

Saul versus Amalek

We know how it is, that in the days of Samuel, the people of Israel wanted a king to be “like all the nations” (2 Sam. 8:5), but there was also another reason for their request, as expressed in verse 20 of 1 Samuel 8:

“That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, **and fight our battles**” (1 Sam. 8:20).

Again, rehearsing the matter before the people, Samuel said:

“And **when ye saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you**, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall rule over us: when Yahweh your God was your king” (1 Sam. 12:12).

It is clear then, that what Israel actually wanted was a military commander to lead them in battle – particularly against Nahash and the children of Ammon. In fact, this was a purpose that Yahweh Himself had with king Saul, saying to Samuel concerning him: “To morrow about this time, I will send thee a man out of the land of Benjamin, and thou shalt anoint him to be **captain** over my people Israel, **that he may** save my people out of the hand of the Philistines ...” (1 Sam. 9:16). Saul then, was appointed by both the people, and their God, to be a captain to save them from their enemies. In a similar fashion, the Lord Jesus Christ, Israel’s future king, is the Captain of our Salvation, who will bring many sons into glory (Heb. 2:10). The difference is, however, that Saul failed, and was eventually overcome by the enemy he was purposed to destroy.

Following the inauguration of Saul to be king, Yahweh sent him on a mission:

“Thus saith Yahweh 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. Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant an suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass” (1 Sam. 15:2-3).

So it was, that Saul was to utterly destroy the nation of Amalek. It would appear that Amalek had a particular strategy in fighting their battles:

“Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; How he met thee by the way, **and smote the hindmost of thee, when thou wast faint and weary**; and he feared not God” (Deut. 25:17-18).

Amalek’s strategy then, was to pick off those who were lingering behind, being faint and weary. And isn’t that just the way in which sin affects us! When we are strong, and confident, when we feel spiritually awake and alert – then, we are less likely to fall into a way of sin. But when we are weak, perhaps enduring particular afflictions, that is when we are more likely to succumb. So the Apostle exhorted the believers to look to Messiah as an example of one who overcame, for strength and encouragement: “consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be **wearied and faint** in your minds” (Heb. 12:3). The Lord himself was strong in faith, when he was crucified through weakness (2 Cor. 13:4), and overcame Sin totally, which was seen in his resurrection.

When we consider Types and Shadows in Scripture, It is evident that in Amalek, we are to see a *type* of Sin. Saul, as the captain to save, was to destroy Amalek utterly, even as our Captain overcame sin utterly. But as with Lot in Sodom, the Kenites were given the opportunity come out from them, and not be partakers of the destruction to come:

“Saul said unto the Kenites, Go, depart, get you down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them: for ye showed kindness unto all the children of Israel, when they came up out of Egypt. So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites” (1 Sam. 15:6).

Even so, we are on notice that Messiah will come again to judge the world – and the same exhortation applies to us:

“Wherefore **come out from among them**, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:17).

And again, to Israel in relation to the judgment of the Great Harlot system:

“**come out of her** my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues” (Rev. 18:4).

Achan, however, did touch the unclean thing: indeed, he took to himself certain items which were devoted to destruction, as described in Joshua 7. And king Saul was no better: instead of utterly smiting the power of sin, he spared those items that would be profitable for his use:

“But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but everything that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly” (1 Sam. 15:9).

Again, isn't this just like our experience with Sin? Here we seen Human Nature exemplified. It is easy to cut out of our lives those things which seem not to confer any benefit, or which we take no pleasure in. But those things that seem to us to be “good” are much harder to remove. “Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:14) is the Father's Command, and by the very definition of what those lusts are, this will inevitably mean removing from our lives some of those things that we find ourselves attractive to, and which we desire. Saul desired those things that Yahweh had appointed to destruction, in a manner not dissimilar to that of Achan, who desired the riches of Jericho. But he even went so far as to impute a religious motive to his actions:

“ ... the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice unto Yahweh thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed” (1 Sam. 15:15).

So, HP Mansfield comments: “it is possible to use a religious reason to justify disobedience”. The commandment was to utterly destroy everything to do with Amalek, but Saul saved the best alive, with the claim (whether true or otherwise) that the intention was to use them in service to Yahweh. Again, we can find a parallel of our own experience: it is possible to convince ourselves that a sin is acceptable if we can use it as part of our service to our God. Like the One who reasoned that gambling is not wrong, so long as we give our winnings to the Lord's service. The point is that Yahweh has decreed certain things to be destroyed out of our lives, and we are wrong to keep them alive under the guise of using them to serve Him.

So it was, that Saul was rejected of Yahweh, who said to Samuel: "it repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king: for **he is turned back** from following my commandments ..." (1 Sam. 15:11). Saul turned back into perdition, and so lost the kingdom, and in the final analysis, his life. So the writer to the Hebrews spake:

"Now the just shall live by faith: but **if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him**. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul" (Heb. 10:38-39).

The lessons for us in this matter are obvious.

When Saul was challenged by Samuel regarding this matter, he sought to blame the people for what had taken place:

"Saul said unto Samuel, Yea, I have obeyed the voice of Yahweh, ... but the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things that should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to Yahweh thy God in Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:20-21).

The point was, of course, that Saul was king over the people, and they could only have flown upon the spoil if he had permitted it. It is written that "The sacrifice of the wicked is abomination: how much more, when he bringeth it with a wicked mind?" (Prov. 21:27). Even if the spoil had been kept in order to offer sacrifice with, it was still the sacrifice of the wicked, as it marked a disobedience to what God had commanded.

This point was addressed by Samuel:

"Samuel said, Hath Yahweh as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Yahweh? Behold, **to obey** is better than sacrifice, and **to hearken** than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22).

Here is the principle established: if we offer up something in worship that Yahweh has not commanded, we cannot expect his approval of it. Jeremiah 7 exemplifies this principle:

"I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: but this thing commanded I them, **Obey my voice**, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well with you. But **they hearkened not**, nor inclined their ear ..." (Jer. 7:22-24).

Obedience is far better than a religious observance of those things which God has not commanded. Indeed, the churches would do well to heed this example in relation to their traditions of men, taught as though they were the commandments of God. Again, it is written:

"Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil" (Eccl. 5:1).

This is the spirit of Saul: "I have performed the commandment" he said – yet his proscribed offering would have been the sacrifice of fools.

Even when rebuked by Samuel, Saul still did not repent. Although he used the words, "I have sinned", his main concern was how he would appear before the people:

"Then he said, I have sinned: yet honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn again with me, that I may worship Yahweh thy God" (1 Sam. 15:30).

We know that his professed repentance was not genuine, for it was not forgiven. Hence the words of the resurrected Samuel: "Because thou obeyest not the voice of Yahweh, nor executedst his fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore hath Yahweh done this thing unto thee this day. Moreover, Yahweh will deliver Israel with thee into the hand of the Philistines ..." (1 Sam. 28:19, see also 1 Chron. 10:13).

By contrast to Saul, who kept King Sin alive, Samuel destroyed him in a very graphic way:

"... Samuel said, As thy sword have made women childless, so shall thy mother be childless among women. And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before Yahweh in Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:33).

Saul started off very well, in humility and with a Divine Commission to destroy the Philistines. But through his lack of faith in Yahweh, and disobedience to his commands, the Philistines instead destroyed him. There is a lesson in that: if we don't faithfully engage in the warfare of faith against Sin, Sin will destroy us at the last.

But we can find exhortation in the life of Saul, being both a good example in the way he began, but also an example of unbelief at the end. In considering these things, we are brought to our Redeemer, Jesus the Christ. He is our Captain who shall lead us into victory against the greatest enemy of all, even sin itself. In memorialising his sacrificial death and resurrection, we remember his great victory – which victory will be ours, if we hold fast to the faith without wavering, and without turning back.

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