

"TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE."

– 1 SAM. 15:13-23. – JULY 26. –

THE words of our caption, the Golden Text of this lesson, are the Lord's rebuke to King Saul by the prophet Samuel, in connection with the announcement that Saul, by disobedience to the heavenly King, had forfeited his privilege of representing him on the throne of Israel. The rending of the kingdom from the hands of Saul meant more than his own displacement: it meant that his son and successive heirs should not continue the Lord's representatives in the kingdom.

For a number of years Saul seems to have prospered fairly on the throne, and the people of Israel prospered with him. It was several years after his coronation, noted in our last lesson, that his first severe testing in respect to his obedience to the heavenly king came to him. At that time a war was instituted against the Philistines, who had been encroaching upon the Israelites to the east. Saul waited several days for Samuel to come to offer the sacrifices of the Lord previous to the beginning of the battle. Samuel was providentially hindered, and Saul, after waiting for a time, offered the sacrifices to the Lord himself, contrary to the arrangement, and then proceeded to battle, the result being a considerable defeat to his forces. Apparently he was not evilly intentioned, but lacked proper respect and reverence for the Lord and his arrangements. This may be said to have been the beginning of Saul's rejection by the Lord. Samuel's words were, "Thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord...now thy kingdom shall not continue. The Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart."

The lesson of this incident is as applicable to spiritual Israel today as it was to Saul and natural Israel in their day – "Obedience is better than sacrifice." In how many ways we may see expressions of this same condition amongst many who profess the Lord's name today! Many are "workers" in the Lord's cause in the various denominations

of Christendom, and many are their sacrifices of time and money; but inasmuch as they are not obedient to the Lord, they fail of the blessing they would have, and, indeed, in a considerable measure cut themselves off from greater privileges and opportunities. Yea, many of them, we fear, are cutting themselves off from the kingdom, from glory, and from joint-heirship with the Lord in that Kingdom. We should learn from this lesson, given us in Saul's experience, that our heavenly Father wishes us to be very attentive to his Word, and not to think for a moment that we can improve thereon, or that times and circumstances will alter the propriety of our obedience to him. Had Saul been obedient and the results disastrous, he would at least have had a clear conscience; he could have said that he had been obedient to God and was not responsible for the results. But if [R3224 : page 219] he had been obedient God would have been responsible for the results, and we know that divine power would have brought about the proper results. Let us apply the lesson to ourselves in respect to our daily conduct in every matter of life: let us hearken to the Word of the Lord and keep close to it, not fearing the results, but having faith that he who keeps us never slumbers nor sleeps and is too wise to err, as well as competent to meet every emergency that could possibly come upon us as a result of our obedience. How many of the Lord's people in Babylon would be blessed by following the instructions of this lesson. They have said to themselves, time and again, "I see that present institutions and arrangements are contrary to the simplicity of the Gospel of Christ and the practice of the early Church, but what can I do? I am identified with this system and am engaged in sacrificing for its upbuilding; if now I withdraw my hand it will mean more or less disaster. I wish I were free from human institutions and that I had my hands filled with the Lord's work along the lines of his Word, but I cannot let go, for necessity seems to be upon me. I must perform a sacrifice and this seems to be my most convenient place for so doing." The Lord is not pleased with such argument. His message to us is that to obey is better than sacrifice: leave the matter of your sacrifice in my hands; – it will amount to nothing anyway unless I accept it, and I accept sacrifices only from those who are first obedient. "Come out of

her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and receive not of her plagues."

Although the Lord announced the rejection of Saul, the prediction was evidently not executed for several years after; perhaps ten years the decree stood, as it were a dead letter, for quite possibly Saul was properly exercised by the rejection and became more attentive and more obedient to the divine will, and David, who was probably anointed about this time, was not yet sufficiently developed to be the Lord's representative in Saul's stead.

Saul's next severe trial was in connection with the Amalekites – a nomadic and fierce people who, on several occasions, had done injury to the people of Israel. In sending the message the Lord gave special instructions that the Amalekites should be destroyed, saying, "Utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." Without mentioning other of Amalek's transgressions, he specifies here that the destruction is on account of Amalek's opposition to Israel in the way when they came up out of the land of Egypt several centuries previously.

This narrative is seized upon by sceptics to prove either one or the other of two things: **(1)** That God sent no such message; that it was either the imagination of Samuel or Saul or of some one writing fictitiously in their names. **(2)** If it were accepted as being the command of the Lord, it would prove him to be a monster – lacking in justice, pity, sympathy and love – that he should thus command the wholesale slaughter of human creatures and dumb animals. There is but one answer to make to this matter, and it should be and is satisfactory to all who understand it. It is this: –

First, the slaughter of the Amalekites did not mean, as is usually inferred, that they, being admittedly wicked, went forth to eternal torture. Death had the same meaning to the Amalekites that it had to their cattle – a termination of whatever was desirable in the present

life, and the desirable things in the present life were probably not more to the Amalekites than to their herds. The Amalekites suffered far less, slaughtered by the sword, than if they had been made the subjects of famine or a pestilence, and had died of hunger or disease – the ending of life with little pain to themselves or trouble to others – the ending of comparatively uneventful lives anyway. They all went down to the great prison-house of death – *sheol, hades* – the tomb. God foreknew and had already arranged a great redemption not only for them but for all mankind, and that redemption, secured by the great sacrifice of Christ centuries after their death – will by and by secure to them release from their imprisonment, an awakening from the sleep of death. They will be amongst the class mentioned by our Lord, saying, "All that are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of man and shall come forth." They will come forth under much more favorable conditions, to learn of the grace of God in Christ and to be amongst the families of the earth who shall be blessed by the seed of Abraham, spiritual Israel. They will not be in the chief or life resurrection, but will be awakened unto the privileges of restitution by judgments, corrections in righteousness.

Second, it is quite true of the Amalekites, as it was true of the Amorites, that they would have been cut off sooner but that their iniquity was not yet come to the full. One lesson to be learned from this is that even though those nations may not be under special covenant relationship with God, there is a certain divine supervision – that their iniquities go not too far, and that, when they have reached their full, punishment is to be expected. We know not the particulars respecting the Amalekites, but, knowing the character of God and his justice and mercy, we may be sure that, in some particular sense of the word, their iniquities had come to the full and running-over measure before this order **[R3225 : page 220]** for their execution was committed to King Saul.

Saul's error in this trial was his failure to carry out the command of the Lord explicitly. He slew all the Amalekites, old and young,

except the king, whom he kept alive, possibly thinking to exhibit him in some kind of a triumphal display; but as for the flocks and herds, he consented with his people to spare all that were goodly and desirable – "The best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings and of the lambs, and all that was good,...but everything that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly." (Vs. 9.)

It is at this juncture that the Prophet Samuel came to him and the colloquy of our lesson ensued. The general narrative – the indignation of Samuel and the Lord's positive announcement – clearly indicates that Saul had not misunderstood his instructions, but had with considerable deliberation violated them. Consequently we must understand his words addressed to Samuel to have been to a considerable extent hypocritical. He first salutes the Prophet with blessings, and assurances that he had performed the commandment of the Lord successfully. But immediately the prophet replies, "What means, then, this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" The prophet understood at once that the work of destruction had not been complete, that Saul and the people of Israel were anxious to take a spoil. This was wholly contrary to the Lord's direction. They were not to destroy their enemies to their own advantage, but simply to act as the agents of the Lord in thus executing his decree, the sentence of justice. They were not to take booty and thus to become like the nations about them – a robber nation, profiting by the troubles they inflicted upon the enemies of the Lord. This is in full accord with the Lord's character and the foregoing explanation of it.

Saul, seeing that the prophet was not likely to sympathize in any measure with his violation of the command, began hypocritically to represent that all those fine sheep and oxen had been captured from the enemy to be sacrificed to the Lord, and incidentally this would have meant a great feast for the Israelites, because the flesh of animals so sacrificed was eaten by them. Samuel stopped the king in his explanation and told him of the Lord's words of the night preceding

(which, in Jewish counting, would be "this night," because their day began in the evening). The message of the Lord calls attention to the fact that Saul was humble when he was chosen as the Lord's representative upon the throne, and at that time he was very willing to give strict obedience to the heavenly voice, but the intimation is that now he had grown more self-confident and therefore less reliant upon the Lord and less attentive to the Lord's commands; getting into the wrong attitude of heart, he had failed to properly execute a very plain specific direction. Knowingly and in violation of the Lord's command he had the spoil separated, and spared the best when the Lord had commanded the reverse.

If, in applying the principles of this to the Lord's people of today, we think of the Amalekites as representing sins and of how the Lord's command comes to us to put away sin entirely, utterly destroying everything that is related to it, we may get a good lesson. Like Saul, many are disposed to destroy the vilest things connected with sin, but to save alive the king sin, merely making him a prisoner. Many are disposed, too, to seek out the things which they realize to be condemned of the Lord to destruction – such things as would be choice and desirable to their taste – and frequently, like Saul, they claim that even these sins of the less obnoxious kind are held on to for the purpose of sacrificing them and thus honoring God. How deceitful above all things is the heart! How necessary it is that all who would be in accord with the Lord should be thoroughly true-hearted, thoroughly sincere, and that under the Lord's direction we should seek to take away the life of every sinful principle, evil teaching, evil doctrines, evil engagements, unholy words and thoughts and deeds.

Saul sought to defend his course, to put as good a face upon the matter as possible and to lay the responsibility for the saving of the spoil for the sacrifice upon the hosts of Israel, who, with himself, were so desirous of offering sacrifices to the Lord. Samuel's answer is the pith of this lesson and contains its Golden Text. He clearly points out to Saul what the latter should have known, and what all should

recognize, namely, that offering sacrifices is far less pleasing to the Lord than obedience to his Word. No one could offer an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord unless obedient in his heart and unless the sacrifice represented that obedience. So with the Lord's people today. It is not so much of ill-gotten wealth that we may sacrifice to the Lord; it is not so much the proceeds acquired directly or indirectly by wrong doing that we may sacrifice acceptably. Our sacrifice must be from the heart, and, first of all, must be the will. He who gives his will, his heart, to the Lord, gives all; he who gives not his will, who comes not in obedience of heart unto the Lord, can offer no sacrifice to the Lord that could be acceptable. "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice," is a lesson which should be deeply engraved upon the hearts of all the sanctified in Christ Jesus. To have the spirit of obedience is necessary, too, and whoever has the spirit of obedience will not only obey the divine will, but will seek to know the divine will more and more that he may obey it. It is of this class that the **[R3225 : page 221]** Scriptures declare, "His word was found and I did eat it;" and again, in the words of our Lord, "I delight to do thy will, oh my God; thy law is written in my heart."

Saul had been very diligent in his opposition to witchcraft and idolatry throughout the land of Israel, and in so doing was accomplishing a good work in accord with the divine plan, the divine will; but the prophet calls his attention to the fact that his energy in such matters would not prove an offset to his deliberate wilful neglect of the divine injunction. The Lord's commands against sin and every evil thing are to be executed to the very letter, no matter how highly exalted the sin may be in dignity and place, and no matter how precious or valuable or desirable or toothsome the sin may be to our fallen natures. Though it be as dear as a right hand or as a right eye, there is no course open to the Lord's followers but to be obedient – even unto death.

Although fully rejected, Saul's removal was not yet due. Samuel associated himself with him in a public sacrifice, commemorating the

victory over the Amalekites, and on this occasion he slew Agag with his own hand – departing then to his own home. He never afterward saw Saul, yet the Scriptures declare, "Nevertheless, Samuel mourned for Saul" – thus again showing us the beauty and strength of his character. He was ready to do the command of the Lord in any and every particular, yet was not without a feeling of compassion for those who were out of the way; – not a compassion which would make them his friends and lead him to cooperate with them in their wrong course, but a compassion which would have been glad to have cooperated with them at any time in a righteous course.

