

THE PLEASURE OF GOD IN OBEDIENCE

by, *John Piper*

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"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 hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king" (1 Samuel 15:22-23).

The good news is that God is a mountain spring and not a watering trough. His overflowing fullness is magnified and OUR longings are satisfied in the simple acts of thirsting and drinking.

When we turn from all the pop and fizz and bottled beverage of the world and get down on our knees beside the mountain spring of God's living water, we honor Him and glorify Him and magnify Him as the only source of lasting joy. And in the very act of magnifying Him we satisfy ourselves because this is the water we were made to live by.

This is the best news in all the world – that God is the kind of God whose zeal to glorify His name comes to fullest expression in an act which satisfies the longings of my heart. This means that whenever I am most thirsty and most desperate and most in need of help I can encourage my soul not only with the truth that there is a merciful impulse in the heart of God but also with the truth that the source and power of that impulse is the zeal of God to act for the sake of His own name.

I can pray with the psalmists, *"For Thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great" (25:11). "Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name; and deliver us" (79:9). "For Thy name's sake...lead me and guide me" (31:3).*

Because God loves the glory of His own name, He also takes pleasure in those who hope in His love and those who express their hope in prayer. When you hope in God you glorify God as the fountain of deep and lasting joy. When the upright pray they simply give expression to that God-glorifying hope. We now go one step further and say that obedience to God makes that God-glorifying hope visible and proves that it is real in our lives.

Our text is 1 Samuel 15:22, *"Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?"* The answer is clearly NO. The Lord delights far more in obedience than in the performance of worship ceremonies without it.

There are two questions that I want to try to answer with you. 1) Why does God delight in obedience? And 2) Is this good news? Is it good news to hear that what pleases God is obedience, or is it just a discouraging burden?

Before we focus on these two questions let's be sure we have the setting clear in our minds.

When Israel came out of Egypt and passed through the wilderness the Amalekites attacked them. We read about it in Exodus 17:8-16. God gave the Israelites victory, but the evil was never forgotten. In Deuteronomy 25:17-19 God said,

"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way, when you were faint and weary, and cut off at your rear all who lagged behind you; and he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies round about, in the land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget."

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Finally the iniquity of the Amalekites is complete and the Lord commands Saul, the first king of Israel, to execute the sentence against the Amalekites. The command is given in 1 Samuel 15:2-3:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way, when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.'"

So Saul gathered his army and went against the city of Amalek. He warned the Kenites to clear out if they wanted to spare their lives (v. 6). And then he destroyed the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, east of Egypt.

But verse 9 describes the fatal disobedience of Saul. *"Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed."*

The Lord saw this disobedience and He repented that He had made Saul king (v. 11). Just a brief word in passing about this divine "repentance."

It says in verse 29 of this chapter that *"the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent; for He is not a man, that He should repent."* I take this to mean that the repenting which God does (for example in v. 11) is not like the repenting man does. In fact, it is so different it is in one sense not a repenting at all, as verse 29 says. It is not based on ignorance or deceit. The repenting of God is the turning of his heart in a new direction but not one that was unforeseen. God does not repent because He is caught off guard by some turn of events. That would indeed be like man. But the Glory of Israel is not a man that He should repent. When the Bible says that God repents, it means that He expresses a different attitude about something than He expressed before, not because any turn of events was unexpected, but because the turn of events makes a different attitude more fitting to express now than it would have been before.

Samuel is angry at this turn in God's attitude toward Saul and he cries out to God all night (v. 11, see also 12:23). The result of his night of prayer is a firm resolve to do what God says. He rises early in the morning and finds out (15:12) that Saul has gone to Carmel, set up a monument for himself and proceeded to Gilgal where he was first made king (11:15).

So Samuel goes to meet Saul, and (in 15:13) Saul says, *"Blessed be you to the Lord; I have performed the commandment of the Lord."* Samuel asks (in v. 14) what the sound of bleating sheep and lowing oxen means if Saul really destroyed everything the way God said.

Then (in v. 15) Saul blames it on the people: *"They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep..."* But nothing Saul says will work now. He has disobeyed the commandment of the Lord and he finally admits it in verse 24: *"I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words."*

Now our first question is this: Why is God so displeased with disobedience? Or positively, why does God take so much delight in obedience?

Why God Delights In Obedience And Hates Disobedience

I see at least five reasons in this story why God hates disobedience and takes pleasure in obedience. I'll mention them in the order from least to most serious, as it seems to me.

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1. Disobedience shows a misplacement of fear.

Notice verse 24: *"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.'"*

Why did Saul obey the people instead of God? Because he feared the people instead of God. He feared the human consequences of obedience more than he feared the divine consequences of sin. He feared the displeasure of the people more than the displeasure of God. And that is a great insult to God. Samuel had said twice to Saul and the people in 12:14 and 24, *"Fear the Lord, and serve Him faithfully with all your heart."* But now the leader himself has feared man and turned away from following God (1 Sam. 15:11).

2. Disobedience shows a misplacement of pleasure.

Saul tried to persuade Samuel that it was a noble intention that led him to disobey God and keep the best sheep and oxen alive (v. 21). He said they wanted to sacrifice these to the Lord in Gilgal. But the Lord had given Samuel insight into the true motive of Saul and the people. We see it in his words in verse 19:

"Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you swoop on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?"

They swooped down on the spoil like hungry birds eager to fill their bellies. This word, "swoop on" is used back in 14:32 to describe how the people swooped down on the spoil when the Philistines were defeated. It says, *"The people flew upon the spoil, and took sheep and oxen and calves, and slew them on the ground; and the people ate them with the blood."*

When Samuel says in 15:19, *"Why did you swoop on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?"* he implies that the people were driven by an overweening desire for the pleasures of all that meat. (Remember, those who sacrifice get to eat the meat.) Their pleasure was misplaced. It should have been in God. But they delighted more in the meat of sheep and oxen than they did in the smile and fellowship of God. This is, of course, a great insult to God, and therefore very displeasing in His sight.

3. Disobedience shows a misplacement of praise.

When Saul had defeated the Amalekites the first thing he did was build himself a monument. Verse 12: *"It was told Samuel, Saul came to Carmel and behold, he set up a monument for himself."* Evidently Saul was more interested in getting a name for himself than in making a name for God through careful obedience to His word. He had misplaced praise from God to himself.

This sin becomes even worse when you read verses 17-19:

"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, 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?"

Back in 9:21 Saul had seemed amazed that God would choose him to be king over Israel when he was from the smallest tribe, the tribe of Benjamin, and from the least of the families of his tribe. And he should have been amazed! If he wanted honor he should have been amazed and satisfied with the honor that God had given him. This is Samuel's point here in verse 17 – why are you driven by a lust for human glory when God has in fact given

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you a glorious privilege as the head of the tribes of Israel and the anointed king of God's people?

But Saul was not content with the glory of God and the honor of being His chosen king. He wanted his own glory and his own praise. And the submissive path of obedience does not offer that kind of praise and glory. And so he did things his own way.

4. Disobedience is as the sin of divination.

Now we are on explicit textual ground. This is the very reason Samuel gives why disobedience is displeasing to God in 15:22-23.

"Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination."

God had put divination in the same category with horrible things that He hates in Deuteronomy 18:10-12: *"There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord..."*

Why is rebellion and disobedience as the sin of divination? Divination is seeking to know what to do in a way that ignores the word and counsel of God. And that is exactly what disobedience is based on. God says one thing, and we say, I think that I will consult another source of wisdom – namely, what? MYSELF! Disobedience of God's word puts my own wisdom in the place of God's and thus insults God as the only sure and reliable source of wisdom.

5. Disobedience is idolatry.

This is what Samuel says in the last half of verse 23: *"For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry."*

When God says one thing and we consult the little wizard of our own wisdom and then stubbornly choose to go our own way we are idolaters. We have not only chosen to consult ourselves as an alternative to God, and thus become guilty of divination, but we go beyond that and actually esteem the direction of our own mind over God's direction and become guilty of idolatry. And worst of all, the idol is our own self.

So it stands to reason that God will be displeased with disobedience because at every point it is an attack on His glory.

- It puts the fear of man in the place of the fear of God.
- It elevates pleasure in things above pleasure in God.
- It seeks a name for itself instead of a name for God.
- It consults the wisdom of self instead of being satisfied with the will of God.
- And it sets more value on the dictates of self than on the dictates of God and thus attempts to dethrone God by giving allegiance to the idol of the human will.

But obedience, being the exact opposite, in all these things enthrones and honors God. And therefore God has pleasure in obedience.

Is It Good News That God Delights In Obedience?

Now we turn to the second question we raised at the beginning: Is this good news? Is it good news to learn that God takes delight in obedience, or is that just another burden?

I think it is good news. And there are at least six reasons why I do. We only have time to mention them briefly.

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1. God's delight in obedience is good news because it means He is praiseworthy and reliable. If He did not delight in obedience He would be a living contradiction: loving His glory above all things and yet not pleased by the acts that make His glory known. He would be two-faced and double-tongued. His beauty would vanish and with it all our delight! And He would be unreliable because you can't trust a God whose values are so fickle that He exalts Himself one minute and approves of insults the next.

2. God's delight in obedience is good news because it guarantees the promise that someday the glory of God will indeed fill the earth the way the waters cover the sea. If God were indifferent to disobedience there would be no certainty that the age to come would be rid of all God-dishonoring behavior. But because He hates disobedience and loves obedience we can be sure that our longing for a world full of God's glory will surely come to pass.

3. God's delight in obedience is good news because it shows that God's grace is a glorious power and not just a flimsy tolerance of sin. The glory of God's grace is seen not just in the fact that God overlooks the sins of believers but also in the fact that it gradually and finally and victoriously eradicates those sins. If God did not delight in obedience, the glory of sovereign grace might never be seen in its sin-conquering power.

4. God's delight in obedience is good news because His commandments are not too hard. They are only as hard to obey as His glory is hard to cherish and His promises are hard to believe. Deuteronomy 30:11 says, *"This commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you."* And 1 John 5:3 says, *"This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."*

5. God's delight in obedience is good news because everything God commands us is for our good. And so what God is really delighting in when He delights in our obedience is our deep and lasting joy. Deuteronomy 10:12-13 says, *"And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I command you this day for your good?"*

6. And finally God's delight in obedience is good news because the obedience He loves is the obedience of faith. And faith means banking our hope on the mercy of God. And mercy means that our obedience does not have to be perfect; it only has to be penitent. *"If you confess your sins, He is faithful and just, and will forgive your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

God is still a mountain spring and not a watering trough. Obedience is not a bucket brigade to fill His need. Obedience is the irrepressible "public relations" efforts of those who have tasted and seen that the Lord is good.

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