

"Wherefore then didst thou not obey?"

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As another year of our pilgrimage reaches its end, and we stand on the threshold of a new year, we are deeply conscious that the need of a reviving in the whole church of God is as great as ever. Our hearts rejoice in all that God has done and is doing, we gratefully acknowledge His mercy which still is converting and saving souls out of the world which steadily marches forward to judgment, yet we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that the love of many Christians waxes cold, that much sinful lethargy exists amongst them, and that there is frequently much ignorance of the Word of God, and, what is worse, often a deplorable spirit of indifference and even open disobedience to the plain injunctions of Scripture. The church of God particularly needs a revival which shall take the practical form of a great awakening to *simple-hearted obedience to the Word of God*.

Naturally we are all of us adepts at finding out plausible reasons why we may ignore the commands of Scripture, not one of which will prove to be valid when the hour of testing comes. Scripture must of course be read in a spirit of prayerful subjection, so that we may each become "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2: 15); then having intelligently ascertained the mind of God nothing is needed but simple obedience. There is nothing more damaging to spiritual prosperity, or disastrous in its final results, than disobedience to the Word of God.

If we turn to the Old Testament, that faithful mirror of the human heart, that wonderful instruction book which is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus, we shall find forcible illustrations of this.

Take first of all the case of King Saul. Here you have a man of splendid physical proportions who began his reign well. Elevated to the throne quite suddenly, he displayed both modesty and generosity in no small degree in the opening months, and yet only two years of his reign had passed before we find him a rejected man. Why was this? The answer is in one word — *disobedience*.

Having gathered the people together to fight the Philistines, Saul desired to approach God by way of sacrifice so that His blessing might be upon their enterprise, and Samuel the prophet had made a definite arrangement to meet him at Gilgal for that purpose after seven days. Now what happened was this: "He tarried seven days, according to the set time that Samuel had appointed: but Samuel came not to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. And Saul said, Bring hither a burnt offering to me, and peace offerings. And he offered a burnt offering. And it came to pass, that as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came.... And Samuel said, What hast thou done?" (1 Sam. 13: 8-11). Saul made his excuses: it seemed to him a politic thing to do in view of the people's tendency to scatter; moreover, he had done it reluctantly; "I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering" (verse 12) were his words. Samuel's answer was, "Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God.... Now thy kingdom shall not continue" (verses 13, 14).

But why had Saul acted thus? What had possessed him? Did he say within his heart something like this: "After all, that seven day appointment was only an arrangement that Samuel made; he may have forgotten it, or he may have been mistaken"? Perhaps he did. But stay! Samuel's arrangement was not everything. Long before his day just such a contingency had been anticipated and the Divine

instructions were: "Thou shalt come . . . unto the judge that shall be in those days . . . thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall show thee, to the right hand, nor to the left" (Deut. 17: 8-12). Moreover, in the same chapter it was enacted that the future king of Israel should familiarise himself with the instructions of the law by writing out for himself a special copy to be kept continually by him; so that he had no excuse for ignorance. Samuel was, without a doubt, the judge raised up of God for his days, and the Word of God enjoined implicit obedience to his instructions Saul disobeyed. He was swayed by what appeared to him to be expedient, and he treated the Word of God, through Samuel, as only Samuel's opinion.

This act of disobedience, bad as it was, was soon followed by a worse. Disobedience to the Word of God is a habit that grows upon one. A few years later we have God sending Saul a special word, through Samuel, as to the destruction of the Amalekites. 1 Samuel 15 records how he partially carried out the instructions, and then elected to use his own discretion as to certain details, preferring his own opinion to the Word of God. Without a question the Modernist of today would altogether agree with Saul. To his way of thinking the Divine instructions were the product of a barbaric age, and Saul's action represented the dawning of higher ethical ideas. God, however, knew what He was doing when He ordered their entire extermination. It was a sanitary measure of a spiritual sort. Their sins were pestilential, and they were to be stamped out like a pestilence. Saul however, had no scruples such as those of the Modernist; his excuses for his disobedience were not based on ethical grounds, they were of a more subtle order. He would like to preserve the best of the belongings of the Amalekites for himself, and would do so under cover of devoting them to the service of God.

Disobedience which springs from carelessness or indifference is bad; that which is sheer wilfulness is worse. Worst of all is that which while springing from wilfulness — yet arrays itself in a cloak of pretended piety and zeal for the interests of the Lord. It was that of which Saul was now guilty, and hence the strong and drastic way in which God met it through the lips of Samuel, saying, "Wherefore then didst thou not obey 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. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king" (1 Sam. 15: 19-23)

Was Saul tempted to think of the instructions as to Amalek as being merely an expression of Samuel's opinion? We know not: but if he did he had absolutely no ground for so thinking. It was unquestionably the Word of God, for there staring him in the face were the Divine instructions of Deuteronomy 25: 17-19; the very remembrance of Amalek was to be blotted out from under heaven. His presumptuous disobedience resulted in his ruin and death.

Let us now turn from Saul to Solomon. How very different the circumstances! The former was in the position of a petty king struggling to maintain his feet. The latter was firmly established in his kingdom as the fruit of the faithfulness and obedience of his father David. He was an overlord to the kings of the surrounding nations, prosperous and marvellously blessed of God, with every inducement to continue in a path of obedience. Yet in spite of all this, and of the special wisdom with which he was endowed, he was guilty of most flagrant disobedience to the plain commands of God as recorded in the books of Moses: consequently he grievously damaged himself, and also sowed the seeds of the total ruin of his once splendid kingdom.

In the early part of 1 Kings 10 we have the incident of the Queen of Sheba and her visit. In reading it we get an idea of the extraordinary greatness and magnificence of Solomon's court and kingdom. The enquiring Queen of the south had her breath completely taken away, "there was no more

spirit in her." In the latter part of the chapter many further details are given, which impress us yet more with the splendour of those days when all the vessels of the king's house were of gold and none were of silver, for silver was then in Jerusalem as stones;" it was nothing accounted of in the days of Solomon."

Yet towards the end of this striking chapter, wherein success is piled upon success and magnificence upon magnificence, a few remarks are quietly made which tell their own tale to the thoughtful reader. We begin to be suspicious, and when we turn to chapter 11 and note the significant "But" with which that chapter opens, our suspicions are turned into a sad certainty that something is seriously amiss.

First of all then, we notice that all this magnificent accumulation of gold and silver and ivory, of articles of value and objects of art and vertu, descending even to apes and peacocks, was all collected for his own pleasure and gratification. He was the centre around which all revolved. How different he was to his father in this. David truly collected immense stores of gold and other forms of wealth as the result of his victorious campaigns, but in his case Jehovah, as identified with His temple, was the Centre to which all was gathered. If David received large sums into his privy purse, as unquestionably he did, he still kept Jehovah's interests before him. He could say, "I have prepared with all my might for the house of my God the gold . . . and the silver . . . and all manner of precious stones.... Moreover, because I have set my affection to the house of my God, I have of mine own proper good, of gold and silver, which I have given to the house of my God, over and above all that I have prepared for the holy house, even three thousand talents of gold...." (1 Chr. 29: 2-5). Further, having enumerated all these things, he gladly confessed, "Of Thine own have we given Thee," thus showing that he fully recognized that all belonged to God and that he was but a steward of all that which had been entrusted to his hand. Solomon was quite on different lines. All that he got he heaped up for his own benefit.

Secondly, we notice in the end of the chapter in 1 Kings that Solomon went largely in for horses. He "gathered together chariots and horsemen: and he had a thousand and four hundred chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen." This is emphasised by repetition a couple of verses further on, where it is said, "And Solomon had horses brought out of Egypt." This is the more noticeable inasmuch as up to this point there is hardly any mention of the horse in connection with the history of Israel. The ass we often read of, and also the mule; Absalom, the son of David, the king, only rode upon a mule, it will be remembered, and the ox seems to have been the beast of burden. It was not, of course, surprising that Solomon sent to Egypt for horses, for he had already obtained his queen from there, and she naturally would desire to have the very superior animal to which she had been accustomed.

Thirdly, we come to that very significant "But" with which 1 Kings 11 opens. "But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; of the nations concerning which the Lord said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go into them, neither shall they come in unto you." Here we have mentioned a matter in which he most grievously sinned. Not only was there polygamy of a very extravagant and outrageous sort, but there was, as pointed out, the breaking of the commandment which forbade intermarriage with the surrounding nations, lest the infection of their idolatry should spread amongst the tribes of Israel. This commandment applied to the people universally, and Solomon might have known, therefore, that as the leader of and example to the people, it applied fully to himself.

But there was more than this. Solomon was not left to draw inferences from the Word of God, however obvious and unquestionable those inferences were. In Deuteronomy 17, to which we have already referred, there lay clearly before him the most positive and clear commands from God on all the three points we have just noticed.

In verses 14 and 15 of that chapter it is foretold that a day would come when, settled into their own land, Israel would desire a king and propose to set one over themselves, and in view of that eventuality certain instructions are given. The Lord said, "He shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the Lord hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way. Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold" (verses 16, 17). In the days of Moses, the great lawgiver, the all-seeing eye of God had traversed the centuries, and He foresaw the future kings of Israel and their special dangers, and He provided the needful warning in His Word, and also the antidote by ordering that the future king should write his own copy of the law, and have it always with him so as to read therein all the days of his life, and so turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand or to the left. (See verses 18-20.)

Yet, as far as Solomon was concerned, these commandments might as well never have been written. Precisely what had been forbidden, that he did! It is hardly possible that he was ignorant of what God had said. It is far more likely that he had arguments in his mind and reasons which he considered excellent, quite sufficient in fact to authorise him to treat the ancient Word through Moses as a dead letter. Had not the times changed? Had not military tactics advanced since the days of Moses, so that the horse which formerly had been a luxury had now become a necessity? — and so on. It matters little, however, just what specious excuses Solomon had in his mind. The fact remains: he met the plain directions of God's Word with flat denial and disobedience, and thereby he started rolling a snowball of destruction which did not stop until it had become an avalanche of judgment which swept Israel away.

When first we put together Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Kings 10 and 11 we confess we were astounded. Such a deliberate infraction of Scripture on the part of an otherwise wise man, like Solomon, seemed almost incredible. Many of our readers, perhaps, have a similar feeling on having their attention called to it in this paper. We must confess, however, that today we contemplate it without any surprise whatever. We know a little more of the insubject folly of our own hearts, and we have observed, too, a little of the free and easy way in which professed Christians, and even real ones, treat the injunctions of the Word of God. Apparently they are to be obeyed or not obeyed at their own discretion, for they are far from trembling at the Word of God.

How lightly, alas! do many young believers brush aside that solemn New Testament injunction, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6: 14-18), and contract a marriage — the most pronounced and enduring yoke known amongst mankind — with an unconverted partner. How often do Christians entangle themselves in a yoke of business partnership with unconverted men. How often do they entangle themselves in all kinds of trade and business and social alliances in order to further their own interests or to escape reproach and persecution.

How slowly, if at all, does many a Christian obey the instructions of the Word of God as to what the believer shall do when evil of a fundamental sort has entered and permeated the mass. This question was raised early in the Church's history through the false teachings of Hymenaeus and Philetus, and answered in Paul's second letter to Timothy. The instructions are, to purge oneself from these vessels to dishonour. This assumes that it is no longer possible to purge them out as old leaven according to 1 Corinthians 5. If this were universally observed and obeyed by all believers who are sound in, and true to, the faith, God would be honoured in His Word. But no, alas! multitudes of them find plenty of reasons, to their minds quite cogent enough, for staying where they are, and contenting themselves with protests and attempts at improving the existing corruption. If only every true believer cleared himself from all complicity with false and apostate teachings, and extricated himself from all corrupt and

merely human systems, in obedience to the Word, what a revival there would be!

A third striking illustration of our theme occurs almost immediately after the days of Solomon. In 1 Kings 13 we have the incident of the man of God out of Judah who went by command of the Lord to prophesy against the altar at Bethel which Jeroboam had made. He courageously executed his mission in every point, save one. He had received very strict instructions not to identify himself in any way with the people or the place against which his prophecy was directed, there was not to be the smallest fellowship between them. "Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest," was the Word. This Word he disobeyed.

In one respect, however, he differed from the other cases we have considered. With them the disobedience was of an open and deliberate kind, with him it was not. He was decoyed into it after obeying at first. Remarkably enough, his punishment seemed far more drastic, and certainly was far more immediate, than in the case of the other two. This was doubtless because as a prophet and a man of God he was in closer contact with God than the others, and to whom much is given in the way of privilege of them more is required.

The first thing that this prophet had to face was *the world's violence*. "Lay hold on him," shouted the angry king. This did not deflect him from the path of obedience nor terrify him, and soon the king's spirit was subdued and he was glad to receive healing at the prophet's hands.

Immediately after the prophet was tested by *the world's patronage*. "Come home with me, and refresh thyself," was now the king's invitation. The prophet now had the opportunity of being the world's honoured guest; a far more serious temptation. Yet he firmly withstood it.

A little later, when the prophet had started back another way, in accordance with the Word of the Lord, the old prophet of Bethel came upon the scenes with his invitation, "Come home with me and eat bread." Here he was tested by *religious associations*, which are far more dangerous. How difficult to refuse the kindly invitation of one's fellow-prophet; yet he did it.

This, however, was immediately followed by a wicked act of *religious imitation*. The old prophet paraded before him the fact that he, too, held the prophet's office, and then he claimed a special revelation through an angel which had the effect of completely nullifying the original instructions under which he acted, and bidding him do the very thing he had been told not to do. "Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he lied unto him." Before this deceit the man of God fell.

Oh, why did he listen! Surely a few moments reflection would have sufficed to put him on his guard. Does God usually fail to foresee the end from the beginning, and consequently have to countermand His instructions before His enterprises are finished? If originally God gave him his instructions *direct*, would He now fail to inform him *direct* of further instructions, and notify instead someone who had no part in the matter? It was easy and pleasant, however, to acquiesce. He did so, and disobeyed.

What a powerful voice all this has for us. The servant of God to-day may on occasions be called to go into strange places to render a word of testimony to His Lord, and thus find himself in unusual surroundings, yet he must be very careful as to his associations, and see that he fulfils the Divine Word, "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Eph. 5: 11). To have fellowship is to become compromised oneself.

To entangle us the adversary will spare no devices. If one does not succeed he will try another, as we see in the case of the man of God. Some of us fall easily before the frowns of the world, or its

smiles; others are not so easily caught, and religious enticements are brought into play. It is a sad reflection that for this dirty work no tool comes so readily to the devil's hand as a false professor of religion or a true child of God terribly back-slidden. The old prophet of Bethel may have been one or the other; which we cannot determine.

The sum of the whole matter is this: there is nothing so good and safe and pleasing to God as full and unquestioning obedience to His Word. All necessary instructions for the man of God are found in it, as 2 Timothy 3: 16, 17 affirms; therefore we may disobey by *going beyond it*, just as we may by falling short of it. We may easily become a little fanciful and think we are maintaining the testimony, or honouring the Lord, when we are only straining at gnats, to end by swallowing the camel of definite disobedience to what the Word of God does most plainly say.

Let us then accept the Old Testament warnings with searchings of heart, and so be made wise unto salvation from the sin of disobedience to the Word of God. The Lord has said, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and *trembleth at My Word*" (Isa. 66: 2).