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The Peril of Divided Loyalties

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 1 Sam. 31:1-13; 2 Sam. 1:17-27.

It is around Jonathan that our thoughts are gathered at this time. His is a strange and very pathetic story and raises a matter which is perhaps more difficult to resolve than most - the whole question of divided loyalties.

We take a cursory glance at Jonathan and his father Saul, and we see a good many variations in their histories; strange mixture, many conflicting and contradictory features. Sometimes both of them seem to be in the full flood of Divine blessing and help. At one time you find Saul moving out and subduing all his enemies round about, seeming to be in a tide of spiritual life and power and help from the Lord, and then at another time you see situations such as the one we have just read, with everything in reverse - defeat, failure, tragedy. So also with Jonathan. There was at least one outstanding occasion when with his armourbearer he went out and made that great assault upon the Philistines, issuing in the complete demoralization of the Philistines so that they fled before Israel. Clearly the Lord was with Jonathan on that day in great fulness and blessing. Then you come to the story we have just read - complete reverse. Taking such an inconsistent and contradictory history, you have to get down into it and behind it and ask some basic questions.

The Lord Not Prejudiced Against People As such

But we must first of all look at it from the Lord's side; and what I see as coming up out of this whole story in the first place is this, that the Lord has no prejudices against people as such. When a man is, even if only temporarily, stretched out for the Lord's interests and abandoned to His honour and glory, although the Lord knows a great deal more about him as to origins or as to ultimates and knows perhaps the failure that is coming later, yet for that time the Lord shows that He is not prejudiced against the man. He is with him while and when he is utterly for the Lord. There were times when even Saul surmounted that other side of his nature and seemed to be set upon the Lord's interests, and it is quite clear that Jonathan was like that. The Lord knew what the end would be and what was deeper down in the heart, but for that time He showed that He was not prejudiced against the individuals. It is a tremendous thing for us to realize, that "the Lord is with you while ye be with him" (2 Chron. 15:2). In spite of a lot that the Lord knows about us, and of the fact that He knows the end from the beginning, He is right there to give us a full chance and a full blessing, immediately we are utterly for Him. It is a thing to lay in store.

God Cannot Compromise on Principle

But while that is true, what comes out in the life of both Saul and Jonathan is that God cannot compromise on principle. When principles are contravened He cannot stand by the people concerned. Sooner or later it will be manifested that, while the Lord loves the people, He cannot support the wrong principles which are governing their lives. That will be the key to this whole situation, as we shall see as we go on.

No Compromise with the Self-Principle

Now, deep down in Saul there was the self-principle active; there is no doubt about it; and, although at times he seemed to rise above it and to have the Lord's interests at heart, that self-principle was recurrent, and when put to the final test with Amalek in Chapter 15, we find that it asserted itself again. That was the turning point, where the Lord rejected Saul and finally in intention passed the kingdom from him to David. The self-principle goes too deep for the Lord to regard it lightly. It is not just a matter of the person. It is there that the link with an entirely antagonistic spiritual system is found. Amalek was such a link. Amalek had stood in the way of Israel when they came out of Egypt and were making for the land. They had stood across their path in the attempt to frustrate the Lord's intentions of spiritual fulness for Israel, and that very people Amalek were the test case for Saul as to whether he was really wholly set upon the Lord or whether he had personal interests. When, through Samuel, the Lord commanded Saul to destroy every vestige of Amalek, leaving nothing alive, Saul reserved the best of the herd and the flock. He discriminated according to human judgment, to keep something that he fancied, that he thought was good. He set his own judgment over against the judgment of the Lord because of this self-principle that was in him, thus proving that in principle he was one with Amalek, that is, he was not set upon all that the Lord was after. The Lord was seeking to bring Israel into the land, that is, to spiritual fulness. Amalek said 'No'. Saul and Amalek found themselves one in principle. He spared them. But see what Samuel does to Agag, king of the Amalekites! - he hews him in pieces before the Lord. There is no compromise there.

The Self-Principle Links With the Kingdom of Satan

The self-principle goes so deep as to link with not just another nation, but with the spiritual domination of false principles that are standing right in the way of spiritual fulness. Any self-interest is Amalek straddled across the path which leads to spiritual fulness. It is not just a little bit of childish

selfishness to be excused and pardoned. It goes right deep down to the kingdom of Satan, and God cannot compromise on a principle that gives Satan an opportunity to frustrate His full purpose in Christ. So God sees where this thing comes from, not just the form of its present manifestation. It comes from the devil, and the devil is all the time out to cut across the way of spiritual fulness. The Lord, knowing that, cannot compromise. We have to be quite sure that the background is wholly according to the Lord's mind, or all our fighting against what we think to be the Lord's enemies will only bring disaster upon ourselves, as in the story of Saul.

Divided Loyalties Issue in Disaster

Now take Jonathan. Even he can be involved at last in the awful tragedy of compromise. It is one of the saddest stories. We all want to shed tears when we read David's lament over Jonathan. We remember the beginnings of the relationship between David and Jonathan, how their souls were knit together. Their story is always being taken as a kind of classic and model of friendship, and yet even there there were divided loyalties in the case of Jonathan - loyalty to the realm of nature, to his father after the flesh, straining against his loyalty to David, and causing him to be a divided personality. When he is with his father, his heart is with David. When he is with David, he feels the pull of duty to his father. He is a divided man. What a problem divided loyalties present!

Jonathan must have known all about that Amalek episode and what Samuel did; that in the Divine intent the kingdom was then taken from Saul and passed to David; that the Lord forsook Saul and was no longer with him. He may have known of the consultation with the witch, the touching of that realm forbidden so strongly by the Lord. And yet, on natural grounds of some kind, Jonathan did not break with that whole system of things. What a different story might have been told if he had taken sides wholly with David and been David's right hand man for the kingdom! But this divided loyalty involved him in the ultimate tragedy. And even good people who have been blessed of the Lord, to whom He has shown His favour and whom He has used very greatly, may in the end be involved in spiritual tragedy if for some reason compromise has entered in. It may have come in because of policy. What a snare policy is! We tell ourselves we must be very careful that we do not do this or that because it may have such and such a result. It is all policy and diplomacy. 'We must be careful to avoid...' - what? just what we seek to avoid betrays the whole case. Are we afraid of losing prestige with men, support, friends, position, opportunity? Do these things weigh with us as over against implicit obedience to the Lord? If so, there is divided loyalty; and if we allow it, we may at the end pass into terrible tragedy; the tragedy that always follows compromise.

Divine Fulness Reached By Subjection to Divine Principles

The whole question of spiritual fulness is at stake. I have spoken of what might have been in the case of Jonathan. David came to the kingdom in fulness, and Jonathan might have been there at his side, his strength and support in the kingdom. But no; instead of that, he passes out in this tragic way. In a sense, there is nothing wrong with Jonathan; but he has become involved in compromise with another one and another instrument and another order of things, because he did not make a clean cut. It is not for us to judge why, but it does seem that it must have been that he argued on the ground of natural reasoning about this thing. What does it all amount to? If spiritual fulness is to be reached, we have to be governed by Divine and heavenly principles, and not by human considerations. Divine principles; not, What will the consequences be? not, What shall we lose? not even, What will the Lord lose? - because that is a very subtle argument. The Lord does not ask us to reason this thing out on that level at all. He says, 'What is the Divine principle? Let that principle

govern and guide.' You may not see at all how it is going to work out. If you are governed by Divine principles you may seem to lose a lot here; you may, for a time, have to go out with David and wait. But in the end the principles will be vindicated. You have to recognise that compromise on principle only brings disaster. You see it everywhere.

Former Blessing No Argument for Present Compromise

The need is to seek to know what the Divine principle is in any matter. Has God revealed His own thought and mind? Then I must not pursue some other way on the ground that the Lord has blessed and the Lord has used that other way. That was true of Saul; that was true of Jonathan. But there came a point at which an ultimate issue was raised on principle by the revealing of God's full mind. Now I cannot argue that because people have been blessed and used of the Lord though they have not at given times and in given ways stood for that full mind, therefore it is not necessary for me to be abandoned to God's full thought. That is human argument. We must not do it. The Lord blesses when the heart is wholly for Him, but that does not mean that everything is there that He wants. The very people whom He is using He will presently bring to see something more of His will and how much more deeply His thoughts go. Then it is no less an issue than Amalek. Human judgment must be utterly put away, in the light of the Divine mind then revealed.

I have no doubt you can see through what I am saying a great deal more. If you do not grasp the whole thing, just take this as a guiding lesson in life, that where Divine fulness is concerned, the fact that the Lord blesses does not warrant us in arguing that we can stay in a certain position, that there is nothing more required. The point is, has the Lord revealed something more than is actually represented in the sphere where we have known His blessing? If so, it is for us to go on in the light of all that the Lord has revealed, and take the consequences. In the end it will be seen whether the principle was vindicated by God.

This story of Jonathan is, I say, a terribly pathetic and tragic story. No doubt he had a good argument for what he did, but he certainly did not argue from the heavenly standpoint. He did not say, 'God has made it perfectly clear that it is through David that His full purpose is to be realized. I knew from the beginning that David was the anointed, and not my father; I have had it confirmed again and again; I told David that he was going to have the throne and the kingdom; my heart is with him; and yet he is out there in the wilderness and I am here with my father. What am I doing here?' He did not argue, 'That is the direction in which the Lord's full purpose lies; it is for me to be there.' He doubtless had his arguments and his reasons and could probably have been very plausible as to why he was still sticking to his father and to the kingdom from which God had departed. He was compromising. His loyalty was divided and he was involved in the tragedy.

It is a fresh call to us to act on principle with the Lord and not to argue from any other standpoint, on any other ground. We must say, 'What has the Lord revealed? It will mean this, it will cost that, it will involve me thus; but that is not the point. I am not going to be influenced or governed by consequences at all. Policy must have no place with me. What God has revealed - that is the only argument for me.'

So Amalek became the occasion for bringing up the whole question of obedience to the Lord, involving the necessity for the setting aside of a great deal of natural judgment. "Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?" (1 Sam: 15:22).

Beyond all outward observance and profession, the Lord looks for full and uncompromising obedience to His revealed will.