

1 Samuel 15-16 - Obedience, Heart, and God's Sovereign Choice

Goal: Explore how Saul's partial obedience leads to rejection and how God chooses and empowers David according to the heart.

Overview

In 1 Samuel 15, God commands King Saul through Samuel to completely destroy the Amalekites as judgment for their ancient attacks on Israel (see Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-19). Saul wins the battle but spares King Agag and the best livestock, claiming it's for sacrifice. Samuel confronts him: "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Samuel 15:22-23). Saul's excuses reveal fear of people and self-justification. Samuel finishes the job and slays Agag in Gilgal (1 Samuel 15:32-33). God regrets making Saul king (1 Samuel 15:11, 35), and Samuel parts from him.

In 1 Samuel 16, God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's sons. Samuel looks at the strong older brothers, but God says, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature... For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). David, the young shepherd, is anointed. The Spirit of the Lord rushes upon him, while an evil spirit torments Saul. David enters Saul's service as a musician, showing God's quiet provision.

These chapters mark a pivot: the end of Saul's legacy and the rise of a man after God's own heart (see Acts 13:22).

Discussion Topic 1: Partial Obedience Is Still Disobedience

Saul's story warns us that good intentions or "mostly" following God doesn't cut it. He obeyed partially, spared what looked valuable, and blamed the people. Samuel's words echo through Scripture: God desires heartfelt obedience over religious performance.

- Hosea 6:6 - "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."
- Micah 6:8 - "He has told you, O man, what is good... to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."
- James 2:10 - Breaking one part of the law makes us guilty of all.
- Jesus in Matthew 23:23-24 rebukes the Pharisees for tithing herbs while neglecting justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Life Application Questions:

- Where in your life do you practice "mostly obedience" (e.g., in relationships, work ethics, generosity, or purity)?
- How can fear of people or rationalising ("It's for a good cause") lead us astray, like Saul?
- Share a time when full obedience, though costly, brought blessing.

Discussion Topic 2: The Danger of Self-Deception and Pride in Leadership

Saul built a monument to his victory (1 Samuel 15:12) and repeatedly claimed, "I have performed the commandment of the Lord" while the animals bleated in the background. Pride blinded him. This pattern appears in leaders who redefine God's commands to suit themselves.

- Proverbs 16:18 - "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."
- Jeremiah 17:9 - "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"
- 2 Corinthians 10:12 - Comparing ourselves or excusing sin is unwise.
- King David later contrasts this in Psalm 51 after his own sin—he owns it fully without excuse.

Life Application Questions:

- How do we deceive ourselves about our motives or spiritual condition (see Galatians 6:7-8 on reaping what we sow)?
- In church, family, or work leadership, what safeguards help us stay humble and accountable?
- How does genuine repentance differ from Saul's "I have sinned" (15:24, which was more regret over consequences)?

Discussion Topic 3: God Looks at the Heart, Not Outward Appearance

God rejects Saul's impressive start and chooses unlikely David-the ruddy youngest shepherd. This principle runs throughout the Bible: God elevates the humble and sees what others miss.

- 1 Corinthians 1:27-29 - God chooses the weak and foolish to shame the strong, so no one boasts.
- Isaiah 55:8-9 - God's ways and thoughts are higher.
- Jesus as the suffering servant (Isaiah 53:2-3) had "no form or majesty" yet was the chosen one.
- Psalm 78:70-72 describes David as chosen from the sheepfolds to shepherd Israel with integrity of heart.

Life Application Questions:

- How does society (or even church culture) judge by appearance, success, or charisma, and how can we resist that?
- Recall a time God used someone "unlikely" (yourself or another) in a powerful way.
- What does it mean practically to cultivate a heart that God delights in (see Psalm 51:10, 17)?

Discussion Topic 4: The Spirit's Power and God's Sovereign Provision

The Spirit comes mightily on David from his anointing and departs from Saul. David's harp-playing soothes Saul, showing God uses even small gifts in hidden seasons. Leadership and service flow from God's empowerment, not self-effort.

Cross-references:

- Zechariah 4:6 - "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord."
- Galatians 5:16, 22-23 - Walk by the Spirit to bear fruit.
- Ephesians 5:18-20 - Be filled with the Spirit, leading to worship and service (echoing David's psalms).
- Jesus promises the Helper (John 14:16-17; Acts 1:8) for all believers.

Life Application Questions:

- In what "waiting" or "hidden" season (like David's shepherd years) is God preparing you through small acts of faithfulness?
- How do we rely on the Holy Spirit daily rather than our own strength in leadership, ministry, or trials?
- How does the transition from Saul to David point us to ultimate hope in Christ, the perfect King after God's heart?

Closing Application & Prayer

These chapters challenge us: Obey fully, guard the heart, trust God's sight over ours, and rely on His Spirit. David wasn't perfect, but his heart orientation set him apart (Acts 13:22). Ask God to search your heart (Psalm 139:23-24). Pray for

obedience, humility, and fresh filling of the Spirit in your group's lives, families, and church. Encourage accountability partners for the applications shared.