

The Judgement of the Amalekites

Not a Sunday school memory verse

The Sin of the Amalekites

God's judgement is:

1. Retributive Justice
2. Delayed
3. Primarily carried out by the Messiah

The Sin of Saul

God's judgement is based on:

1. Obedience to his word
2. Our Responsibilities
3. His Just and Merciful Character

The other day I was talking with a friend about our favourite Bible verses. His was 2 Timothy 1:7 – ‘God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.’

We probably all have a verse like that, that we like to call to mind at various times. But I am going to go out on a limb here and say that none of you would name 1 Samuel 15:3 among your favourites. *Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.* This isn’t going to be next week’s Sunday school memory verse, you aren’t going to stick it on your fridge, we don’t have hymns based on it.

Frankly when we here this verse we shift uncomfortably in our seats.

In *The God Delusion*, the atheist biologist Richard Dawkins would call this ‘ethnic cleansing...bloodthirsty massacres’ carried out with ‘xenophobic relish’. And even we might agree that the Bible would be better off without this whole episode. So why is it there? And what could justify such a command? Why is it that in the twenty-first century we still affirm the wrath of God in passages like this?

Tonight I want to make three observations about the wrath of God in this episode with the Amalekites, and then make three observations about the judgement of God in relation to Saul.

But first we need to go back in history a bit to where the judgement on the Amalekites began: at the exodus from Egypt.

When the Israelites left Egypt they knew they weren’t going on a day trip, so they had with them their children and sheep and cattle. They carried with them all their worldly possessions. After God led them through the Red Sea they began crossing the desert. Even with God providing manna this was a gruelling journey. They were thirsty and weary with their loads and had been travelling for many weeks.

And they passed near the land of Amalek. The Amalekites saw this weary rabble of Israelites and they struck down all who lagged behind. Like a pack of predators they spied for the weakest in the group and attacked them, murdering and plundering their wealth. We are told that this was a nation that did not fear God.

At one point when the Amalekites came down to attack, the Israelites fought back with Joshua at the head and Moses holding his staff up so that God would lead them in battle. God granted them a victory over the Amalekites and Moses made an altar to God and called it, ‘The LORD is my banner’.

After this the LORD said to Moses, ‘Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of the Amalekites from under heaven.’ On that day God pronounced that judgement was coming on this nation who did not fear him. And, of course, this is the task that is given to Saul in tonight’s passage.

God said, ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have.’

So, three observations we can make about this.

Firstly, God’s judgement is retributive justice. God responds to evil by judging it, not always to correct those who have sinned, but because the just response and consequence of sin is wrath.

You can see in the passage the motivation is to repay the wrong that has been done, not thirst for blood or xenophobia as Dawkins might have us believe. So, when Saul sees the Kenites living alongside the Amalekites he tells them to leave so that the Amalekites can be judged for their sin.

Recently an issue in our state has been compulsory sentencing, which says that there are certain crimes which deserve a minimum penalty, and if that penalty hasn't been paid then justice hasn't been done. So if a felon has committed heinous crime they should have to go to jail regardless of whether that will help reform or rehabilitate them.

Sometime in the Bible God judges his people so that they will turn back to him, but here his judgement on the Amalekites is to utterly blot them out. If you have your Bibles there would you turn to Second Thessalonians, chapter 1. 2 Thessalonians 1, from verse 6:

For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes to be glorified by his saints

God's judgement is repayment for what has been done, and the punishment of destruction is eternal. Those who face it will not repent and be saved after they face this punishment. Like the Amalekites this will be final.

Earlier this year an American pastor called Rob Bell, who makes the well known Nooma videos, released his book *Love Wins*. In it he makes the case that everyone will eventually be saved. Even though Jesus will judge people, he thinks that this judgement will be to help people repent and learn to trust God. But that goes completely against what we see in 1 Samuel and in 2 Thessalonians. God's final judgement is definite and it is definitive.

Second observation is that God's judgement is delayed.

God had said in Exodus that he would wipe out the Amalekites, yet for over two centuries these people remained a thorn in the side of the Israelites. Repeatedly they would invade their land and when they came, Judges tells us, they 'did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys'.

You can imagine that whenever this happened the Israelites would look to God and ask, 'why is this still happening?'; 'Why do you let them continue to do this to us?'

And that is a question many of us will also ask of God when we are the victims of evil. We will want to shout at God, 'why are you still letting this happen?'

And one reason is that God gives people an opportunity to change. In Jonah God pronounces that he will blot out the city of Ninevah, but he gives them an opportunity to repent and when they do he is full of mercy and compassion. The Amalekites had 250 years to repent, but they continued in their rebellion against God and their violence against Israel.

I think, for the Christian, knowing these two things – the certainty of judgement and delay of judgement – should work together to make us far more active in trying to bring about repentance.

The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon said,

Oh, my brothers and sisters in Christ, if sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies; and if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay, and not madly to destroy themselves. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.

God has delayed and for the love of men we can't waste this opportunity.

But God's reason for delaying his judgement on the Amalekites isn't just that he was waiting for them to repent, but also, it seems, that he was waiting for Saul

In verse 1, Samuel says, 'The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel'. Saul is God's appointed king over Israel. And not just God's appointed king, but also God's anointed king.

As many of you will know, the Hebrew word for anoint is where we get the word messiah. Last week we saw Samuel anointed Saul with oil. And we see perhaps why God has been holding back on judging the Amalekites for all this time: the anointed one, the messiah is to be his chosen instrument for judgement. And this is my third observation on God's judgement: the messiah is God's primary instrument.

Judgement was Saul's solemn mission, and one that he failed. But of course God has anointed another king, the Lord Jesus who will be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God.

And in saying judgement belongs to the messiah, we are also saying it *does not* belong to those who are not the messiah. So, Romans 12 will tell us, 'never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'. No Christian will ever be put in the position of Saul and asked to carry out God's wrath. At St Mark's someone may be asked to leave the church if they are unrepentant in sin, but this *will* be corrective – it will be to bring them to repentance. The church will never assume the messiah's role of final punishment.

Those who lived in the centuries before Saul were not given the task of blotting out the Amalekites this came in God's time and through God's means. In our time we should not be seeking the judgement of others, but like Spurgeon said, let us warn and implore and pray until Jesus returns to judge.

With this in mind, let's turn our attention specifically on King Saul, the anointed one. In the last few chapters cracks have already begun to show in Saul's leadership. You can go back and read Chapter 13 where Saul fails to trust God. Chapter 14 where Saul is sitting under a pomegranate tree while his son, Jonathan fights the battle. But here in Chapter 15 his failure as king is made categorically clear. He is a king who will not follow God and will not lead his people in righteousness.

Let's look again at the first verse where Samuel gives Saul his mission. He says, 'The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD'

Saul was only king because God through his prophet had made him king. And Israel's true king was still God. They are his people Israel before they are Saul's. Saul is to remember this chain of command and listen to the words of the Lord.

But Saul doesn't listen and he doesn't obey as the passage makes all too clear:

Verse 3, Samuel says 'go and attack Amalek and *utterly destroy* all that they have'

But in verse 9, 'they *would not* utterly destroy them'

In verse 3, '*do not spare* them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey'

But in verse 9, 'Saul and the people *spared* Agag, *and* the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, *and all* that was valuable'

Saul determines for himself what is worthy of killing and what is worthy of sparing. And we see God's response to this in verse 10 and 11: I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.

When Samuel comes to approach Saul the next morning he can't find him at first because Saul is out building a monument. Remember what Moses did after Israel defeated the Amalekites in Exodus? He built a monument and called it 'The LORD is my banner'. Saul on the other hand has built a monument *to himself*. Saul not only takes God's authority by overriding his command, but he also takes God's glory, claiming it for himself. He has broken the chain of command.

Yet, in his arrogance he will boast to Samuel in verse 13, 'I have carried out the command of the LORD.' But the air is thick with the sound of his disobedience.

'What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?'

Do you remember when you used to fight with your siblings. Mom would hear this racket going on upstairs and she'd come in and pull you apart and try to find what caused it all? And she'd sit you down and ask you, what did you do?

And you'd say, 'well, she took my lego piece'. And Mom would say, 'I don't want to know what *she* did, what did *you* do'. And you'd say, 'Well after she took my lego piece...'

When Saul is caught out he tries this same old trick. What's with all the sheep and the cattle, Saul?

'*They* have brought them from the Amalekites; for *the people* spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest *we* have utterly destroyed.'

Aw, give it a break, Samuel says. 'Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?' A few minutes ago Saul was making a monument to everything he did, but when he describes what happened it seems the people were disobeying the commands and he wasn't even there. When he tells the story suddenly he is so little and he is shifting the blame to everyone but himself. He's like the soccer coach who wants to blame every loss on the referee and never admit that he is the head, and the buck stops with him.

'Are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?' Samuel asks. Wasn't it your responsibility to ensure the people followed the command? Doesn't the buck stop with you? The LORD anointed you king over Israel and sent you on this mission.

Saul may try to keep up his denial, but we know that he himself rejected God's command, he spared Agag and swooped down on the spoil. And eventually he will have to admit it to.

In verse 24, 'I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice'

God's command in verse 1 was, 'listen to the sound of my voice', but Saul has listen to the people and obeyed their voice. He's not only failed to follow God, he has failed to lead his people. He didn't take charge, he didn't correct them, he didn't show them what was righteous.

So the LORD rejected Saul as king and will give that title to another, with the prophet Samuel left to finish the job the Saul would not do, executing the Amalekite king, Agag. And no pleading on Saul's part will cause the Glory of Israel to recant on this verdict.

From this story I want to make three points on the basis for which God judges.

Firstly, God will judge on the basis of obedience to his word.

As Samuel said in verse 22, 'Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams'. God is not judging on the basis of outward worship, or sacrifices, or how many times you come to church, but the inward worship of obedience.

For Saul this meant obedience to God's word revealed in the Sinai covenant and the prophets sent from God. For us it means obedience to the word made flesh, that is, Christ Jesus.

So, in Second Thessalonians which we read earlier, Christ will judge, 'those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus'.

Rather than following the commands of God, Saul chose to determine for himself what was right and just. Rather than obeying the Lord's commands, he obeyed the people.

And many of us probably have this same temptation when it comes to the words on judgement in Scripture. Rather than following what it says, we are tempted to revise them as Rob Bell has done. Rather than continue speaking a true message we are tempted to listen to the people around us and start sounding like them. Rob Bell's doctrine is postmodernism under the cloak of Christianity, whereas true Christianity is that we walk in obedience to God's commands.

The second basis on which God judges is according to our abilities and responsibilities.

Saul's sin was not only in that he failed to follow God's commands, but also that he failed to lead. As the anointed king he had the responsibility to lead the people in righteousness.

With his responsibility, came accountability.

In a similar vein, the apostle James wrote, 'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.' Whether you are a teacher, or a parent, or someone with wealth, or someone with gifts in pastoral care we are all entrusted with responsibilities that we are accountable for. And like the servants in the parables of the talents we will be judged according to whether we honour this responsibility.

And lastly, God will judge in accordance with his character.

If there is one thing we learn in this passage it is that God is uncompromisingly just. The only just response to sin is judgement and a holy God cannot withhold judgement. As Samuel says to Saul, 'the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind'. God's character is to be always consistent, always and utterly just.

But this is not the whole truth. This story doesn't end with the just judgement of God, but as you can see in verse 35 it ends, 'with the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel'. Now this is really odd, because the word translated 'sorry' here, the Hebrew *nacham* (naw-kham) has appeared three times before in this chapter. Once was in verse 11, where God *regretted* that he had made Saul king. And then twice in verse 29 which I just read 'the Glory of Israel will not recant or *change his mind* for he is not a mortal, that he should *change his mind*'.

So twice in this chapter the Lord does *nacham* and twice he does not *nacham*. Now this word can have these different meanings to go back on your word or to grieve over something. Like the difference of regretting and sending your regrets. But even so it is a contradiction so blatant you know the writer is trying to tell us something.

I did a study of this word in the Old Testament and it is so interesting, but since I don't have time I'll just share with you two other times it is used.

One is from Jonah 4. God had delayed his judgement on Ninevah and they had repented and were saved from judgement. And Jonah is pretty upset about this and he prays, "O LORD! Is not this what I said while I was still

in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent – *nacham* – from punishing.’ And then in Joel chapter 2 the prophet calls on the people to, ‘Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents – *nacham* – from punishing.’

So we know two things about God’s character that seem an impossible balance. On one hand he is holy and just and will always punish sin. And on the other hand he is gracious and merciful and longs to relent from punishing sin.

Andrew Reid, who taught at Ridley and is now the pastor at Holy Trinity Doncaster writes that, *The Gospel proclaims that it is this very problem that is solved on the cross. On the cross God treats sin as sin and does not change his mind regarding its evil and its need for punishment and does not relent from it. However, at the same time he does relent from it and mercy triumphs over judgement. In the words of Paul, ‘he is both just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.’*

On the cross God’s wrath was poured out in full on the sinless Jesus Christ. And so on the cross God’s punishment of our sin was taken. His mercy and grace have freed us from condemnation.

On one hand we should be completely unapologetic about the wrath and the justice of God. But at the same time we need to share his love of mercy. When asked about judgement in the Bible we need to fully affirm the justice of it, but fully proclaim the lengths to which God went to spare us from judgement. Only then are we truly proclaiming the character of God.