

Title: Does God Repent?  
Text: 1 Samuel 15  
Theme: God's foreknowledge and our responsibility  
Series: 1 Samuel  
Prop Stmt: God's Sovereignty, immutability and omniscience does not rob God of being able to be fully engaged in the moment and responsive to what happens.

In our study of 1 Samuel, we came to chapter 15 which is the account of Saul's disobedience to God and the confirming of God's warning that Saul would indeed lose the kingdom. The story line is straightforward, but the account itself raises a couple of questions that we need to address before we move on. Last Sunday we looked at the command of God to Saul to devote the Amalekites to destruction. This Sunday, I want to address the issue of: Does God repent? I am organizing this address on this topic with 3 points 1) What appears to be the problem? 2) How are we to understand this? 3) What are the implications?

### **1. What appears to be the problem?**

Read Text: 1 Samuel 15.11, 29, 35

A girl in our church was in her 1<sup>st</sup> year of college. The professor in her philosophy class asked the students who considered themselves to be Christian to raise their hands. There were several who did. The professor said that his goal was by the end of the semester to have none. He wanted to dismantle the Christian faith. It is passages like this, that are used to "prove" that the Bible contradicts itself. Since the Bible is not a reliable source of truth, truth has to come from somewhere else – like you. You are the source of truth for you.

That is not just the stated goal of certain professions, it is the wind of the culture and the air that we breathe. Ever since Genesis 2 we are tempted to believe the lie that life under God is awful. In order to be happy, we have to be freed from the tyrannical reign of a Supreme Being. The idea that God created you and therefore defines you and defines all reality, enrages those who try to demand their rights to define themselves and their own morality. If I say it, then it is. That appeals to our sinful natures. We all want to live as if we get to make the rules. And we are living with the results of this effort and it should be self-evident that it is not working. Kevin DeYoung tries to interact with some of the axioms that I call the "Thus saith our culture." Listen to the contradictory dogmatic statements of our culture and see if they fit together. He writes:

*"Gender is a social construct. Period.*

*At the same time, it's always good when women can break glass ceilings. We should celebrate all the firsts that we see women do because women are certainly not men.*

*By women, of course, I mean anyone who identifies as a woman, including people we used to know as men. Sex is a socially derived category that assigns certain physical differences and*

*then labels those differences as “male” or “female.” There are no immutable distinctions between men and women. We are all on a spectrum. We can all change.*

*Unless we are talking about sexual desires. Coming out as gay or lesbian is something we should all be proud of because people can’t change the way they were born. In fact, it should be illegal for doctors and counselors and religious leaders to try to change people who were born a certain way.*

*But some people definitely should be able to change the way they were born in terms of gender—and doctors and counselors and religious leaders should do everything they can to encourage this change. Sometimes our bodies don’t align with our true selves. Never forget: Your self-identity is your genuine identity.*

*Except when it comes to race and ethnicity. You should never claim an ethnic or racial identity that isn’t yours. Be very careful what you eat and what you wear; you can’t just appropriate someone else’s culture.*

*But you can appropriate someone else’s gender. Or go with no gender at all. We have all been socialized into a gender system that tells us how to think and how to act. The sooner we do away with the notion of a gender binary altogether, the better.*

*But just remember, women have been held back by the evils of patriarchy. Women are oppressed; men are oppressors. That’s a fact.*

*Not that “women” or “men” are anything more than fluid and culturally conditioned modes of self-identification. Obviously.*

*Still, we shouldn’t do away with women’s sports. It’s essential that every college have as many sports for women as for men. We must have equal opportunities for both sexes. Sports for women, sports for men. Those categories are absolutely critical.*

*But if men want to participate as women in women’s sports, that’s also really good because the sexual differences upon which the existence of men’s and women’s sports rest—those differences don’t really exist.*

*But don’t get me wrong, women have it a lot harder than men, trying to balance being a mom and pursuing a career.*

*Just to be clear, though, men can also be mothers. Birthing persons come in all genders. Not that gender is anything more than what our culture tells us it is. Don’t forget that.*

*And don’t forget that women get paid less than men in the workplace. And women are underrepresented in Fortune 500 companies. And we’ve still never had a woman president.*

*Or at least not a president that we took to be a woman. It's hard to say what a woman is without biologists weighing in.*

*Not that being a man or a woman is rooted in biology. That goes without saying.*

*Well, whatever a woman is, we know this much for sure: Women have a right to do what they want with their bodies. Reproductive freedom is the most important women's issue of our time.*

*But I'm not saying that only women reproduce. Men can menstruate too.*

*Being a woman has many challenges. That's why it's important we protect women and make them feel safe.*

*Except in restrooms, in locker rooms, and in prisons. Then it's OK for women to feel unsafe around men because everyone knows those men are really women.*

*It's also worth remembering that men and women don't have to look a certain way. But if a man becomes a woman, he should definitely pick a woman's name and try not to look masculine anymore.*

*I mean, if there were such a thing as masculinity. Because obviously there isn't.*

*But sometimes there is, and then it's completely toxic.*

*Here's the bottom line: Gender is a social construct. Period.*

*I know, it's complicated. But don't worry, the less you think about it the more it will make sense."<sup>1</sup>*

There are what appear to be some interpretative challenges with God's Word. But, are there reasonable ways to understand them? Yes! Is there a reasonable way to understand "Thus saith the culture?" No!

## **2. How are we to understand this?**

The Hebrew word that is translated *relent* (*nacham*) has a semantic range (range of meaning) that can mean to feel regret, to be sorrowful, and it can mean to change one's mind and direction. In this text, we see how the difference meanings of that word are used. In verses 11 and 35 we read that God feels regret. He feels the disappointment and sorrow over Saul's choices and their consequences. However, the regret that God has is not regret like we have (v.29). "He is not a man, that he should have regret." His regret is not like our regret. I regret taking a particular route because there is a wreck that causes me to get stuck in traffic. "Had I

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wng.org/opinions/we-live-in-confusing-times-1648558031>

known” I would not have done that. My regret is based on not having the right information. That is never the case with God. His regret is his ability to respond emotionally to Saul, even though Saul’s decisions do not surprise God. Obviously, the writer of 1 Samuel does not see this as a tension. This text is not a “gotcha chapter.” In fact, this is not too difficult to resolve and it is important to consider.

**A. Remember the Creator/creation distinction.**

I talked about this a bit last week. The fact that God is from everlasting means that he never had a beginning. He is infinite. We (the creation) have a beginning. We exist in time, space and mass. God created time, space and mass. He existed outside of it, and he inhabits eternity and everything in it. Therefore, there are going to be some things that are true about God that my bandwidth is not big enough to grasp. And, God uses the limits of our vocabulary in order to communicate aspects of those truths to us. God uses words and ideas that we are familiar with to help us grasp at some level what is going with God. God is omniscient. He knows everything. God cannot learn in the sense of gaining new information. At the same time, God can still be in the moment.

**B. Remember that God’s attributes are never in conflict.**

The fact that God is Sovereign and has ordained all things does not mean that we are not responsible for our “free” choices. God also responds to the decisions that we make and he responds to the prayers that we pray, even though when we pray, we are not giving God information that he isn’t already aware of. One of my favorite examples of this is when Jesus weeps at the tomb of Lazarus. Why does Jesus weep when Jesus knows full well that he is about to raise the guy from the dead, amaze everyone in the town and delight to no end the hearts of Mary and Martha? He weeps because his omniscience and omnipotence does not rob him of the ability to be in the moment. That is huge! God knows exactly how he is going to leverage your difficulties for his glory and your good, and yet, at the same time, he is able to feel our burdens, carry our sorrows and sympathize with our weaknesses. God knows what is going to happen. He is able to be in the moment. And he is able to fully respond in the moment in a way that is fitting and in a way that he knew he would. The fact that God responds, may appear to be a change of mind, but a change of affection (heart – emotional response) is simply God’s consistent character faithfully responding to either the rebellion or repentance of people.

**C. Remember that God has given us a grid in order to understand this.**

God forgives those who repent and judges those who rebel. That is the fixed, North Star position of God. God not only forgives those who repent and judges those who rebel, he loves to forgive for those who repent and has no delight in those who rebel. Therefore, God is quick to forgive and reluctant to judge. I like to say that judgment is on a long fuse, while his mercy is a hair trigger. Again, there is a point that a person can cross where God is finally done. But God is not anxious to get there. That is the fixed position of God and therefore, we are to understand his warnings in view of that fixed position.

Jeremiah 18.7-10 (screen)

1) These are conditional warnings given to motivate repentance.

The prophetic warnings from God are intended to form the morality of people, more than simply foretell the future. This explanation of the conditional warnings of God is repeated in Jeremiah 26.3, 13 and 19. It is also stated again in Ezekiel 18, where God says that he does not get any pleasure in the death of the wicked. I want people to repent and turn back to me. That is the posture of God. That is the North Star position of God. I love to forgive and want to forgive and want to give people multiple chances to repent. However, there comes a time, when a person refuses to repent and then the warnings that were made come true.

2) There are conditional blessings given to encourage faithfulness.

If someone uses the promises of God as an excuse to rebel against God, then God warns that the promise is not given to gloss over sin, but to encourage faithfulness.

Every example in the OT of God relenting is God relenting of the judgment that he said he would bring because the people repented or God relents of the blessing that he said because people are presumptuous, arrogant and rebellious. It is not God being fickle and unpredictable. God is predictable. His mercy is astoundingly predictable for those who repent and his judgment is predictable for those who do not.

Case study: Jonah preached a message of judgment. There was no hope in his message at all. In fact, Jonah didn't even tell the people to repent. He just told them that judgment was coming in 40 days and the Ninevites repented and God "relented" and did not judge them and Jonah was ticked off and said, "I knew this would happen! I preach, they repent and you relented of the judgment because you are so stinking merciful!" (my paraphrase) Did God relent his judgment because the Ninevites surprised him and they did something that he did not anticipate or know would happen? No! The warning was conditional and even Jonah knew that. He knew it so much that he didn't want to go and preach there because he feared that this would happen.

**D. How this applies to Saul.**

Saul was not plan A and now God has to go with someone else as plan B. What comes before 1 Samuel? Ruth! The story of Ruth ends with these words. "*Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.*" Roughly 80 years ago, God ordained all of this to take place because he was bringing David into the picture. But, before God gave Israel a king after his heart, he gave the people the kind of king they wanted. He did it to teach them a lesson, but he was still personally engaged in it. Parents, you get this. You warn your kid that if you do this, then you will lose this privilege and you really want them to have this privilege or opportunity. One of my kids did not get up on time on the morning that youth group was going to Cedar Point and as a result, when we got to the church, the buses were long gone. And I could have

said, "Hey, I told you this would happen." And went home. My kid was crushed and I hated the consequence. And in this case, I think that he/she got it, so we took off and tried to catch the busses and we did. That is the heart of God here.

There is emotional regret and disappointment in Saul even though God knew that Saul was going to be like this. It is similar to the language in Genesis 6.6 which states that "*the LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*" His plan to have a kingdom for his Son was never in jeopardy, but the Sovereignty of God did not rob God of being completely responsive to what mankind was doing. His warning was a motivation for repentance that no one, but Noah paid any attention to. It is the same idea in Exodus 32 when God tells Moses to step back because God is going to wipe out Israel for her rebellion, rejection and replacing of God with a golden calf. God is genuinely remorseful in the moment and his warning is the trigger for Moses to intercede and God responds to the prayer of Moses. However, the regret that God feels is not like our regret. God doesn't have regret like we have regret (v.29) because God never looks back at a decision that he made and realizes in hindsight that it was a bad decision. God is incapable of making a bad decision. But God is capable of feeling sorrow of the impact of his decisions when they are rejected.

Saul is given warnings that are intended to drive him to repentance. I believe that is what happens in 1 Samuel 13.13. Samuel tells Saul that in view of his failure to obey God that Saul's kingdom would not continue and that God has sought out his replacement. How would Saul respond? I believe that Saul still had the opportunity to actually repent. I think that the warning in 1 Samuel 13 is given to motivate Saul to repentance and to follow God faithfully. After all, in 1 Samuel 15, God gives him another chance. The Word of the Lord came to him through Samuel with clear orders. God was not done with Saul. Saul had another opportunity. God is merciful. But Saul did not obey and while God gives warnings for the purpose of motivating repentance, there comes a time when the warnings no longer have hope. I believe that here, Saul crosses the line. In chapter 16, the Spirit of God withdraws from Saul and it is a slow-motion train wreck from here to the end of the book.

God warned Saul so Saul would repent. Saul did not repent, therefore God's warning stood. (v.29) God is serious about his warnings. If they do not generate repentance then they will confirm judgment. But, even when God carries out his warnings, he has no delight in it (v.35).

### **3. What are the implications?**

#### **A. I need to humbly consider how I respond to God's warnings and promises.**

We each need the Spirit's help to realize how sincere God is with his promises of mercy, because so many of us are tempted to disbelieve God's grace. And we need the Spirit's help to realize how sincere God is with his warnings because the nature of sin our blinds us to the reality of our condition. If we wait until we are caught in sin to repent of it, is difficult even for us to discern if we are truly sorry for the sin or its consequences. Saul, just own it, man! Isn't that what we want to say? Just own it and mercy will come running. But when you excuse,

blame-shift, act like you are the victim, and try to manage the outcome and your image, then you forfeit the mercy and you end up in places so dark and so far away that it is hard to comprehend. We see it in Saul. Can you see it in yourself?

**B. This helps me understand the garden and the cross.**

Jesus knew that he was going to die and he knew that he would rise again. He knew that the joy that was before him, was going to be worth the sorrow that he experienced (Hebrews 12.2). However, that did not make the sorrow, less intense. When Christ took upon himself our griefs, our sorrows, our repulsive sin, our crushing guilt, our shame, it nearly killed him. His agony in the garden was intense. His sense of rejection and suffering of judgment was real. And through it all, he was in the moment. He did not use his authority as God to minimize his experience as man. He suffered completely for our sin. It was real. It was costly. And it was complete.

**C. This helps me understand his ministry for me now.**

What is Jesus doing now? He is feeling my weaknesses and interceding for me. He is in the moment with me. He knows the temptations we feel because he felt them fully, yet never surrendered to them. Therefore, we can come boldly to God knowing that we have an advocate. We have a faithful and merciful high priest who pours out grace in our time of need. His ability to be in the moment, never robs him of his authority and power as God. What a Savior!