mā'as* in [Num 11:20](#); [14:31](#); and especially [Lev 26:15, 43](#)).

The judgment against Saul was curt (two words in Hebrew) and extremely serious: the Lord "has rejected you as king." The form of the Hebrew verb used here (a perfect conjugation) suggests that Saul's rejection was already an accomplished fact. God's rejection of Saul's position of authority was caused by Saul's rejection of God's authoritative Word.

[15:24–26](#) Belatedly, Saul acknowledged that he "sinned" (v. [24](#)). In his response he used a verb that expresses the concept of "missing the mark" (Hb. *ḥātā*'; cf. [Judg 20:16](#); [Prov 19:2](#)). He missed the mark when he "violated" (lit., "passed over") both "the word of the LORD" (lit., "Yahweh's mouth") and Samuel's "instructions"; the prophet's words apparently were accepted by Saul as equal in authority to the Lord's words, just as Samuel intended them to be (cf. v. [2](#)).

What had motivated Saul to move away from obedience to God's command? Fundamentally it was misdirected fear: instead of fearing the Lord as required by the Torah (cf. [Lev 19:14](#); [25:17](#); [Deut 6:13, 24](#); [10:12, 20](#)), Saul "was afraid of the people" (cf. [Mark 11:32](#); [John 7:13](#)). Because of that misguided fear, Saul "listened to the voice of" ("gave in to") the people instead of listening to the Lord's voice as required by the Torah (cf. [Deut 27:10](#)). Perhaps the desire to achieve economic gain by sparing Agag in exchange for ransom or trade concessions from the Amalekites had also led Saul into sin (cf. [1 Tim 6:10](#)).

Saul understood the gravity of the prophet's words and dropped to his knees (cf. [1 Sam 15:27](#)), begging Samuel to "forgive [his] sin." What he apparently did not know was that forgiveness was an act that could not be performed by the prophet but only by the Lord himself, usually in response to an act by an Aaronic priest. Saul also requested that Samuel return with him so that the king could "worship the LORD."

Samuel rejected Saul's plea because not to do so would be to buttress Saul's claim to power over Israel, a position that had now been denied him by God. Emphasizing the primary point of the just-announced divine oracle, Samuel restated the crucial facts: Saul had disobeyed the Lord in a matter of utmost importance, as he had consistently disobeyed the Lord on previous occasions, and the Lord had now rejected him as king.

[15:27–29](#) As the prophet "turned to leave" (v. [27](#)) Gilgal, Saul grabbed the "hem" (Hb. *kānāp*, lit., "corner") of his robe. The Torah required tassels to be present on this portion of the robe as symbolic reminders of all of the Lord's commands (cf. [Num 15:38–39](#)), and it was likely the tassel that Saul actually grabbed. When Saul "tore" the corner tassel from Samuel's robe, he dramatically symbolized his breach of the Lord's command. Samuel immediately picked up on the significance of Saul's act and pronounced a further oracle of divine rejection. Using imagery appropriate to the situation, he added the time element in the Lord's judgment: "today" (v. [28](#)). Though Saul might continue to act as Israel's king, "one better" than Saul, that is, one more careful than Saul to keep the Lord's commands, was being given to the kingdom of Israel.

Though some warnings sent from God were conditional in nature (cf. [Jonah 3:4, 10](#)), this one was not. Through various experiences Saul had shown that he was spiritually incorrigible, in spite of previous warnings and penalties (cf. [13:13–14](#)); as a result, his punishment would not be altered. Though the Lord

“was grieved” (v. [11](#); *nḥm*), he would not “change his mind” (*nḥm*). The surety of the Lord’s words was based in the stability of the divine nature.

To emphasize the finality of the judgment against Saul, Samuel created a new title for Yahweh, *nēšah*, “the Everlasting One” (NIV “the Glory”) and attached it to an indirect quotation from the Torah (cf. [Num 23:19](#)): “the Everlasting one does not lie or change his mind” (v. [29](#)). Words of judgment spoken against Saul by an eternal God would stand unchanged forever.

[15:30–33](#) Saul, desperate to retain his position of authority over the people, repeated and expanded his petition to Samuel. In an apparent effort to appease the prophet and regain his support, Saul confessed for the second time that he “sinned” and yet still wanted to worship the Lord. He requested once again that Samuel come with him and “honor” (Hb. *kbd*) him before Israel. Saul recognized that he needed the endorsement of Israel’s spiritual patriarch to rule the people effectively.

Saul’s penitence and persistence paid off, at least to this extent: “Samuel went back with Saul” (v. [31](#)). In return Saul kept his word and “worshiped the LORD.” Thus Saul was able to maintain the appearance of an undamaged relationship with the Lord.

However, in a gesture suggestive of his loss of divine favor, Saul was not permitted to complete the task given him by God. Instead, elderly Samuel performed one final action at Gilgal befitting his role as Israel’s judge, that is, as one charged with the responsibility of carrying out the Lord’s judgments. Calling “Agag king of the Amalekites” forward, Samuel pronounced an oracle of unrelenting judgment against a second king and then “put Agag to death before the LORD.” The verb translated “put to death” (*šāsap*) is used only here in the Hebrew Bible and seems to suggest that Agag was cut to pieces (similar to *nātaḥ* in [11:7](#)).

The Hebrew text describing Agag’s approach to his death is problematic: “Agag came to him *ma’ādannōt* [NIV, “confidently”; others suggest “trembling,” “in fetters,” or even “cheerfully”], and Agag said [to himself?], “Truly [*’ākēn*, a word often introducing a statement contrary to expectations; e.g., [Gen 28:16](#); [Exod 2:14](#); [Isa 45:15](#); [53:4](#); [Jer 3:20](#); [Zeph 3:7](#)] the bitterness of death has turned aside.” There is disagreement concerning the manner of Agag’s approach and also the nature of his utterance. McCarter follows the **LXX** in translating Agag’s last recorded words as a question—“Would death have been as bitter as this?” The NIV follows the **MT** in translating it as an exclamatory clause. Agag seems to express surprise that he is not to be killed, a conclusion that may have based on his being brought before a prophet rather than a soldier.

[15:34–35](#) Following the completion of this gruesome task, “Samuel left for Ramah” (v. [34](#)), his hometown; Saul returned to “his home” and seat of power, “Gibeah of Saul.” The separation that occurred between the Lord’s anointed and his prophet as they departed from Gilgal was to be permanent.

But though Saul was gone from Samuel’s field of view, he was not gone from his heart: “Samuel mourned for him” (v. [35](#)). The word translated “mourned” (Hb. *’ābal*) suggests an intense emotional reaction in response to a distressing turn of events (cf. [Exod 33:3](#)) or death (cf. [2 Sam 19:1](#)). Significantly, Saul’s sin not only weighed heavily on Samuel but it also affected the Lord, who “was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel.” In combination with v. [11](#) this note regarding the Lord’s grief frames the judgment narrative of vv. [12–35](#) and sets the tone for its interpretation. In view of the double use of this verb with the Lord as its subject, chap. [15](#) must be viewed as one of the darkest passages of the Former Prophets. As clearly as any passage in the Bible, it shows how seriously God takes the failings of those he places in positions of authority (cf. [Heb 13:7](#); [Jas 3:1](#); also [2 Sam 11:27](#); [12:7–12](#)).