

GREAT OPPORTUNITIES MISUSED.

– 1 SAM. 31:1-13. – *SEPTEMBER 6.* –

Golden Text: – "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man; but the end thereof are the ways of death." – Prov. 14:12.

KING SAUL'S life as a whole was a blunder and a failure. It opened with grand possibilities and opportunities under divine favor and the love and adoration of his countrymen. Not only his personal qualities were in many respects estimable, but even his physical proportions – head and shoulders above his fellows, goodly to look upon, and attractive to his people – had added to his influence. Yet he failed. A valuable lesson may be drawn by each of us from the causes of his failure. A contemporary sums up his case thus:

"Saul had many noble and lovable qualities, such as bravery, promptitude – in his earlier days modesty and generosity. All these he had by nature, but there is no sign that he ever sought to cultivate his moral character or to win any grace that did not come naturally to him; nor is there any reason to suppose that religion had ever had any strong hold upon him. From the baleful influence of his selfishness, as before some hot poison-wind, all the flowers of good dispositions were burned up, and the bad stimulated to growth. His earlier virtues disappeared and passed into their opposites. Modesty became arrogance, and a long course of indulgence in self-will developed cruelty, gloomy suspicion and passionate anger, and left him the victim and slave of his own causeless hate. He who rebels against God mars his own character. The miserable last years of Saul, haunted and hunted as by a demon by his own indulged and swollen rebellion and unsleeping suspicion, are an example of the sorrows that ever dog sin; and, as he fell by his own sword in his final battle at Gilboa, the terrible saying recurs to our memory: 'He that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.'"

Saul's difficulty, which led to all this disaster, was his selfishness – and he was not unusually selfish either. The great majority of mankind are equally selfish – self-willed; and the great majority, like him, make a failure of whatever possibilities were before them at the first. As David's career illustrates the wisdom and advantage of an early consecration to the will of the Lord, and the blessing which must surely attend such a course – even though those blessings be accompanied with trials and difficulties – so Saul's course in a general way illustrates the error of those who measurably ignore the Lord and attempt to direct their own paths. Such will surely find themselves misled by their selfish ambitions as Saul was by his. Saul's two special transgressions were: (1) his offering of sacrifice, which, according to divine arrangement, he had no right to offer (1 Sam. 13:1-14); (2) his disobedience of another direct command of the Lord, as recorded in 1 Sam. 15:1-13. It may be argued that King David also erred and did contrary to the Lord's will on several occasions, but we are to notice the wide difference between these two characters, in that David's heart was apparently always loyal to the Lord, and that when overtaken in a fault his sorrow therefor was sincere and led to greater carefulness in the future. With Saul, on the contrary, the difficulty seems to have been with the heart – that at heart he was not submissive to the Lord's will but was guided by his own will, and merely repented and apologized through fear of consequences and not from sorrow at having deviated from the Lord's way.

Herein we may note a great difference between people nominally the Lord's today: The truly consecrated may stumble, may err, but at heart they are ever loyal to the Lord and wish to serve and please him. These are spiritual Israelites indeed, and the blessing of the Lord is upon them. The other class professes to be the Lord's people, but at heart are far from him, and merely draw nigh with their lips and outward ceremonies. They have neither part nor lot **[R3240 : page 351]** with the others, and will surely reap the results of their own self-will so far as any opportunities under the present call are concerned. Another writer has well said:

"When Saul forsook God there necessarily was a separation between him and God; and an evil spirit took possession of his heart. We see no sign of God's doing anything direct to hasten Saul's doom. He was left to work out the natural results of an evil heart, and a life guided by passion and selfishness, without the help and direction of God. He spent his time in hunting David instead of overcoming his enemies. His kingdom was thus neglected, his people discontented, many of his best men abandoned him and went over to David, and together were driven into the enemies' country. His army lost courage, and in the last great battle he was weakened and worn by spending the night in consulting a witch instead of preparing for his work. So that he perished miserably by suicide at last. 'He ate of the fruit of his own way, and was filled with his own devices.'" – Prov. 1:3.

Our lesson concerns the closing days of Saul's experiences. The Philistines with an army had penetrated the kingdom of Israel, and Saul, with an opposing army, went forth to engage them in battle. The two armies encamped not far from Nazareth. We can easily imagine the dejection of mind which led King Saul on the night before the battle to consult the witch at Endor. In his self-will he neglected the Lord's will in general and was filled with hatred for David, because he realized that it was the Lord's will to ultimately bring the latter to the throne of Israel. He realized, therefore, that in opposing David, who did him no harm, but was really one of his most loyal subjects, he was in fact fighting against God. And now, on the eve of battle, it is no wonder that he felt downcast and dejected, because when he sought to inquire of the Lord he got no response. He bethought him of the witch of Endor and concluded to inquire of her respecting the outcome of the battle on the morrow. Here again he knew that his course was in opposition to the divine will; for he himself had given instructions for the execution of the Lord's command of Deut. 18:10,12; Exod. 22:18. His course in this matter illustrated the quality of his disposition which the Lord disapproved. Knowing that communication with the evil spirits through mediums was disapproved of God, he nevertheless pursued the wrong course.

Similarly some of God's people today, notwithstanding the instruction of the Scriptures that they should not seek those having familiar spirits, etc., have attended Spiritualistic seances "just to see how it is done." Such a disposition to be careless of the Lord's instruction, self-willed, was the one which got Saul into trouble and surely will make trouble for those who have it today. God is not pleased with those who are careless of his commands: he lets them take their own way as he permitted Saul to take his own way; but, however wise such a self-willed way may appear at the time, the end is sure to be disastrous so far as peace and fellowship with the Lord are concerned. Only those who are fully committed to the Lord and who love the Lord's will better than their own can expect to have fulfilled toward them the promise, "All things shall work together for good to them that love God."

The narrative of the lesson is very simple and requires very little comment. Saul and three of his sons and his entire bodyguard perished in the battle, in which the Philistines seemed to have specially pursued the royal party. Saul committed suicide, lest falling alive into the hands of his enemies they would have tortured him, as was not infrequently the custom in that day. The Philistines, of course, rejoiced in his discomfiture, and as an evidence of their victory his head was sent as a trophy to one and another of their cities. They were worshipers of the goddess Ashtaroth, [R3241 : page 351] and as a memorial of their victory Saul's armor was hung in one of her temples. The bodies of Saul and his sons were fastened to the outside wall of the city of Bethshan as a mark of special indignity, but they were soon recovered by men from the tribe of Manasseh, who, probably to prevent further desecration to the bodies, burned them, and subsequently buried the ashes, unconsumed bones, etc.

The Golden Text is worthy of being committed to memory by all. Its lesson is that we are not competent to guide and direct our own affairs; that we need divine counsel. Human judgment would be unreliable even if supported by absolute knowledge; but in view of

our deficiency in knowledge as well as in judgment, very evidently to man many ways seem right and wise and advantageous and desirable which, pursued, lead to disappointment and chagrin and ultimately would lead to death – second death. The wise, proper course for all, therefore, is to realize and acknowledge our own insufficiency, unwisdom, and to look to our great Creator for guidance. Happy are those who heed the Scriptural injunction, "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth." The earlier this right course is begun the better will be the results every way, the easier will it be for us to bend our wills to the will of the Lord; and the lessons and satisfaction and peace coming to us through the Lord's guidance will be the more precious. A full consecration of the heart and life and all our interests to the Lord, that his will may be done in us in all things, is the consecration necessary to the bringing of every justified believer into fellowship in the body of Christ, which is the Church.

