

1 Samuel 15:17–33 — When Thou Wast Little in Thine Own Sight

Obedience Better Than Sacrifice, the Anatomy of Excuses, Rebellion as Witchcraft, and the First Man and the Second

Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 15:17–33

“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?”

“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. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.”

“And Samuel said unto Saul, I feared the people, and obeyed their voice.”

Saul Provisional, David the True King

This chapter is set within a larger pattern in the ways of God. Shiloh was provisional — God provided it for the people until his choice of Jerusalem was made known by fire falling on the altar in connection with David. Shiloh was not the chosen place; it was the place provided for the time being. So too with Saul. He was provisional kingship. God had in mind David, and he had in mind Solomon, and he had in mind his chosen city Jerusalem. Saul was what met the people’s state at the time they demanded a king. God gave them the man they cried for — head and shoulders above the people, impressive, commanding. And while the flesh was yet in their teeth, so to speak, God’s government began to

work its way through the consequences of their demand.

This is a solemn principle in the ways of God. The psalmist warned: he gave them the desire of their heart and sent leanness into their soul. God can give what is prayed for outside his will. The children of Israel cried for flesh to eat, and he gave it, and while it was yet between their teeth he struck them. We may pray insistently, and God may answer according to our state rather than his best. We must beware of praying in the energy of the flesh and then taking the answer as proof that we were right. Saul was not evidence that God approved of Israel's demand for a king. He was the expression of God's response to that demand — which is a different thing.

Samuel's opening word to Saul goes to the root: when thou wast little in thine own sight. The implication is clear. Saul had grown. He was no longer small in his own eyes. Pride had filled the place where smallness had been, and it was in this enlarged condition that he disobeyed. This is the opposite of John the Baptist, who said of the Lord: he must increase and I must decrease. The man after the flesh grows in his own sight; the man after God's heart decreases in his own sight and grows toward God.

Excuses: The First Is Found in the Garden

Saul's response to Samuel's charge is bold: Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord. He had not. He knew it, because in verse 24 he admits it: I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord. But first comes the denial, and then the excuse: the people took the spoil, sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the Lord your God. He shifts the blame to the people, and then wraps the whole thing in religion.

The habit of excuses runs from the very first pages of Scripture. Where is the first excuse in the Bible? In the garden. The woman blamed the serpent; she gave me to eat. The man blamed God and the woman together: the woman that thou

gavest to be with me, she gave me and I did eat. God is implicated in the excuse. That is how low the fallen heart will go. Excuses are never a small thing in Scripture — they are always a refusal to own up to what God already knows.

The three excuses in Luke 14 are the classic catalogue. Those invited to the great supper all with one consent began to make excuse. I have bought a piece of land; I must go see it. I have bought five yoke of oxen; I must prove them. I have married a wife and cannot come. The first two are pretexts; only the third man is honest: I cannot come. And that honesty fits the theme of the chapter — compel them to come in, for no man comes to God except God draws him. Excuses expose the heart. They show what is really valued over God's call.

Obedience Better Than Sacrifice

Samuel's answer to Saul's religious excuse is one of the great statements of Scripture: to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. This is not a word against sacrifice and offering in their proper place; it is a word against using religious activity to displace obedience to God's word. Saul had a plain commandment. He violated it. Then he proposed to offer sacrifice on the proceeds of the violation.

The same pattern runs through Christendom. The various disobediences to God's word in Christian practice are almost universally covered over by busyness of service. Busy, busy, busy. And after all, God saved some souls under those circumstances, so the Lord must have blessed it. But the Lord blessed it despite the disobedience, not because of it. God did not abandon his people in their disorder; his blessing of souls there is not his endorsement of the disorder. And the service, however impressive in scale, cannot replace what God has actually said. It is a sacrifice offered in the place of obedience.

Rebellion as Witchcraft, Stubbornness as Idolatry

The terms are severe. Rebellion is as the sin of divination; stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Divination is consulting another god rather than the true God. If a man consults his own will rather than God's word, he has set himself up as a god. He is practicing a form of idolatry — the idol is himself. Self-will is indistinguishable from idolatry at the root. The flesh, left to itself, reveals what its true character is: it worships itself. Saul's disobedience was not just a strategic error or a lapse in judgment. It was, at its root, the setting aside of God and the enthronement of the self.

Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king. The rejection answers to the rejection. God had chosen Saul provisionally; now God sets him aside and the true king — the man after God's own heart — will be anointed. The kingdom is rent from Saul and given to his neighbor who is better than he. Samuel never saw Saul again. He wept for him; he mourned. But he never undertook to undermine the kingship of Saul, which is a lovely thing. He rested in the word of God about the matter and acted accordingly.

Agag, Gilgal, and the First Man and the Second

Saul had said he utterly destroyed the Amalekites. He had not. The book of Esther finds Haman the Agagite very much alive centuries later. The Amalekites were not gone because Saul did not do what he was told. God had said that Amalek was scheduled for extermination — in the millennial reign of Christ there will be no Amalekites. What the first man failed to do remains for the second man from heaven to accomplish. All wherein the first man fails is taken up by the second man and made good to God's glory. This is one illustration among many of that pervasive biblical principle: first that which is natural, and afterward that which is spiritual.

Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal. Gilgal was the right place to do it. It was the entry point to the land, the place of circumcision, the rolling away of the reproach of Egypt, the place where the flesh was cut off before God. Saul was not answering to Gilgal. He had not walked in the Gilgal character. And so the spiritual man had to do in Gilgal what the fleshly man had refused to do. When Israel was in the days of the judges in a bad condition, the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochem — weepers. The people wept because they had not been acting in the Gilgal character. The place of self-judgment, the cutting off of the first man before God, is not optional. We are never wiser than the Scripture that returns us to it.

The great head of another race never made one excuse in his life. He always did those things that pleased the Father. Every charge leveled against him, every opportunity to deflect or diminish the demands of God, he met with full and perfect obedience. That is the second man. That is the answer to Saul.

To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.