

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FAILURE UNDER THE SUPREME TEST

(I Samuel 15:26)

“Mortal! if life smile on thee, and thou find
All to thy mind,
Think, Who did once from Heaven to Hell descend
Thee to befriend!
So shall thou dare forego at His dear call
Thy best, thine all.”

- K. Eble

ON the shores of the Dead Sea, encrusted with salt, lie the trunks of many noble trees which have been torn from their roots, and carried by the rapid Jordan in its flow from the uplands of Galilee towards the depression of that remarkable gorge; and as they line those desolate shores they remind us of lives which God planted to bear fruit and give shade, which have not fulfilled his original purpose in their creation, and which have been torn up by the roots and borne down to the sea of death. Conspicuous among such failures is that of Saul, the first king of Israel.

It is impossible to turn to the pages of his history without lamenting that the bright promise of his early life was so soon over-cast, and that he, who stood forth in the morning of his life amid the acclaim of his people as likely to do marvellous work for his fatherland, became one of those whom the sacred writers describe as having failed of the high purpose of their life, been rejected in their mission, and cast away as tools from the hands of the great Artificer.

This chapter gives the story of his final rejection, which had indeed been threatened afore time, but which now befell.

I. THE TEST OF THE DIVINE SUMMONS AND COMMAND

“Go and smite Amalek, and 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.”

This command was given after several years had intervened from the incident narrated in the previous chapter; and during those years Saul had met with marvellous encouragement. The handful of men who had followed him, trembling, had increased to a great army, properly disciplined and armed, and led by Abner, his uncle.

He had also waged very successful wars against Moab and the children of Ammon on the East, against Edom on the South, and against the kings of Zobah on the North. In whatever direction he had directed his arms he had been victorious beyond his highest hopes. It is also evident that he had gathered around him considerable state, for we find the royal table was reserved for himself, Abner, and Jonathan; that he was surrounded by a bodyguard of runners; and that his will was law. The kingdom that had been inaugurated amid such adverse circumstances was beginning to enforce respect, and Saul was able to vie, both in the magnificence of his state and in his army, with the kings of the lands that bordered on Canaan.

It was at this time that the supreme test entered his life, as it so often comes to us in days of prosperity.

In the warm summer days we are most in dread of corruption and contagion, and it is in the days of prosperity that the soul is oftenest subjected, not realizing the significance of the ordeal, to its supreme test. If of late you have had immunity from special adversity, if your circumstances have been easy, if paths that were once difficult have become smooth be on your guard; for, at such a time as ye think not, the Son of Man comes to call you to his bar.

You will notice, also, that this supreme test gave him a final chance of retrieving the past. At Gilgal, years before, God had told him by the lips of Samuel that his kingdom should not continue; but there had been no sentence of his own deposition or rejection, and it seemed as though this last command was put into his life to give him an opportunity of wiping out his former failure and mistake, and of retrieving the fortunes that had seemed to be absolutely sacrificed.

God often comes to us when we have made some sad and apparently irretrievable mistake. He gives us yet another opportunity of reversing the past, as when our Lord said to his disciples in the Garden of the Olive-press; “**Sleep on now, and take your rest**”; a moment afterwards adding, “**Arise, let us be going**,” as though a fresh opportunity would be afforded of fellowship in his sufferings.

The Divine command involved the absolute extermination of the Amalekites; for the word translated “**utterly destroy**,” means “*to devote*.” It is the word so often used in the Book of Joshua for placing under the ban the sin-infected cities of the Canaanites. It was understood that, in the case of the “devoted” city, man, woman, and child, and the very beasts, must be destroyed, and only the precious metals kept, after being passed through the fires of purification (Numbers 31:21, etc.). With such absolute devastation and destruction was the name of Amalek to be wiped out from under Heaven.

There had been feud between Amalek and Israel from the earliest days. “**Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt**” (1 Samuel 15:2).

You will remember that Moses reared an altar, and called it Jehovah-nissi “*the Lord my banner*”; because he said that the Lord would have war with Amalek, until He had wiped out the reproach of his people (Exodus 17:15, 16).

Centuries had passed, and this ancient threat had remained unfulfilled until this hour, and now the command was given, **“Go and smite Amalek.”**

At first it seems very terrible that God demanded this act of obedience from Saul; but on the other hand the Amalekites, as we are told in ver. 18, were sinners of a very black and aggravated type. We learn also from ver. 33 that Agag with his sword had often made women childless. A very cruel and rapacious tribe of robbers were these Amalekites, who were constantly making raids upon the southern frontier of Judah. It was absolutely necessary, therefore, for the safety of the chosen people, that their power to injure should be permanently arrested.

Even in this world God sets up his judgment-seat; and as our Saviour tells us in his last wonderful discourse, the Son of Man sits upon the throne of his glory, while the nations are gathered before Him, and He separates them as the sheep from the goats.

These words, without doubt, portend some imposing event, which we are to witness in that great day, when the King of the Ages will call to his bar every nation and kindred, people and tongue, and will announce his awards. But we cannot suppose, for a single moment, that the judgment of the nations is to be altogether relegated to that final day. Throughout the history of the world the nations have been standing before Christ's bar. Nineveh stood there, Babylon stood there, Greece and Rome stood there, and other nations are standing there to-day.

One after another has had the solemn award depart; and they have passed into a destruction which has been absolute and irretrievable.

The Amalekites had stood before the bar of God, had been weighed in his balances, and found wanting. Their sentence had been pronounced, and Saul was called upon to inflict it. But remember that Saul was only doing summarily and suddenly that which otherwise would follow in the natural process of decay; for God has so constituted us that when we sin against the laws of truth, purity, and righteousness, decay immediately sets in by an inevitable law.

If Amalek had never been attacked by Saul and his hosts, the vices that were already at work in the heart of the people must have led to the utter undoing and consumption of the nation.

It is said of families in our great cities, infected with the evils that are rife among us, that in five generations they die out, having lost the power of self-propagation; and what is true of a family is equally so of a nation. We may infer that there was therefore mercy in this Divine ordinance.

It was infinitely better for Amalek, and for the surrounding peoples which would have become infected by her slow deterioration, that by one stroke of the executioner's axe the existence of the nation should be brought to an end.

II. OBEDIENCE WITH RESERVE

The story is told us in ver. 9; **“But Saul and the people spared Agag.”**

When he raised his standard, two hundred thousand footmen from Israel, and ten thousand men of Judah, Benjamin, and Simeon, gathered around it, at Telaim, on the southern frontier; and they came to the chief city of Amalek, which lay, probably, a little to the south of Hebron. After lying in ambush in some dry water-course, or wady, and having given notice to the Kenites a peaceful, friendly people to depart, the attacking army carried the city by assault, put to the sword men, women, and children; pursued the fleeing remnants of the Amalekites from Havilah even to Shur, the great wall of Egypt; and with the exception of Agag, and a few that may have escaped, and the choice of the flocks and herds, the whole country was rid of its inhabitants, and reduced to the deathlike silence of an awful solitude.

Saul returned, flushed with triumph, reared a monument of victory in the oasis of Carmel, near to Hebron; and then came down to the sacred site of Gilgal, that he might sacrifice to the Lord, and perhaps divide the vast plunder of sheep and goats, of oxen and camels, which had fallen into his hands, and which he and the people had been loath to destroy.

“Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen, and of the failings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them; but everything that was vile and refuse, they destroyed utterly.”

Whether this reserve was due, so far as Saul was concerned, to greed, as appears most likely, or because, as he says in ver. 24, he feared to thwart the people, obeying their voice rather than the voice of God, we cannot decide; but considerable light is thrown on the incident by the startling expression used by Samuel in ver. 19, when he says that he, **“didst fly upon the spoil?”** employing the same expression as in chapter 14:32, where we are told that the people, in their ravenous hunger, flew upon the spoil, and ate even with the blood.

The same passionate vehemence seems to have characterized Saul and the men of Israel. Surely rapacity and greed were at work, and before their boiling currents all the bulwarks of principle and conscience were swept away.

There is great significance in this for us all.

We are prepared to obey the Divine commands up to a certain point, and there we stay. Just as soon as **“the best and choicest”** begin to be touched, we draw the line and refuse further compliance. We listen to soft voices that bid us stay our hand when our Isaac is on the altar. We are quite prepared to give up that which costs us nothing our money, but not our children, to the missionary cause; the things which are clearly and disgracefully wrong, but not the self-indulgences which are peculiarly fascinating to our temperament. Skin for skin; yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life only spare him that, and he will cheerfully renounce his claim to all else. There is always a tendency with the best of us to make a bargain with God, and sacrifice all to his will, if only He will permit us to spare Agag and the best of the spoil.

But an even deeper reading of this story is permissible.

Throughout the Bible, Amalek stands for the flesh; having sprung from the stock of Esau, who, for a morsel of meat, steaming fragrantly in the air, sold his birthright.

To spare the best of Amalek is surely equivalent to sparing some root of evil, some plausible indulgence, some favorite sin. For us, Agag must stand for that evil propensity, which exists in all of us, for self-gratification; and to spare Agag is to be merciful to ourselves, to exonerate and palliate our failures, and to condone our besetting sin.

Is this your case? You are willing to give Christ the key of every cupboard in your heart, save one; but that contains your most cherished sin, for which you find manifold excuses, and to retain which you are prepared to sacrifice everything else. Thus Ananias and Sapphira kept back part of the price, and were cut off.

It is startling to learn that Saul perished, on the field of Gilboa, by the hand of an Amalekite (II Samuel 1:1-10). What a remarkable fact! The least instructed can decipher the lesson. He who runs may read. If we spare ourselves, forbearing to cut off the right hand or foot, which may be causing us to offend, we shall certainly perish by the hand of that which we refused to part with. Our cherished indulgences will bring about our undoing.

The love of God, foreseeing the risk we are incurring, pleads with us to destroy without mercy the enemies of our own peace; but Agag comes to us delicately; we forbear to inflict the Divine sentence, and presently we are stricken down by the assassin, dye the green sward with our life-blood, and are despoiled of our crown, which is transferred to another.

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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