

To obey is better than sacrifice

Scripture text: 1 Sam. 15:22-23, Ps. 40:6-8, Hos. 6:6, Heb. 10:5-18

(Sermon summary – June 16, 2024)

Introduction: Keith Green, child of the 1970's Jesus movement was something of a hero in my youth because of how dynamically he came out for Christ, with such tremendous talent, then tragically lost his life in a plane crash at age 28. But there are different kinds of tragedies! The story of Keith Green's life was tragic, but it was also full of redemption because Jesus continues to be glorified through his songs and his testimony. One of his biggest hits was entitled "To obey is better than sacrifice." The backstory to that song comes from our Scripture passage today about Saul, who was one of the Old Testament's tragic characters who found little redemption, either in his own generation or among his descendants. A man of great stature and potential, he was anointed as Israel's first king, starting out with high hopes, but his tragic flaw became evident all too soon: he had his own agenda, unwilling to tune his ear to God's voice; he simply was not teachable. So when the big test came in the confrontation with the Amalekites, he won the battle but lost the war. He didn't carry out God's orders, but used his own criteria to sort things out. He came up with a "better plan" (in his estimation): he would keep the spoils of war, claiming it was for a "sacrifice to God," giving his selfish reasoning a high-sounding spiritual rationalization. God knows better when we try to do that – He sees right through our clever justifications for doing our own thing (which, sadly, is our default mode!).

1) The Amalekites were the first people to attack Israel shortly after they had crossed the Red Sea (Ex. 17). God knew they would be a source of corruption for the Israelites, leading them astray, infecting them with idolatry and all kinds of immorality (even child sacrifice). So God's judgment on these people and all their belongings was "anathema" (set apart for sacrificial offering). But the temptation was too strong for Saul, as he explained to Samuel: "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" (v. 15). Yet v. 9 says they had devoted to destruction only that which they deemed "despised and worthless." Of course, Saul's justification did not convince Samuel, who told him the kingdom would soon be torn from his hands:

"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 heed than the fat of rams." "Obey" is the same Hebrew root as in the Israelite "*shema*" (the creed of Dt. 6:4-5), meaning hear, listen, take heed, harken, comprehend, obey; or as someone expressed it, "to hear so clearly that you understand so well that you act on what you hear." The difference between our English understanding and the Hebrew is that hearing is not separate from the action of heeding and doing! My own problem with "obedience" as a young person was that it sounded to me like legalism, always sticking to the rules, never getting to think outside the box, too straight-laced! Something deep inside me rebelled against the idea of obedience ... until I learned the true meaning of it: obey comes from the Latin *ob* + *audire*, meaning to listen in a certain direction; the Greek root is similar: *upo* + *akouô*, meaning to listen from below (as if receiving orders from above!). So obedience is all about **who has your ears**: whom are you listening to, heeding, paying attention to? Paul says that we will be slaves of whomever we're listening to, whether to sin or to righteousness (Rom. 6:16), and the fruit of your life will correspond to whoever is your master!

2) So why didn't Saul rise to the occasion of being king over Israel? Why was his life such a tragedy? Because he was stuck on his own glory, the preservation and improvement of his good image! He had never gotten a clear glimpse of God's glory, so he never gave God his deepest loyalty (his heart and his ears!). Tragically he would influence others around him in the same direction! This would be the story of Saul's life. It doesn't have to be your story, but you have to face the same decision that Saul faced: who will "have" your ear? Whom are you listening to from the heart? Whose criteria will dominate your life? The Old Testament had already made clear that **God's primary interest was not in the sacrifices** we might make. David's testimony in Ps. 51 was a strong reflection of his personal experience: "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering [even though, as the writer to Hebrews notes, they were offered according to the law]. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (vv. 16-17). And in Ps. 69 he gives a similar testimony: "I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify Him with thanksgiving. This will please Yahweh more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs" (vv. 30-31). (Bulls and goats are not moral agents, hence could not transmit forgiveness; they could only symbolize what God would do.) Finally the prophet Hosea summed it up thus: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hos. 6:6, cf. Mt. 9:13, 12:7).

David's witness in Ps. 40:6-8 is reinforcing the same lesson (then we'll compare the use made of that psalm in Heb. 10:5-10): "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required." What real delight could the Lord possibly find in burnt offerings and sacrifices? They were mere ritual observances that represented realities beyond themselves. But "open ears" – *that's* what brought God joy! However, the translation here is a bit tricky! The Hebrew verb *karah* translating "open" actually means *to dig out*; some interpreters associate this with the piercing of an indentured servant's ear if he chose to remain a servant in his master's household (Ex. 21:5-6). But personally I find more convincing another interpretation regarding ear canals that fill with wax and need to be "dug out" so that there's nothing to obstruct the message! Hearing *should* mean obeying! Then the Septuagint (3rd-century B.C. translation of the Hebrew to Greek) will interpret the Hebrew text to mean "ears you *prepared* for me." So the NT writer to the Hebrews, when he quotes this passage, will think that a

literary device called *synecdoche* is being used – the whole being represented by a part – hence, instead of just ears, he translates, “a *body* you have prepared for me.” Of course, he sees a profound Christological application here: this psalm is clearly **pointing to the incarnation** and how Jesus will put God’s true delight into practice, His will into action. What Jesus hears is God’s amazing lovingkindness and truth, His faithfulness and salvation (Ps. 40:9-10), which, in the true spirit of Ps. 40, He proceeds to announce to the world, even and especially as He’s being crucified!

3) Jesus is our paradigm in all things: He only had ears for His Father’s voice and will. He knew His mission was not primarily about religious observances that He was supposed to fulfill, but about **restoring relationship**. He knew His Father’s delight was not focused on sin offerings and sacrifices, but on that relationship of perfect love and loyalty between them, which He wanted to extend to His beloved creatures made in His image. So Jesus’ vocation was never legalistic in nature, but personal and relational. Sacrifice is a function of relationship; he made His sacrifice out of love – not to meet some forensic requirement, but in order to rescue our souls from the hands of the enemy (Lk. 11:21-22)! *This* was the great “substitution”: He chose to die at our hands instead of calling twelve legions of angels to deal with us according to our just deserts. He would sacrifice Himself for our sakes, letting us torture and murder Him, and **His response would be our atonement, His life the price of our rescue, His victory on that cross the means of our reconciliation**, because it was the *only way to defeat our enemy*: facing him down on his turf in that final showdown to the death. That’s how He dethroned the prince of this world and delivered us from his power. It’s what all those OT sacrifices were symbolizing – that God Himself would make the ultimate sacrifice, laying down *His own human life* in the face of our rebellion, personalizing our forgiveness in His Son, as none of those animal sacrifices could ever do! So sacrificing Himself wasn’t about fulfilling some legal requirement to compensate God for our failure to obey. Sacrificing Himself was about “greater love has no man than this: to lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13), in fact, even for us His enemies (Rom. 5:8). *That’s* our salvation, and when Jesus really has your ear, that’s all the motivation you’ll ever need for obedience in the Christian life.

Forgiveness is relational, not transactional; it’s personal, not legalistic. God’s forgiveness was not some kind of legal transaction between the Father and the Son, because our sin problem was not primarily about breaking God’s law, but about breaking covenant! We were **unfaithful in relationship**: we betrayed humanity’s best Friend! And He turned around and made that amazing sacrifice that saved the day for everybody! Receiving that gift is what confessing His name is all about! It was exactly what we were needing in our lives: someone who could deal with our guilt problem and stand up to the bully who was stomping us into the ground! And Jesus accomplished both with one enormous blow: Hebrews says with a single sacrifice for sins He perfected for all time those who were being sanctified (v. 14). And how did He do it? V. 18 makes it clear: “where sin has been forgiven, there’s no longer any offering for sin.” But you think it didn’t really look like Jesus was standing up to the bully? But more like Jesus was getting stomped? Look closer! You never defeat a bully on his own terms; you have to trap him at his own game, surprise and outsmart him, which is what Jesus was doing on the cross: by faith we are reinstated there in God’s favor, and the enemy no longer has anything to accuse us of! Satan never imagined Jesus would submit to all the horrors in the human heart and continue loving us; he never imagined Jesus would go through all that misery and still be so gracious, still believing in our redemption! Jesus was deliberately making His personal power available to us by reigning over all that junk in our lives! Out of love for us!

Conclusion: So why not tune your ear to this voice? Why not call on Him as Lord and King? We’re not saying there’s no place for sacrifice in your life! Just that it can’t be your first instinct. You need to have the right reason for sacrificing, like Jesus did. Jordan Peterson defines sacrifice as “giving up something of value in the present so that you can improve the future.” Often the things that stop us from moving forward in our Christian life are our attachments to present things that we should not still be attached to. So if you’re NOT moving forward in your spiritual growth, there’s a high probability that you have some ideas or behavior patterns or habits that you’re so in love with that you won’t let go of them. Like King Saul, fixated on his royal image, His popularity, His need to keep everything under his control. God didn’t have Saul’s ears or heart or attention, so he kept postponing maturity! As we come to this communion table this morning, would you make it an expression of your longing for maturity! Ask the Lord to dig the wax out of your ears – unstop them! – so that you can hear the One Voice that matters – and obey!