

“Holy Wars and Peace”

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I Samuel 15

This summer we're studying the most difficult passages in the Bible. We tend to side step around them or we try not to think about them very much. Yet the issues they raise are very real and well-known. A number of these issues keep people from a deeper commitment to God. - “How can I worship a God who . . .” I Samuel 15 is one of those passages. Samuel was the first of Israel's prophets and quite a powerful person. He selected the first king of Israel, Saul.

I Samuel 15: 1-3

Samuel said to Saul, 'The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD. ²Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I will punish the Amalekites for what they did in opposing the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. ³Now 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."

The Amalekites fought the Israelites once they crossed the Red Sea. They tried to prevent them from going to Sinai. Therefore, according to the passage must be punished. The command was to kill every man and woman, every child and infant and all livestock. As Christians we know this - Jesus would not have given that command

We must evaluate every passage based on the revelation of Christ.
We must strive to view each passage through the lens of Christ.
Therefore this passage comes up short.

Vss. 7-9 Saul defeats the Amalekites but spares their King Agag and the best of the livestock.

I Samuel 15:7-9

⁷Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. ⁸He took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. ⁹Saul 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, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed.

Vss. 10-11 Samuel was greatly disturbed that Saul disobeyed God. So he goes to pay him a visit.

I Samuel 15:10-11

The word of the LORD came to Samuel: ¹¹‘I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.’ Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the LORD all night.

I Samuel 15:13-23

When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, ‘May you be blessed by the LORD; I have carried out the command of the LORD.’ But Samuel said, ‘What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?’ Saul said, ‘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.’ Then Samuel said to Saul, ‘Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me last night.’ He replied, ‘Speak.’

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, utterly destroy 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 swoop down on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?’ 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 utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.’ And Samuel said,

*‘Has the LORD as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices,
as in obedience to the voice of the LORD?*

*Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to heed than the fat of rams.*

*For rebellion is no less a sin than divination,
and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry.*

*Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king.’*

Notes -

- Vs. 13 Saul is celebrating
- Vs. 14 - I think I hear some livestock Vs. 15 - “They”
- Vs. 17 - Saul’s low self-esteem

- Vs. 21 - changes his story from "They" to sacrifices!
 - Vs. 22 - to obey is better than sacrifice
 - Vs. 23 - what Saul did was as bad as divination & idols
- Saul is rejected as King. David will become the next king.

So what do we do with this passage?

1. One response I've already mentioned - as Christians, those who have seen the revelation of Christ, we critique this passage based on the ethics of Jesus, who taught his disciples to "put down the sword" and to love one's enemies. We say this passage doesn't measure up to what we now know about God.

2. A Second response is to remember this truth - the Bible is both a human and a divine book.

A. Some people believe that the Bible is simply a human book - on par with Shakespeare or Robert Frost or any other great work of literature. But for people of faith, the Bible is a divinely inspired book, God's Word to us. It's where we go to find truth about God. It shapes our beliefs & our ethics.

Illustration. Lorr's Father's Funeral. I remember one of the first funerals I ever went to. A good friend of mine in high school lost her father suddenly. The part of the service that stood out the most for me was the reading of the scriptures. The promises of God spoke loud and clear. The pastor weaved a world filled with hope and promise. But it wasn't his words - Word of God.

B. The opposite view is that the Bible is totally a divine book, with little or no human input - as if it were simply dictated from God to the writers. This view tends to take everything in the bible literally - including all historical and scientific details. This is the view of fundamentalists, but it's rather new in the history of Christianity - since early 1900s. The historic Christian position was not one of "biblical inerrancy." Martin Luther (1500s) realized that there were mistakes in the genealogies in Matthew's Gospels.

Last week we looked at Genesis 1 & 2.

We looked at these first two chapters of the Bible and noticed that they are two stories put side by side. They are two distinct stories from different sources, different authors. They have different details in them, such as the order of creation, that can't be harmonized. That's because they were not meant to be taken literally!

If you take all the Bible literally then you have to believe the following:

- the earth is flat
- it was created 6000 years ago in 6 - 24 hr. days.

- polygamy is approved by God.
- shellfish is not.
- menstruating women & handicapped men are not allowed in public worship.
- slavery is approved by God.

Exodus 20: Commandment #4 - Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

- here is a direct word from God, yet it allows for slavery. So the Bible is clearly human and divine. We take it seriously, but we don't have to take everything literally.

A third principle we must keep in mind when it comes to difficult passages is this:

C. Ancient People wrote history different than we do. They believed that if something happened it must have been the will of God, or the will of the gods. So, if Joshua when he fought the Battle of Jericho killed every man, woman & child ancient writers would write it up by saying that God must have told Joshua to kill every man, woman & child. That's just the way they wrote history (see Josh. 6 & 8)

I Samuel 15 - King Saul & Samuel the Prophet had a dispute about military tactics. Shortly after this Saul was rejected as King and David is the new king. Therefore God must have sided with Samuel, and Saul was rejected because of his failure to carry out Samuel's orders.

The Fundamentalist view of this passage is hard for me to understand. Their view is that in order to establish the Chosen People in the Promised Land God needed to have the land pure of all non-Israelites. So they all had to be exterminated. - that's why they killed everyone. But we know that "There's a Wideness to God's Mercy."

Illustration. There's an old Hebrew legend concerning the parting of the Red Sea. When the walls of water came crashing down on the Egyptian army, they all drown. The angels who carried out the deed started celebrating, "We got 'em! We got 'em! We got those Egyptians." Then God called out with a loud voice, "Silence! The Egyptians are my people, too. You should be weeping, not celebrating."

So what can we learn from this passage?

1. The Bible is human and divine.
2. It's okay to evaluate a passage in the Bible and say, "Hmm. That's not really Christian."
3. We're meant to grow in our understanding of God. The biblical writers evolved in their understanding of God. So should we.

Think about it.