**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 SAMUEL-009. SAUL REJECTED by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10.* *Then came the word of the Lord unto Samuel, saying, 11. It repenteth Me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following Me, and hath not performed My commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the Lord all night. 12. And when Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning, it was told Samuel, saying, Saul came to Carmel, and, behold, he set him up a place, and is gone about, and passed on, and gone down to Gilgal. 13. And Samuel came to Saul: and Saul said unto him, Blessed be thou of the Lord: I have performed the commandment of the Lord. 14. And Samuel said, What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? 15. And Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the Lore thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed. 16. Then Samuel said unto Saul, Stay, and I will tell thee what the Lord hath said to me this night. And he said unto him, Say on. 17. And Samuel said, When thou wast little in thine own sight, wast thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel, and the Lord anointed thee king over Israel? 18. And the Lord sent thee on a journey, and said, Go and utterly destroy the sinners the Amalekites, and fight against them until they be consumed. 19. Wherefore then didst thou not obey the voice of the Lord, but didst fly upon the spoil, and didst evil in the sight of the Lord? 20. And Saul said unto Samuel, Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and have gone the way which the Lord sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. 21. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in Gilgal. 22. And Samuel said, 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 than the fat of rams. 23. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king."*

*1 Samuel 15:10-23*

Again the narrative takes us to Gilgal,--a fateful place for Saul, There they made Saul king before the Lord; there he had taken the first step on his dark way of gloomy, proud self-will, down which he was destined to plunge so far and fatally. There he had, in consequence, received the message of the transference of the kingdom from his house, though not from himself. Now, flushed with his victory over Amalek, he has come there with his troops, laden with spoil. They had made a swift march from the south where Amalek dwelt, passing by Nabal's Carmel, where they had put up some sort of monument of their exploit in a temper of vain-glory, very unlike the spirit which reared the stone of help at Eben-ezer; and apparently they purpose sacrifices and a feast. But Samuel comes into camp with no look of congratulation. Probably the vigorous old man had walked that day from his home, some fifteen miles off, and on the way seems to have picked up tidings of Saul's victory and position, which ought to have reached him from the king himself, and would have done so if Saul's conscience had been clear. The omission to tell him was studied neglect, which revealed much.

Samuel had cried unto the Lord all night, if perchance the terrible sentence might be reversed; and his cries had not been in vain, for they had brought him into complete submission, and had nerved him to do his work calmly, without a quiver or a pang of personal feeling, as becomes God's prophet.

**I.** We must go back a step beyond this passage to understand it. Note, first, the command which was disobeyed. The campaign against Amalek was undertaken by express divine direction through Samuel's lips. It was the delayed fulfilment of a sentence passed in the times of the Conquest, but not executed then. The terrible old usages of that period are brought into play again, and the whole nation with its possessions is devoted'. The word explains the dreadful usage. There are two kinds of devotion to God: that of willing, and that of unwilling, men; the one brings life, the other, death. The massacre of the foul nations of Canaan was thereby made a direct divine judgment, and removed wholly from the region of ferocious warfare. No doubt, the whole plane of morals in the earlier revelation is lower than that of the New Testament. If Jesus has not taught a higher law than was given to them of old time, one large part of His gift to men disappears. The wholesale destruction of babe and suckling with the guilty makes us shudder; and we are meant to feel the difference between the atmosphere of that time and ours. But we are not meant to question the reality of the divine command, nor His right to give it. He slays, and makes alive. His judgments strike the innocent with the guilty. In many a case, and often, the sin is one generation's, and the bitter fruit another's. The destruction of Canaanites and Amalekites does not change its nature because God used men to do it; and the question is not whether the Israelites were fiercely barbarous in their warfare, but whether God has the right of life and death. We grant all the dreadfulness, and joyfully admit the distance between such acts and Jesus Christ; but we recognise them as not incongruous with the whole revealed character of the God who is justice as well as love, as parallel in substance, though different in instrument, with many of His dealings with men,--as the execution of righteous sentence on rank corruption, and as sweetening the world by its removal. Most of the difficulty and repugnance has been caused by forgetting that Israel was but the sword, while the hand was God's.

**II.** Note the disobedience. Partial obedience is complete disobedience. Saul and his men obeyed as far as suited them; that is to say, they did not obey God at all, but their own inclinations, both in sparing the good and in destroying the worthless. What was not worth carrying off they destroyed,--not because of the command, but to save trouble. This one fault seems but a small thing to entail the loss of a kingdom. But is it so? It was obviously not an isolated act on Saul's part, but indicated his growing impatience of the divine control, exercised on him through Samuel. He was in a difficult position. He owed his kingdom to the prophet; and the very condition on which he held it was that of submission to Samuel's authority. No wonder that his elevation quickened the growth of his masterfulness and gloomy, impetuous self-will,--traits in his character which showed themselves very early in his reign! No wonder either that such a king, held in leading-strings by a prophet, should chafe! The more insignificant the act in itself, the more significant it may be as a flag of revolt. Disobedience which will not do a little thing is great disobedience. Nor was this the first time that Saul had kicked, like another Saul, against the pricks, Gilgal had seen a previous instance of his impetuous self-assertion, masked by apparent deference; and the inference is fair that the interval between the two pieces of rebellion had been of a piece with them. Trivial acts, especially when repeated, show deep-seated evil. There may be only a coil of the snake visible, but that betrays the presence of the slimy folds, though they are covered from sight among the leaves. The tiny shoot of a plant, peeping above the ground, does not augur that the roots are short; they may run for yards. Nor can any act be called small, of which the motive is disregard of God's plain command: He that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much. Saul had never much religion. He had never heard of Samuel till that day when he came to consult him about the asses. It was a wonder to his acquaintances to find him among the prophets; and all his acts of worship have about them a smack of self, and an exclusive regard to the mere externals of sacrifice, which imply a shallow notion of religion and a spirit unsubdued by its deeper influences.

Such a man habitually acts in disregard of God's will; and that is great sin, though it be manifested in small acts. It is to be remembered, too, that the excepting of the best of the spoil from the general destruction, changed the whole character of the transaction, and brought it down from the level of a solemn act of divine justice, of which Saul and his army were the executors by divine mandate, to that of a mere cattle-lifting foray, in which they were but thieves for their own gain. The mingling of personal advantage with any sort of service of God, ruins the whole, and turns it into mere selfishness. Samuel, in verse 19, puts the two sides of this evil in the sight of the Lord as being disobedience and swooping down on the booty, like some bird of prey.

**III.** Note Saul's excuses. Throughout the whole interview he plays a sorry part, and is evidently cowed by the hated authority and personality of the old man; while Samuel, on his side, is curt, stern, and takes the upper hand, as becomes God's messenger. The relative positions of the two men are the normal ones of their offices, and explain both Saul's revolt and the chronic impatience of kings at the interference of prophets. Here we have Saul coming to meet Samuel with affected heartiness and welcome, and with the bold lie, I have performed the commandment of the Lord. That is more than true obedience is quick to say. If Saul had done it, he would have been slower to boast of it. Those vessels yield the most sound that have the least liquor. He doth protest too much; and the protestation comes from an uneasy conscience. Or did he, like a great many other men who have no deep sense of the sanctity of every jot and tittle of a divine law, please himself with the notion that it was enough to keep it approximately, in the spirit of the precept, without slavish obedience to the letter? In a later part of the interview (v. 20) he insists that he has obeyed, and tries to prove it by dwelling on the points in which he did so, and gliding lightly over the others.

Samuel had reason to believe the sheep and oxen above Saul; and there is a tone of almost contempt for the shuffling liar in his quiet question: What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? There was no answering that; so Saul shifts his ground without a blush or a moment's hesitation. The people spared. It is a new character for him to appear in,--that of a weak ruler who cannot keep his unruly men in order! Had he tried to restrain them? If he had, and had failed, he was not fit to be a king. If he had not, he was a coward to shift the blame on to them. How ready men are to vilify themselves in some other direction, in order to escape the consciousness of sin, which God is seeking to force home on them! No doubt the people were very willing to have a finger in the affair; but so was he. And if the cattle was their share, Agag, who could be held to ransom, was his; and the arrangement suited all round. As to the purpose of sacrificing at Gilgal, perhaps that was true; but if it were, no doubt the same process of selection, which had destroyed the worthless and kept the best, would have been repeated; and the net result would have been a sacrifice of the least valuable, and the survival of the fittest in many a pasture and stall.

But note Saul's attitude towards Jehovah, betrayed by him in that one word: the Lord thy God, No wonder that he had been content with a partial and perfunctory obedience, if he had no closer sense of connection with God than that! There is almost a sneer in it, too, as if he had said, What needs all this fuss about saving the cattle? You should be pleased; for this Jehovah, with whom you profess to have special communication, will be honoured with sacrifice, and you will share in the feast. If the words do not mean abjuring Jehovah, they go very near it, and, at all events, betray the shallowness of Saul's religion. Samuel, in his answer, reminds him of his early modesty and self-distrust, and of the source of his elevation. He then sweeps away the flimsy cobwebs of excuses, by the curt repetition of the plain, dreadful terms of Saul's commission, and then flashes out the piercing question, like a sword, Wherefore then didst thou not? The reminder of past benefits, and the reiteration of the plain injunctions which have been broken, are the way to cut through the poor palliations which men wrap around their sins.

It speaks of a very obstinate and gloomy determination that, in answer, Saul should reiterate his protestation of having done as he was bid. He doggedly says over again all that he had said before, unmoved by the prophet's solemn words. He is steeling his heart against reproof; and there is only one end to that. Sin unacknowledged, after God has disclosed it, is doubly sin. The heart that answers the touch of God's rebukes by sullenly closing more tightly on its evil, is preparing itself for the blow of the hammer which will crush it. He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy. Let us beware of meeting God's prophet with shuffling lies about our obedience, and of opposing to the words which are loving though they pierce, the armour of impenetrable self-righteousness and conceit.

**IV.** Note the punishment. To the vain talk about honouring God by sacrifice, Samuel opposes the great principle which was the special message committed to every prophet in Israel, and which was repeated all through its history, side by side with the divinely appointed sacrificial system. In the intensity of his spiritual emotion, Samuel speaks in lyric strains, in the measured parallelism which was the Hebrew dress of poetry, and gives forth in words which will live for ever the great truth that God delights in obedience more than in sacrifice. Whilst, on the one hand, he lifts the surrender of the will, and the consequent submission of the life, high above all mere ritual, on the other hand, by the same process, he sinks the rebellion of the will and the stubbornness of the nature, unsubdued either by kindness or threats, as Saul was showing his to be, to the level of actual idolatry.

Rebellion is divination,

And stubbornness is idols and teraphim.

Then comes the stern sentence of rejection. Why was Saul thus irrevocably set aside? Was it not a harsh punishment for such a crime? As we have already remarked, Saul's act is not to be judged as an isolated deed, but as the outcome of a deep tendency in him, which meant revolt from God. It was not because of the single act, but because of that which it showed him to be, that he was set aside. The sentence is pronounced, not because thou didst spare Amalek, but because thou didst reject the word of the Lord. Further, it is to be remembered that the punishment was but the carrying out of his act. His own hand had cut the bond between him and God, and had disqualified himself for the office which he filled. Saul had said, I will reign by myself. God said, Be it so! By thyself thou shalt reign. For the consequence of his deposition was not outward change in his royalty. David indeed was anointed but in secret, so Samuel consented to honour Saul before the people. All the external difference was that Samuel never saw him again, and he was relieved from the incubus of the prophet's interference; that is to say, he ceased to be God's king, and became a phantom, ruling only by his own will and power, as he had wished to do. How profound may be the difference while all externals remain unchanged! When we set up ourselves as our own lords, and shake off God's rule, we cast away His sanction and help in all the deeds of our self-will, however unaltered their outward appearance may remain. But God left him to walk in his own ways, and be filled with the fruit of his own devices, by no irrevocable abandonment, however the decree of rejection from the kingship was irrevocable. The gates of repentance stood open for him; and the very sentence that came stern and laconic from Samuel's lips, rightly accepted, might have drawn him in true penitence to a forgiving God. His subsequent confession was rejected because it expressed no real contrition; and the worship which he proceeded to offer, without the sanction of the prophet's presence, was as unreal as his protestation of obedience, and showed how little he had learned the lesson of the great words, To obey is better than sacrifice.