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"OBEDIENCE BETTER THAN SACRIFICE"

- /SAM. 15:1-35. - JULY 26. -

Golden Text: – "The Lord our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey." – Josh. 24:24.

OUR lesson tells of the testing of King Saul, of his failure to stand the tests, and of the consequent rejection of his family and himself from the kingdom. His history may be divided into four parts: (1) The favorable opportunities of his youth – energetic, fine looking, modest, his choice as the king of Israel was generally conceded to be an excellent one. (2) In the earlier years of his reign he was a successful general and an able organizer of his kingdom. (3) In his testing time he failed and was rejected, partially at first, more thoroughly subsequently. (4) The decline of his manhood, his almost loss of reason, and finally the tragic death of himself and his sons. Today's lesson deals specially with the third of these epochs – his testing.

The Philistines exercised a kind of overlordship in Palestine, presumably collecting taxes as the consideration for permitting the people to have a measure of peace and possession of the country. Apparently they had fortified cities in various parts of Israel's territory, and from their representatives in these the word came that the Israelites had anointed Saul to be their king, a circumstance which was understood to imply the throwing off of the Philistine yoke, a declaration of independence. At once the Philistines assembled an army wherewith to overthrow the new kingdom. The record that they had thirty thousand chariots is supposed to have been a copyist's error for three thousand; for the number of horsemen, two to each chariot, is given as six thousand. This considerable army marched into Palestine; and a battle ensued between them and the Israelites. King Saul evidently

desired to be in harmony with the Lord, and realized still that without divine interposition he would be powerless to repel an invader of such strength. The prophet Samuel was communicated with, and he promised to come within seven days to offer sacrifice to God on Israel's behalf, that the Lord's blessing might attend his people and bring them the victory, in harmony with the divine covenant.

King Saul waited for six days, and meantime saw his army melting from desertion, for the Israelites were poorly armed and greatly in fear. They had practically no weapons, merely their agricultural implements for weapons of war. Apparently the Philistines had previously deprived them of fighting weapons, and in some manner had hindered the Kenites, who were the smiths of the time, from serving them in the manufacture of swords and spears. When the seventh day had come, King Saul, wearied of waiting for Samuel, offered the sacrifice himself, contrary to the divine order. Immediately Samuel appeared, and, pointing out to Saul his failure, stated that obedience to God would have been more appreciated by the Almighty than were the sacrifices. Samuel also pointed out that the sacrifice under the circumstances was a sin, and that the result of this disobedience was that God would not permit Saul and his kingdom to be perpetuated, though he promised that the battle immediately before them would be successful for Israel's sake and for the furtherance of God's own cause.

The difficulty was Saul's failure to respect the divine arrangement, his presumption in undertaking to do what had not been committed to his care, but was under the charge of another. The Lord's cause was not hindered; but King Saul's own prosperity was interfered with by his neglect of the divine arrangement.

THE LESSON FOR SPIRITUAL ISRAELITES

What lesson may we draw from this incident? If for the moment we think of Saul as representing those [R4206 : page 215] who have been favored of God, and called to joint-heirship with Jesus in his Kingdom and anointed with the holy Spirit, we may see in his early victories a picture of our good beginning, when we trusted God implicitly, and sought to do merely as he directed, and to wait patiently and trustfully for him to guide in all of our affairs. As Saul should have made progress and become stronger in his faith and patience and obedience, so should our earliest experiences as the Lord's servants bring to us increasing patience, perseverance, faith, confidence, implicit obedience. But as this was not the case with King Saul, so it is not the case with many of those who have been anointed for joint-heirship with the Lord in his Kingdom. Many of these have similar experiences to that of Saul. Instead of their growing more dependent upon the Lord, the favors received at his hand make them less particular to know and to do his will. They still reverence the Lord; they still recognize that without him they could do nothing; but they are not sufficiently careful to note just what he would have them to do. Sometimes they undertake to do the work of others, and to that extent are "busybodies in other men's matters," as King Saul busybodied and sinned in attempting to do the work that belonged to the prophet.

We should see that in the divine mind obedience is one of the most important elements of character. The Lord has us in training in the school of Christ for a great work in the future; and the first prerequisite for future honors and opportunities very properly must be our obedience to the opportunities and directions of the Lord in the present time. This our Lord explained clearly in his parables, saying that to some of his servants he had entrusted more talents than to others; that each would be called upon to give an account for the proper exercise of the talents, responsibilities and

commands that had been put upon him, and that each would be rewarded in proportion as he used the talents given to him. Our Lord's expression on the subject is, "He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much." – Luke 16:10.

Here, then, is our lesson, "Obedience is better than sacrifice" in God's sight. He will not either approve or reward carelessness on our part in this matter. On the contrary, inattention to his direct will would mark us as proportionately unfit for his direct service, either here or hereafter. This implies on our part such a loyalty to the Lord, such a carefulness in respect to his service, such a recognition of each other in respect to the Lord and his service, that we would go about very carefully in our endeavors to serve his cause. So the Apostle exhorts, "Let us walk circumspectly," carefully, scrutinizingly. – Eph. 5:15.

As the mariner guides the course of his ship by certain charts which show hidden rocks and shoals, and by the stars in their courses, so the Christian is furnished with a chart which shows him the course which he should pursue, and the things which would be displeasing to God and injurious to himself. That chart [**R4207 : page 215**] is the Bible, and whoever would be in harmony with God must not only hearken for his message but keep track also of the hidden dangers which beset his course. Each one of us is on trial. This Gospel Age is our Day of Judgment, of testing. The Lord himself is scrutinizing the course we are taking. It is not sufficient to him that we shall have zeal. The zeal which he will approve is that which operates from love and along the lines of his instruction. The zeal which disregards the divine instruction is not approved; it leads to shipwreck.

The Apostle gives some suggestions along this line, saying that every member of the Body of Christ is necessary (I Cor. 12:12-26); none is to be despised or hindered from having his part in the general work of building up the Body in the most holy faith.

The Apostle illustrates that the eye cannot say to the hand or the foot, "I have no need of you;" and contrariwise the hand or the foot cannot say that it has no need of the eye nor of the ear. Every member is necessary; and above all every member of the Body is to move only in accord with the will of the Head. And that will is to be sought for in every incident of life, great or small. We are not to think of the Lord's cause as being wholly dependent upon us. We are to remember the mistake which Uzzah made – When he saw the ark of the Lord jostled in the road, he put forth his hand to steady it, and died because of his disobedience. It was not in his province to steady the ark. The Lord had that matter under his own supervision, and only the priest might even touch it. Let us all then be zealous, not only to serve the Lord, but also to know the way in which he would have us render that service. Let us be sure that service rendered in any other way than as divinely directed will not be acceptable and will not bring blessing upon us, but on the contrary bring us the Lord's proportionate disfavor. Obedience is better than sacrifice.

THE SLAUGHTER OF THE AMALEKITES

Evidently quite a number of years intervened between the incidents to which we have just referred and those which constitute the main part of today's lesson – King Saul's second test. In the interim Israel had grown strong as a nation; and the time had come for the carrying out of a divine declaration made long before; namely, that the Amalekites should be utterly destroyed. As one branch of Esau's family, they were related to the Israelites and to the Arabs of today. Like the latter they were horsemen, and a kind of brigand, who flourished by pillaging their neighbors. Not strong enough themselves to injure the Israelites they associated themselves with others of the enemies of Israel, either directly participating in war or indirectly, following after battles to gather up the spoils. It will be remembered that they fought against the Israelites in the wilderness when on their way toward Canaan.

(Exod. 17:8-16.) It will be remembered also that they again opposed the Israelites in conquering the land of promise; and that the Lord had declared through Moses that these should be utterly destroyed, and had given Israel this command. – Deut. 25:17-19. [R4207 : page 216]

The fulfilling of these commands was deferred, probably for two reasons. First, the Israelites had no cavalry and would have found it difficult to cope with these marauders, who would swoop down upon them and be off. Secondly, it is probable that the Lord permitted the Amalekites to continue as a thorn in the side of the Israelites for their chastening. But now in Samuel's day the message came to King Saul to destroy utterly the Amalekites, not only all the people, great and small, but all of their belongings – sheep, cattle, horses – everything. The Israelites were to do this as the sword of the Lord, as inflicting the judgment which God had decreed. It must not be said of them that they had turned brigands and thieves, to war against their neighbors and to profit by their pelf. This must be a witness not only to the nations round about, but to the Israelites themselves; it must be a lesson. They must not get the impression that warfare against their neighbors would be undertaken for any selfish, mercenary motives. They were God's scourge in this instance. We are not to draw the inference that today God gives any command to any nation to blot out another people. We are to remember, on the contrary, that Israel was a picture-nation, a type nation; and that through their experience and history the Lord dealt peculiarly to illustrate principles; that he used Israel as his sword, as his pen, as his mouthpiece.

NOT TO AN ETERNAL DOOM

Infidels hold this experience of the Israelites with the Amalekites as an awful picture of cruelty, entirely opposed to justice; and earnest, honest minds have stumbled through a misapprehension of the principles involved. Many would be

inclined to say, "Why did not God send Saul and the Israelites with the Gospel to preach to the Amalekites? Why did he send Israel to destroy their lives, and thus to end their probation and thrust them into eternal torment?"

We answer that eternal torment had nothing whatever to do with their case; for God has made no such threat and inflicts no such penalty for their sin, nor for any sin. According to the Scriptures, "The wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23.) And death was the wage which God authorized Israel to inflict upon the Amalekites, a death penalty. Their execution was along exactly the same lines as courts of justice today command the execution of murderers, except that in this case the Lord himself acted as judge of the court, read the decision and imposed the penalty.

The Israelites preached the Gospel to nobody, because no Gospel could be preached until first of all Christ had come and had paid the penalty for Adam's sin. On the basis of that work of Christ, God commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has appointed a day of trial, a day of judgment. (Acts 17:31.) God did not end their day of trial; for it had not yet come to them. Like all the remainder of the race they were under death sentence for Adam's sin, and it matters not to justice how they die, whether of pestilence or of general decay or by the sword. The fact that their death was a divine punishment, was better shown by their execution in harmony with the divine command, than had it come upon them in some other manner. The incident furnished a lesson to typical Israel, as it still furnishes a lesson to Spiritual Israel. Those Amalekites, let us remember, were all redeemed by the provision of God's love, by the death of Jesus. In due time they are all to have the testimony that Christ died for their sins, and to have the opportunity during the Millennial Age day, the world's judgment day, to return to full harmony with God and to live.

KING SAUL'S SECOND TEST

That a good many years had passed, and that King Saul had made good use of his opportunities as an organizer of the kingdom, is evidenced by the fact that a large army was assembled in harmony with the Lord's command to the prophet: "Two hundred thousand footmen and ten thousand men of Judah." This army was evidently so disposed of as to intercept any of the Amalekites who might flee. Meantime word was sent to the Kenites, who dwelt amongst the Amalekites, advising them to leave that they might not suffer in the punishment of the Amalekites; and the explanation made was that as the Kenites had favored the Lord's people, they were spared in recognition of this fact; for the destruction of the Amalekites was in harmony with the divine decree, because of their opposition to Israel.

The people were all slaughtered except the king, whom King Saul spared, keeping him as a kind of trophy. The animals also were all destroyed, except the choicest of the flocks and herds, which additionally was contrary to the divine command.

When the prophet Samuel came to the king, the latter saluted him as God's representative and reported that he had done according to the divine command. Then came the inquiry, "If so, what means the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the cattle?" Saul's answer was probably a prevarication; that these were kept in order to be offered to the Lord in sacrifice. Then Samuel reproved him, pointing out that he had violated the command of the Lord in preserving any of them. The king, however, protested that the people had kept them; that Israel had desired them; and we can readily suppose that there would have been amongst the Israelites quite an opposition to the waste of the good things of the Amalekites, so accustomed were people of that time, as well as of today, to desire valuables. Saul might have indeed complied with the divine decree by rendering obedience to the Lord and thus put

himself in disfavor with the people; but he would have maintained the divine approval thereby. As it was, the prophet expressed the divine disapproval, saying, "Hath 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 (better) than the fat of rams."

TESTS OF THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

Let us see if there are not corresponding tests upon the royal priesthood. Frequently tests come to this class after they have been a long while in the school of Christ. Speaking to some such, the Apostle says, **[R4208 : page 217]** "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers ye have need that one teach you again what be the first principles of the oracles of God," the doctrines (teachings) of Christ. (Heb. 5:12.) We are sometimes surprised at others, sometimes at ourselves, that we have been so slow in making progress; that we have apparently gained so little victory in character building and appreciation of the principles which should govern amongst those who are the Lord's anointed and in preparation for the throne. Saul's difficulty and tests may represent some of ours.

(1) A selfish spirit, a desire for some of the best of the things which the Lord has condemned; a willingness to spare these because they appeal to us from a selfish viewpoint, the fleshly viewpoint.

(2) A man-fearing spirit. As Saul feared to bring upon himself the reproaches of the people, fearing to be thought too narrow on the one hand and too wasteful on the other, so a temptation comes to the Lord's people to guide their course not entirely by the Word of the Lord, but with a deference to the sentiments of others. This is the fear of man that brings a snare. (Prov. 29:25.) We are ensnared by the spirit of the world. Of such the Lord says, "How can ye believe [continue in proper discipleship] which receive

honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only?" – John 5:44.

(3) Saul's third difficulty was that he had too slack an appreciation of the Lord's Word; and this is the difficulty which specially besets nearly every one of the Lord's followers who stray away into error of doctrine or of conduct. With what care ought we to guard ourselves, lest having become partakers of so great a blessing as our anointing implies, any of us should seem to come short of its glorious realization in the Kingdom. Let us see to it that we put away all love of sin in its every form, and that we esteem the Lord's favor so highly that the consideration of human friendships would not have a particle of weight or influence with us, except as the same should be in full accord with the divine programme; and in order to the maintenance of these proper relationships, let us take heed to his Word.

Let us remember the Apostle's words that we wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with wicked spirits in high positions. (Eph. 6:12.) Let us remember that these wicked spirits have the power in some degree to favor in us wrong sentiments; that in proportion as we would give our minds into any selfish, sinful or ignoble channel, in that same proportion these unseen adversaries of the saints would have power over them. Let us remember, on the contrary, that in proportion as our hearts are loyal to the Lord and his Word and to the spirit of the truth, the spirit of love, in that same proportion we are surrounded by a halo of influence which would protect us, so that of such it may be written, "The wicked one toucheth him not." – John 5:18.

THE TEST OF PERFECT LOVE

The Scriptures clearly indicate a great trial and testing for the Church in the next few years. It will determine with very many what Saul's testing determined for him, whether or not God's favor will continue, with its Kingdom privileges and opportunities. To

the faithful the Lord says, "Fear not, little flock; it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." The others will be answered as was Saul, "Obedience is better than sacrifice;" thou art rejected. Through the Revelator the Lord tells us how the Philadelphian stage of the Church would be saved from the great "hour of trial that is come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." (Rev. 3:10.) There are trials coming upon the Laodicean Church, living at the time of the presence of the Son of Man, when he stands at the door and knocks. (Rev. 3:20.) In that trial, we are told, that a thousand shall fall at the side and ten thousand at the right hand of the one Body, the true Church, of which Jesus is the Head. The Apostle Peter, in figurative language, describes the heavens as being on fire (2 Pet. 3:12), symbolically picturing the ecclesiastical influence of our day; and St. Paul tells of the "fire that shall try every man's work of what sort it is." (I Cor. 3:13.) We are assured that only the gold, silver and precious stones of the divine character and doctrine will abide the fiery ordeal. Surely none of the Lord's people can afford to ignore such testings as these; particularly none of those who with us believe that we are now in that trial period; and that the next seven years will be preeminently a testing time.

If the test of character approved of God, is love – perfect love for God, for the brethren, yea, also for our enemies – then let that thought be continually before all of our minds to the intent that we be not overtaken, that we be not deceived by the great Adversary, who still would fain put darkness for light and light for darkness, on this as upon every other subject. Our anticipation is that the great conflict which will ultimately reach the world, and eventuate in the anarchy which will overthrow all law and order, will begin with the Church; begin with the consecrated, the sanctified, the enlightened. Does not the Lord forewarn us, that in all things judgment must begin at the house of God. (I Pet. 4:17.) Necessarily it must begin with those who are highest up in that house as respects light, knowledge and privileges.

Are we prepared for these tests, of which we read that they would deceive, if it were possible, the very elect? We still believe that these tests will be along the lines of perfect love. Love and selfishness are the two great powers that are moving the world and each individual therein. We have already seen that the selfishness, which will overwhelm the world shortly, will mean lovelessness to the extent that the Scriptures declare, "Every man's hand shall be against his neighbor, and no peace to him that goeth out nor to him that cometh in." (Zech. 8:10; 11:6.) Is that same condition of things to be expected in the Church – every man's hand against his neighbor, the tongue of every brother against every other brother in the Lord? Are anger, malice, hatred, envy and strife to be permitted to overwhelm the Church of Christ? Could such things have **[R4208 : page 218]** any place or power of influence against those who have knowledge of the truth? We are of the opinion that this is just what we are to expect.

We are in the habit of supposing that our Lord's words, "Brother shall deliver up brother to death," applied merely to our Lord's time and during the dark ages. Do we forget that similar conditions may be expected in the end of this age? The delivering up may not be physical, however; the crucifying, the scourging and the roasting may not be literal; but we believe that very much the same things may be expected with only such limits as our civilization will compel. Apparently it is not enough of a test to us to be "hated of all men for my name's sake." We must be tested by the hatred, the malice, the evil speaking and evil surmising of those who dipped with us in the dish, of those who partook with us of the present things of divine bounty at the table of the Lord, the spiritual food. Ah! If this be so then we may indeed expect for the closing days of the Church, the Body of Christ, experiences not dissimilar to those which came to the Master in Gethsemane, one of the most trying of which must have been the Judas kiss.

BRETHREN, WHAT SHALL WE DO?

When some of those who heard the Apostles on Pentecost day came to an understanding of what was the real situation of affairs, and that they and their rulers had crucified the Prince of Life – some of them actually and some of them by failing to protest – those who were right-minded were cut to the heart and cried out, "What must we do?" The Apostle assured them of forgiveness because they did it ignorantly. And so with us. If any of us find that under any snare, or delusion of the Adversary, we have been entrapped into wrong-doing toward a brother, we should immediately feel cut to the heart, and should go to the Lord for divine forgiveness and to those whom we have wronged, for their part of it, that thus we might turn defeat in the hands of the Adversary to victory.

Undoubtedly just such a storm is coming; and as the prophet expresses it, the question is not, Who shall fall, but "Who shall be able to stand?" (Mal. 3:2.) A thousand shall fall to one who will stand. The very Elect will not be deceived, but the question is, Are we of the very Elect? and our answer must be that the Lord will decide this matter according to the manner in which we decide when under the test. It is impossible for us to surmise what may be the various apparent grounds for unbrotherliness, for the loss of a brother's love. If we give heed to the Adversary, he will make us think it proper to break away from the regular rule of procedure, and, if we are willing, make us to feel that we are fully justified in violating all the various directions which the Lord our God has given us. It will require of all of us loving faithfulness to the Lord and to the brethren to enable us to withstand the trials of this day; and we cannot at this point refrain from reminding the dear followers of the Lord afresh of what we have already amplified in DAWN-STUDIES, Vol. VI, Chap. 9, the course which the new creature should take in every matter in which he feels that a brother has offended him, outlined by our Lord in Matt. 18:15-17.

Let us be sure that the Adversary will use every means to turn us aside from this plainly stated rule of love; that he will endeavor to make us think that it cannot be applicable to the difficulty which troubles us. Let our answer to all such suggestions of Satan be, "Get thee behind me." We write thus pointedly, because in various parts we have intimations from the brethren of misunderstandings and in some instances the manifestation of a loveless spirit, a hypercritical spirit, an unbrotherly spirit, a spirit in direct opposition to the Golden Rule and to the Lord's instructions, [R4209 : page 218] to go to him alone, to seek to win thy brother, and not to cast him off nor excommunicate him. On the contrary, be ready to die for him. "We ought also to lay down our lives for the brethren." – I John 3:16.

Let us remember, also, that this loveless condition of the heart, this hypercritical spirit, does not come in suddenly; it develops gradually. Hence every day each of the Lord's people should have a searching of his heart to see whether or not he can find there toward anybody, saint or sinner, any of the spirit of malice which the Lord figuratively represented as leaven, contaminating in its influence. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." (I Cor. 5:6.) A little envy, a little malice, a little anger, a little hatred, and a little strife, may leaven our hearts completely, and in a comparatively short time turn the sweets of our new nature, the spirit of love, into acid bitterness. Moreover, the leaven is not likely to be confined to one, but spreads to others; and thus many may be defiled. The poet has said: –

"We are not worst at once;
The course of evil begins so slowly, and from such slight sources,
An infant's hand might stem its breach with clay;
But let the stream get deeper, and philosophy,
Ah! and religion, too, shall strive in vain
To turn the headlong current."

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