

Are you listening?

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[0:00] Listening is a rather important thing. Back in the summer, Becky and I were eating out at a restaurant which will remain nameless.

! And we seemed to have a waiter who couldn't quite listen to what we asked for.! We asked for some garlic bread as a side with our pasta.

It came out as a starter. We were offered by him some parmesan for our pasta. And a couple of minutes later, there was no parmesan.

And three minutes later, I wondered if I should get up and go and ask for it. Four minutes later, we were still waiting. Five minutes later, I speak to him and he completely forgot.

Did he even listen to us wanting parmesan? Listening is important. And it's frustrating when people don't listen to us and we get frustrated and people get frustrated at us if we don't listen to them.

[1:05] Listening is important. And at the beginning of our passage, it seems to be listening is a key thing. Listening to God's word.

And we're going to ask three questions of Saul, King Saul, this morning. And the first is, are you listening, Saul? Are you listening?

So, have a look there in verse 1. Samuel said to Saul, I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel.

So, and here's the word, listen. Now to the message from the Lord. The Lord Almighty has a word for King Saul to listen to.

And so, Samuel, the Lord's spokesperson, is going to tell King Saul what that message is. And we read what that message is here in verse 2 and 3.

[2:08] Have a look. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all that belongs to them.

Do not spare them. Put to death men, women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.

That's what the Lord Almighty says. But we need to pause there. Because actually, I don't know how you felt as that was being read. But I know that when I read that, and when I read that just now, when I read that this week, I thought that's rather hard, isn't it?

Put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys, all of them.

Totally destroy them. We need to think carefully about what God is saying here.

[3:23] We find that difficult to read. Other people who aren't Christians may read that and say, well, that proves God isn't real, doesn't it?

That proves he's a lunatic, a raging tyrant. How can you believe in such a God, people may say? And actually, if that's the only verse of Scripture they read, I think I can have some sympathy with them.

But we believe from reading the Bible as a whole that God is good, that God is loving. But we also read in the Bible that God is a God of justice.

That God cannot tolerate sin. He is holy. There is no sin in him and sin is rebellion against him, as we're going to see this morning. And so just for a moment, I think it's helpful to have a few things in mind when we come to passages like this.

The first thing to have in mind, this is one of a very few texts ordering the total wiping out of all people, children, infants, women, animals.

[4:41] One of just a very few. Rules for war for God's people were actually rather good. And rather generous.

And we see the Lord's care for the weak and the vulnerable. Secondly, we need to take sin seriously.

We see what they're being punished for, the Amalekites, for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up out from Egypt. And one verse we could read is Deuteronomy 25, verse 17, which says, On that day they came to attack Israel.

They attacked all who were lagging behind. And those who were lagging behind, that seems to be women and children. Those who were weakest and vulnerable.

And the Amalekites, they took advantage of them. They wanted to destroy the Israelites. And they took advantage of those who were particularly weak and vulnerable. Sin is serious.

[5:56] And God is punishing them. Not because of racial hatred or for greed for their land. But he is punishing them for their sin. We need to remember, too, God's nature.

We read throughout the Bible that the Lord is compassionate and gracious. He is slow to anger. God has been patient with them for about 300 years with these Amalekites.

300 years, a sign of God's patience, an opportunity. Many opportunities, many days where they could repent, where they could turn to God for mercy.

He's not just punishing them on a whim. He's not getting angry and saying, right, destroy the lot of you right now. 300 years of the Lord's patience.

And also, I think we need to remember, too, that the Old Testament pattern is different from the New. Still the same God. God isn't different in the Old Testament to the New Testament.

[7:08] Still the same God. But we do now read this in the light of the Lord Jesus. Who has come and taken on that judgment that we all deserve for our sin.

He has taken that on himself. Died for all people. And so all people everywhere, if they call on the name of the Lord Jesus, they will be saved.

Because we also live in the light of the day of final judgments. If we think this verse is hard, there will be a time when all men and women will stand before his judgment throne.

And as we sung earlier, the trumpet will sound. And for some, it's the sound of the hope of heaven. But for others, it's the fear of hell. Sin needs to be judged.

But God is merciful. A few things to have in mind as we come to a passage like this. But we also need to look at this passage together.

[8:16] We can carry on those discussions if you want to after our service is at an end. But we need to remember this passage that we're in this morning that God wants us to look at.

And we need to remember, too, that the first reader of this passage probably wouldn't have had a problem with it like we may have a problem with it.

And actually, there's no indication that Saul has a particular problem with wiping out these Amalekites. They are God's enemies. And enemies need to be destroyed. They would have known what the Amalekites did to them years and years and years before in history.

So, returning to King Saul. Are you listening? That's the question that we have for Saul here.

Are you listening to God's commands? Well, verse 7, we kind of get an answer. Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, near the eastern border of Egypt.

[9:28] He took Agag, king of the Amalekites, alive and all his people. He totally destroyed with swords. But Saul and his army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs.

Everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely. But everything that was despised and weak, they totally destroyed. God said totally destroy all of them, including the animals.

Saul is not listening. Verse 9, he spared Agag, the king, and the sheep and cattle and fat calves.

He was not listening to God's commands. He hasn't totally destroyed them as God had said.

He hasn't been listening. But that's not what Saul thinks. It's frustrating when people don't listen, isn't it?

[10:39] I was even getting frustrated with myself this week. I was listening to a podcast. I wanted to listen to it. I couldn't tell you anything from it because my thoughts were far away from listening to this

podcast.

But here is the Lord Almighty speaking into Saul's ears at the beginning. Not just some podcast. And Saul is not listening to the Lord Almighty.

The command was very clear. And so Samuel, when he goes down to Saul, what do we see Saul getting up to?

Verse 12. Early in the morning, Samuel got up and went to meet Saul. But he was told Saul has gone to Carmel there. He has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal.

Saul thinks he's done a good job. And so much of a good job that it was that he's decided to erect his own monument.

[11:47] Like us thinking we've achieved something great and putting a statue up on London Road for all to see. Look how great I am. That's what Saul's kind of saying here.

Look how good, what good he's done. He's destroyed all these people. So verse 13. When Samuel finally found him, Saul said to him, the Lord bless you.

I have carried out the Lord's instructions. Are you sure, Saul? Are you sure?

What's that noise I hear? Verse 14. What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle in my ears?

That's what Samuel says to him. Did not the Lord want you to wipe out even the cattle and the sheep? Why can I hear the sound of sheep and cattle?

[12:57] And so then comes excuses. Excuses. Excuses. The dog ate my homework. That kind of thing. Excuses. Saul's excuses.

Well, the first one. We did most of it. Verse 15. The soldiers brought them up from the Amalekites. They spared the best of the sheep and the cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God. But here it is. We totally destroyed the rest. And verse 20.

I went on the mission that the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and bought back Agag the king. The soldiers took the sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to them.

I think I'm reading the wrong verse. But there we go. We get the point. Verse 15. He says, we totally destroyed the rest. We did most of it.

[13:57] If someone said to me later, I mostly followed God this week. Great. But it doesn't mean you haven't sinned, does it?

It doesn't mean you haven't disobeyed God's commandments. I only swore once this week. I only said one lie this week.

Mostly doing right still means we've done wrong. It's their fault.

The next excuse. Verse 15. The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites. They spared the best of the sheep. Not Saul. Verse 21.

The soldiers took the sheep and cattle from the plunder. It was the soldiers. It wasn't my problem. It was their fault. But if I said it was their fault I got angry and lashed out at them, it wasn't my fault.

[15:09] We have responsibility for our sin, don't we? Verse 24. It goes even deeper. Saul says, I was afraid of the men. And so I gave in to them.

He was afraid of the men. Jesus says, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Do not be afraid of what men think. Fear of others is not a justification for sin. I remember being so afraid my friends wouldn't accept me if I didn't go out drinking with them.

It's not a good thing. What does the Lord think? And Samuel here reminds him that Saul, you're the one who's in charge here.

Verse 17. Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. He's the one in charge.

[16:22] You used to not be in charge. Okay. We can accept that. But now you're in charge here. You have authority to say to these soldiers, go and do this. Don't lay the blame on them.

Verse 18. He sent you on a mission saying, go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites. Wage war against them until you have wiped them out. Why did you not obey the Lord?

Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord? So you can't blame others. You're the king here. You're meant to be leading the way in obedience to the Lord's commands. But it's okay because it's for the Lord. Verse 15. Verse 21.

They took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God. Don't worry, Samuel.

[17:32] We've kept these sheep so that we can sacrifice them to the Lord. But is God going to be pleased with that? Verse 22 and 23, I think, are quite key in this chapter.

Have a read of them. Samuel replied, Samuel replied, 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.

For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry, because you have rejected the word of the Lord. Samuel is showing what is wrong in Saul's actions here.

Saul thinks the right way is for him to save some of these sheep and sacrifice them to God.

But that's not right. God told you to destroy these, not offer them as sacrifice. Saul thinks that will look good, won't it?

[18:51] But really, it's disobedience disguised as religious worship. Verse 21, to obey is better than sacrifice.

And to heed is better than the fat of rams. Sure, you're going to sacrifice these things, but you haven't obeyed the Lord.

The Lord wants you to obey him, not do things as you think you should do them. And that's a challenge to us all this morning.

All of us are here, participating in kind of religious activity. We've been singing out songs to God. We've been praying, we've been saying our amens.

But is that disobedience disguised as religious activity? What's going on in our hearts? Are we wanting to please the Lord with what we're doing?

[19:56] Or are we trying to put on a show to others? Saul thinks he's been obedient to God's words. And therefore Saul deserves the honor.

Maybe we think we deserve the honor from other people because of what we are doing here this morning. But no, it's God. God. Saul is not listening.

He's saying, as we often say to the children, he's saying no to God. I am in charge. I'll do it my way. And so he is making all these excuses for sin.

But God describes it there clearly in verse 23 as rebellion against him. And that rebellion, it's pride. It's just like worshiping false gods. Rebellion is saying my way is better than God's way. It's a sin as old as sin is.

[21:04] Adam and Eve, they rebelled against God's commands. They were told, weren't they? Did God really say this? Are you listening?

Saul? Are we listening to God's word? And if we are listening, then we're going to try and obey it, aren't we?

Where do we think it should be our way and not God's way? We need to move on.

Secondly, are you sorrowful, Saul? When I regret something, I look back on a mistake, something I've done wrong, and I wish I had never done it.

I wish I had never said that word to them. I wish I had never made them upset in that way. I wish I had never eaten all those cookies. I have regret.

[22:15] I wish I hadn't done that. And if I could go back and change what has happened, I would. Verse 10 and 11, we read of the Lord regretting.

Verse 10, then the word of the Lord came to Samuel. I regret that I have made Saul king because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.

Samuel was angry and cried out to the Lord all that night. The Lord says, I regret that I have made Samuel king.

But does the Lord regret like I regret? Does the Lord wish he had never done that, made a mistake there?

Because what we believe about God is that he is unlike us and doesn't make mistakes. He sees and knows the future.

[23:20] He knew this was going to happen. And he doesn't change. And in fact, verse 29 tells us that he who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind.

For he is not a human being that he should change his mind. What Saul had done here is not going to surprise God.

So how can God regret? Well, in the Bible, we read about things of God that sound quite human. We read about his hands or his eye. But God is spirit. He doesn't have hands. He doesn't have eyes.

It's kind of human language to help us to understand what God is doing. And here, as we read, God's saying that he regrets.

[24:28] Is God communicating to us what he is thinking about this situation? What he is thinking about sin? It's kind of as some theologians describe it.

God lisping to us, speaking in a way we can understand. And so this chap here, D. Blair Smith, said this. God's lisping of regret is meant to communicate his profound displeasure at sin.

That's what's going on here. He has displeasure with sin. He is grieved by it.

He is sorrowful by it. But he's not caught by surprise. God hasn't changed his mind. God isn't going back on something he's decided.

God doesn't change. The one who does change is Saul. But God has this deep displeasure towards sin.

[25:41] But not only that, so is Samuel. Samuel is grieved. He is sorrowful. He is even angry. Lots of emotions going on.

At the end of verse 11, Samuel was angry and he cried out to the Lord all that night. And then at the end of the chapter, we read of Samuel mourning for Saul and this situation.

He is sorrowful for what is going on here. And I wonder for us, does our sin grieve us?

Do we feel a sorrow for the ways in which we have in our pride rebelled against God's? Do we grieve all those times we have said no to him?

Jesus said, blessed are those who mourn. For they will be comforted.

[26:47] And I think what Jesus is saying there in part is we need to mourn our sin. We need to see our sin how God sees it.

As rebellion against him. Not as harmless fun. Not as, oh, it's understandable.

Not as saying, well, everybody else was doing it. But no, it was rebellion against God. But those who mourn, those who see the seriousness of their sin, Jesus said, will be comforted.

We can know, can't we? Because of Jesus, the comfort of sins forgiven when we come without our excuses, but kind of owning our sins, saying, yes, I have sinned.

And I am sorry, Lord. And that leads to the final point. Are you repenting?

[27:56] Are you repenting? Saul, are you repenting? Repent is a, I think it's a very Christian word. We say it a lot in church.

We need to be clear on what we say. What we mean, means we turn around, following sin that way, but we turn around and say, sorry to God.

I want to follow you. I want to obey you this way. Saul, are you repenting? Are you turning around? Well, yes and no.

Saul is kind of a, like a half and half pizza. You can get it if you're ordering pizza, pizza takeaway like Domino's over the road.

You can, if you can't decide what you want, you can get half pepperoni, half vegetable, half ham and pineapple and half chicken and sweet corn.

[29:05] Half and half. Because you can't decide one or the other. And that's what Saul is. He's kind of half trying to follow God, it seems, in this passage, but half not.

Verse 24. I have sinned. I violated the Lord's commands and your instructions. Saul says he sinned.

But I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them. And it gets worse in verse 30. I have sinned.

But please honour me before the elders of my people and Israel. Come back with me so that I may worship the Lord your God. I have sinned, but please honour me.

He knows he sinned, but he also wants the honour and the glory. He wants people to think well of him. He wants Samuel to think, it's those guys that have really done the wrong.

[30:18] I was afraid of them. He quickly turns it back to himself. It doesn't seem to be genuine repentance.

And God doesn't do halves. You're either in or you're out.

Verse 26. But Samuel said to him, I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the Lord. And the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel.

Samuel, Saul wants Samuel to go with him. So it looks like to the people, great, the king is back and he's here with God's prophet. Everything's well.

But no, Samuel says the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel. You've rejected him. He's rejecting you. And so verse 27.

[31:21] As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe and it tore. And Samuel said to him, The Lord has torn the kingdom from you today and has given it to one of your neighbours, to one better than you.

The Lord doesn't do halves. Samuel, Saul, you're not following the Lord.

You're not being obedient to God. You're not even trying. And so the Lord is tearing the kingdom away from you and will give it to another.

God doesn't do half repentance. He doesn't do, I have sinned, Lord, but honour me anyway.

I have sinned, but it's everyone else's fault that I've sinned. Sin is serious and we need to say, I have sinned. I have grieved the Lord.

[32:27] There's no other question about it. We don't offer our own excuses, our excuses to the Lord. We just offer our sin and we trust that he will forgive us.

Stop trying to make it about yourself, Saul, and your own honour, but make it about God and his honour. Now Samuel actually, after saying he won't go with Saul, does go.

Verse 31. So Samuel went back with Saul and Saul worshipped the Lord. But Samuel goes in order to kill off Saul's mistakes.

Because you remember he brought back the king. Well, the king, the king of the Amalekites that is, he was another of the Amalekites that should have been put to death.

And so Samuel is showing to the people and to Saul, actually, God's command is what we need to be obedient to.

[33:39] And so we need to do this. So verse 32. Then Samuel said, bring me Agag, king of the Amalekites. Agag came to him in chains and he thought, surely the bitterness of death is past.

But Samuel said, your sword has made women childless. So will your mother be childless among women. King Agag sinned.

King Agag had made women childless. Sin needs to be punished. Justice needs to be done. The sword of God's judgment needs to fall.

Saul. And so Samuel put him to death. Saul's sin was kind of judged in front of the people.

Saul, you haven't done this, so God's prophet is going to do it instead. And Saul, Saul was not listening.

[34:41] Saul tries to get the glory. He tries to kind of play God himself. And when confronted with his sin, is full of all these excuses and no heartfelt and genuine repentance is shown here.

God was grieved by Saul's sin. And Samuel's even mourning for him and his kingship at the end. It's a sad, sad situation.

So where is the glory? Where can we take any comfort in this passage? Well, I think we need to read verse 29 again. He who is the glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind for he is not a human being that he should change his mind.

Where is the glory of Israel? Israel. It's found in the Lord, their God, who does not change. This king is so full of changeable minds.

He thinks he's done it all and then he has all these excuses. But God, he is faithful and steadfast to all his promises.

[36:03] And he still has plans for his people, plans that will not change. And though this Lord's anointed has failed, God will raise up another and we'll see that next week.

He'll raise up another anointed king. And do you know what? He even raised up another king in the future, a descendant of the next one.

And we know that his name is Jesus. Jesus, the anointed king, the Messiah, the one who was fully obedient to his father, who listened to his every words.

And the sword of judgment that needs to fall on sin, well, Jesus took that on himself as he laid down his life for us.

So that in him we can find the hope, the certain hope of heaven rather than the fear of hell. The people of Israel may have thought their glory was found in having a king like all the other nations.

[37:21] But we see in the Bible that the glory is really found in having a king unlike all the other nations. A king who was made lower than the angels for a little while but is now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death and by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

That's the king who deserves the honor and glory and that's the king we find hope in for our sins to be forgiven.

and that's God's plans unchanged from the dawn of time culminating in the son of God coming down to earth to suffer death for us.

we're going to pray and then we're going to sing. Oh Lord God we thank you we thank you that you do not change do not lie for your own human being that you should change your mind and we thank you that your plans your plans of salvation were fulfilled and though this king Saul fails and changes in lots of ways we thank you that your plan of salvation to us in raising up the Lord Jesus your anointed forever king we thank you that he came and he lived and died thank you that he faced that judgment that we deserve so that we can have the comfort of our sins which grieve you sins forgiven by you and Lord we thank you and we praise you in Jesus name

Amen