



02

SESSION 2

The Downfall of Saul

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we witness the downfall of king Saul and his choice to rebel against God. In Saul's story, we see how the failure to completely obey God leads us to rationalize and justify our disobedience—a sin that is compounded by the desire for human approval rather than divine grace. Half-hearted obedience is just another form of disobedience. God calls us to renounce our hypocritical displays of righteousness and submit fully to His purpose and plan.

SCRIPTURE

1 Samuel 15:10-29

THE POINT

When it comes to following God, half-hearted obedience is still disobedience.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Ask students to think of a person they trust completely. Then, as a group, discuss the characteristics of a trustworthy person by answering the following:

- **What qualities make this person trustworthy?**
- **Why would you follow this person's advice?**

To transition into the next part of this activity, place students in groups of three or four depending on the size of your group. Distribute paper to each group. Now, read aloud the following quote by C. S. Lewis: "To trust Him means, of course, trying to do all that He says. There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice. Thus if you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him."

Instruct the students to discuss the following within their groups:

- **What characteristics prove God is trustworthy?**
- **Why do you think we easily follow the advice given by other people, but hesitate when it comes to obeying God?**
- **What keeps you from completely trusting God? How can you learn to obey Him completely?**

Allow students a few minutes to discuss these questions in their groups. Then, explain that God's commands are more than just good advice. When God gives commands, He expects us to trust Him and act in complete obedience. Partial obedience doesn't count.

Option 2

Group students into pairs and allow them five minutes to locate biblical accounts in which partial obedience would have been a disaster. Help students begin by giving them an example, such as Noah not bothering to put a door in the ark, instead leaving an open doorway. Instruct students to find as many accounts as they can in the time permitted. Give teams one point for every account they list that no other teams lists, and two bonus points if they located the reference. Award a small prize to the pair with the most points.

As a class, choose three accounts to discuss. For each account, ask: What would have happened if this person only partially obeyed? What would the consequences be? Explain that when God gives us directions, He expects us to obey Him completely. Partial obedience is not true obedience.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

When it comes to following God, half-hearted obedience is still disobedience.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Samuel** - dedicated to the Lord before his birth; prophet and final judge of Israel
- **Saul** - first king over Israel; failed to obey God completely and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord

PLOT

In the previous session, we saw that Israel demanded a king, a demand that God saw as a betrayal of His authority. God gave the people what they asked for when He chose Saul as the people's first king. Saul was, in many ways, everything you would want in a king. He was a great military leader; he was tall and well built. Saul was "Mr. Israel."

Saul's rule began well, and it seemed like his heart was in the right place. But in the passages we will study today, we observe Saul's faulty and wavering obedience. Saul obeyed God, but only halfway. He followed God's instruction, but not totally. His obedience was compromised, not wholehearted. His half-hearted obedience would be his downfall.

TIMELINE

SAUL'S DOWNFALL

Israel's first king fails to obey God.

THE ANOINTING OF DAVID

The characteristics of a true king.

DAVID AND JONATHAN

The gift of true friendship.

SAUL FAILS TO OBEY GOD COMPLETELY

1 Samuel 15 opens with God giving Saul a clear command to conquer the Amalekites and to spare nothing—not even the animals. But Saul refused to follow all of God's instruction. He did conquer the Amalekites, but he skipped over a few of God's commands. So, God spoke to the prophet Samuel.

The word of the LORD came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night. And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal." And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD." And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction." (1 Sam. 15:10-15)

God delivered the unsavory news about Saul's disobedience to Samuel, who was rightfully angry. It moved him to cry and pray all night long, and to go to Saul the first chance he had—early the next morning.

When Samuel arrived, Saul was throwing his victory party. Before Samuel even arrived, He received word that Saul set up a monument to *himself* in honor of his recent victory. Not only had Saul disregarded what God clearly commanded, but he was in the midst of recasting the entire battle to make it about him.

Saul boasted of his obedience when Samuel arrived. Take a moment and consider the craziness of the scene Samuel found. The evidence of Saul's disobedience is literally all around him, sheep making noises and the air filled with the smell of livestock. Yet he carried himself with the air of approval. "That's right," he said proudly, "I am faithfully following the Lord."

We shouldn't look at Saul and shake our heads. His story doesn't let us off the hook. How many of us show up at worship services every weekend, acting as if everything is just fine between God and us? How many of us sing songs and put on a good show? Meanwhile, the evidence of our disobedience surrounds us. Those closest to us see our half-hearted obedience as the disobedience it truly is.

- **What examples of half-hearted obedience have you witnessed in your own life? How do these examples serve as a warning to you about the danger of failing to obey God completely?** (*p. 16, PSG*)

SAUL TRIES TO JUSTIFY HIS DISOBEDIENCE

We all get caught in our sin. We are hypocrites from time to time. But what we do next, when the Holy Spirit confronts us, is of life-or-death importance. At this point, Saul still had an opening, a chance to choose a path toward repentance. Instead, he hardened his heart and began to rationalize his misbehavior.

Notice what Saul said earlier about the sheep and the best of the livestock (v. 15). Saul was the one who spearheaded this endeavor yet he decided to shift blame to the people (“The troops brought these!”). But Saul did not stop there—like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he tried to pin this back on God. He argued that the people spared the best sheep to sacrifice to God. Such a worthy goal must justify the disobedience, right?

Then Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night.” And he said to him, “Speak.” And Samuel said, “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, ‘Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’ Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?” And Saul said to Samuel, “I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal. (1 Sam. 15:16-21)

However, it was clear that Saul was seeking a name for himself, his own kingdom, and his own stature. That is why he spared Agag and kept him prisoner. Refusing to kill Agag was not an act of mercy; no, having an enemy king in your prison was an enormous status booster. In those days, conquering kings would frequently parade all of the kings they captured as a sign to the world: “I am the conquering king. I am the king of kings.” In much the same way, Saul paraded the spoils of war in front of his people. His desire for their approval ran deep. As we have learned already, everyone has a king, or something that they crave and must have to feel happy and secure. For Saul, personal recognition was his king. Fame fueled his rebellion.

Saul believed he was successful—he completed his mission and returned with a prisoner king as well as livestock for a sacrifice to God. He should be honored right? Wrong. Disobedience is still disobedience no matter what gain or “good” may come as a result.

And Samuel said, “Has 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 listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.” Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the LORD.” And Samuel said to Saul, “I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel.” As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.” Then he said, “I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the LORD your God.” So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the LORD. (1 Sam. 15:22-31)

According to Samuel, partial obedience is still disobedience. Unfortunately, many people in our churches are giving 90% obedience, just like Saul, and are completely at peace with it. And those of us who are religious are often tempted to cover over rebellion with rituals. We disobey in one area, and try to “make it up” to God with some offering in another area. Like the student who tries to justify being in an unhealthy romantic relationship by saying he or she is trying to share Christ with the other person.

God is not fired up about people singing some songs or giving some of their money when their hearts are far from Him. What thrills God is a heart that obeys Him.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

You must admit: the Bible has some vivid screen writing. Imagine Samuel turning to leave, when Saul grabs his robe. Rip! Samuel takes one look at his torn shirt and says, “God has torn the kingdom away from you, fool, and given it to a better neighbor of yours.” That neighbor will turn out to be King David. David would not be a perfect king, but he knew how to repent, and he knew how to let repentance be about God’s kingdom, not his own.

This moment is a defining one in Saul’s life. From this point on, he will plummet into an epic tailspin. Instead of repenting, Saul will harden himself further. In response, the Spirit of God departs from him. The absence of God and His approval leaves Saul with an enormous void in his life, and jealousy literally consumes him. The slightest criticism will send him into a violent rage. He will spend years of his life tracking David around in the wilderness, trying to kill a man who continually goes out of his way to honor him.

TIMELINE

THE DAVIDIC COVENANT

God reestablishes the covenant with David and his descendants.

DAVID AND BATHSHEBA

David’s fall into sin and prayer of forgiveness.

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Solomon becomes known for his God-given wisdom.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Earlier, we saw how Samuel reminded Saul that before God made him a king, he had been a nobody. Saul should have responded in gratitude because of God's amazing grace. Instead, he refused to listen to the Word of God. He refused to remember God's gift of grace.

God has said something similar to us: "When you were a sinner, I came to earth and hung on a cross for you." The God of the universe sacrificed Himself for us. He loves us immeasurably. When we understand this, it liberates us from the driving need to be great. Knowing the value of God's gift breaks us from the captivating power of sin over our lives.

The great news of the gospel is that Christ demonstrated whole-hearted obedience perfectly for us. He died in our place, suffering the penalty for our disobedience.

"to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam. 15:22). The author of Hebrews referenced this verse in Hebrews 10, applying it to Jesus: He obeyed fully, and then sacrificed Himself on top of that. His obedience earned our acceptance before God, the one Person whose opinion matters more than any other—if we will receive it. And when we do, the power of disobedience in our lives is broken, setting us free from anxieties, dissatisfaction, insecurity, and fear.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God is Unchanging

God's being, attributes, and the ethical commitments He has given cannot change. This means, among other things, that God is committed to being God, and that He is the same yesterday, today and forever. God's unchanging nature is good news for Christians, for it guarantees that God does not change His mind or go back on His promises. Christians can find assurance and peace of mind in knowing that the God who brought them out of darkness into His marvelous light is the God who will carry them through into eternity.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Like Saul, what are some ways you have noticed yourself or others justifying or rationalizing sin?** *Answers will vary but may include things like: students justifying a romantic relationship with an unbeliever because they believe they are being a witness for Christ, someone rationalizing that it is okay to cheat on a homework assignment since in his or her mind it is a minor offense compared to other sins and it would contribute to a better grade in the class, etc.*
- **Have you ever considered the fact that partial, delayed, or conditional obedience in your life is still disobedience? What are some areas where you see these half-hearted types of obedience the most?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Samuel says that God takes more delight in obedience than sacrifice. What are some areas in your life where you see a lot of sacrifice but little obedience?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How has this session challenged you when it comes to obeying God's will for your life?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

When confronted with our sin, we all find ourselves in situations similar to Saul's. Like Saul, we may rationalize our disobedience. We can try to blame others for our disobedience and attempt to make up for our mistakes by pointing out that at least we are not as bad as that guy. But God does not want our rationalizations; He wants our repentance. He does not want our sacrifices; He wants our submission.

- **Why do you think people are more prone to rationalize their sin instead of repent from it?** *Because the human heart is broken and corrupt as a result of the Fall, it comes as no surprise that it will do everything conceivable to avoid blame—the heart will defend itself at all costs. This is why, among many other reasons, we need God to give us new hearts that do battle with sin.*
- **How can we lovingly help each other see through these silly excuses?** *One of the most God-glorifying things about Christ-centered friendships is the ability to lovingly speak truth into each others' lives. From accountability to encouragement, to rebuking and admonishment, our friends can identify blind-spots in order to help us to become more like Christ daily.*



HEART

People's behavior and speech aren't caused by the people and circumstances surrounding them, but by the condition of their hearts. While Saul tried to shift blame for his actions by singling out those around him, the text is clear that Saul's disobedience was internally motivated—he wanted to make a name for himself. Thus, people and situations don't cause us to do or say the things we do, but reveal the truth that is already hidden within us.

- **Based solely upon your actions and words this week, what would you say your heart is being motivated toward?** *Answers will vary, but may include things like: praise from parents, respect from peers, relationships, etc.*
- **How will this truth challenge the way you think through situations?** *At the very least it will challenge students to realize that external factors like people or circumstances aren't the cause of actions and words, but simply reveal what is already inside of us.*



HANDS

In the story of Saul we see a clear example of what empty religion looks like. Empty religion tries to pay God off, so that people can maintain control of their lives. Empty religion wants to obey God, but on its own terms—terms consisting of partial, delayed, or conditional obedience. But as we have learned, all of those are just various forms of disobedience. True religion, on the other hand, is whole-hearted devotion to God through a relationship with Christ. And it recognizes that while we may fail on a daily basis to give God our full obedience, the love of God in Christ empowers us to repent of our shortcomings and once again step back onto the path of discipleship.

- **How does the gospel free us from the desire to disobey, and at the same time free us from the burden of perfect obedience?** *The gospel changes our hearts to not only do the things we ought to do, but also empowers us to get back on our feet when we fail.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPKingsSUM16)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject