

SAUL SPARES AGAG

I Samuel 15

The teachers should all be familiar with the events of the chapters between 8 and 15, but the events to be reviewed in class are the anointing of Saul, his later choice by lot, the people's satisfaction with him, his first victory, and his first defection as described in chapters 10:8 and 13:8-14.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord is pure, unselfish love and seeks above all to drive selfishness out of our hearts for the sake of making us happy.

Our first understanding of the Word is based on external appearances.

Faith in the Lord involves obedience to Him even against our own judgment.

We need to recognize clearly how many of our thoughts spring from our hereditary self-love.

Notes for Parents

We are beginning the period in Israel's history when the nation attained its largest dominion and its greatest importance among nations. We remember that importance in the world was what they were looking for when they asked Samuel to give them a king. Through a series of the three great kings—Saul, David, and Solomon—they did achieve their goal, but they had to learn by bitter experience that security and happiness do not come from worldly power.

Saul was their first king, chosen for them by the Lord because He knew that the only kind of king who would impress them at that time was one like Saul. Saul stood head and shoulders above all the other men, and they respected him for his apparent strength. When we are young, we too judge by the outward appearance of a thing.

Saul had the strength and the weakness of youth. He was brave and eager, but he was also self-confident, hasty, and impatient. He won his first battle, and it turned his head so that he never again was willing to follow exactly the Lord's instructions as they came to him through Samuel, although he and all the people knew that Samuel was the Lord's prophet. Our chapter today tells of his act of disobedience, which finally cost him the kingdom. The Amalekites were a wily foe. When they first attacked Israel in the wilderness at Rephidim, the Israelites conquered them only because Moses went up on the mountain and with the support of Aaron and Hur kept his hands lifted to the Lord until the sun set.

All our ability to resist temptation—brought on by our inward foes—comes from the Lord. When we forget this and trust in our own goodness and wisdom, we often find that our judgment of what is best to do is at variance with the Lord's commands. Like Saul, we do not want to give up things which seem useful and pleasant to us even when the Lord has told us to do so. We do not strike at the root of our trouble, which is self-love and self-satisfaction. In the language of parable, we keep king Agag alive.

Primary

Be sure the children know that Saul was the first of three great kings who ruled over the whole land, and try to make them see why it was that Saul got into trouble even though he really meant in the beginning to be good. He thought he knew better than the Lord what ought to be done, just as children sometimes do not fully obey their parents because their own way seems better. Review the story of Israel's first battle with Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16) and compare the method of the victory there with Saul's victory and his disobedience.

Saul meant to be a good king, and he won his first battle. But this first victory made him feel too sure of himself. Samuel was still the Lord's prophet, and Saul knew that he ought to do just what Samuel told him to do. But Saul was impatient. The next time an enemy threatened, he gathered his army and did not wait for Samuel to come and offer the sacrifices, as he was supposed

to do, but went ahead and offered them himself. And then Samuel came and told him that because he had not strictly obeyed the Lord, his kingdom would not be a lasting one.

In our lesson today what enemy is to be attacked?

Where have we heard of them before?

How were they conquered the first time?

What does Samuel tell Saul to do?

How did Saul disobey the Lord this time?

What excuse did he give?

What did Samuel tell him?

What happened to Agag?

You know sometimes when you have been naughty, you go and hug and kiss your mother and think that will make her forget your naughtiness. She likes your hugs and kisses, of course, but she would be happier if you loved her enough to mind her, and your life would be happier too.

Junior

In this lesson again something of the general spiritual meaning can be given to the Juniors through a study of Saul's good and bad points and his excuse for sparing Agag and the cattle. This kind of confidence in our own superior judgment begins sometimes when we are very young, and the story can be a helpful warning.

The Lord had chosen Saul to be Israel's first king because He knew that they would judge by his outward appearance and that they would have to learn by experience that appearance is sometimes deceiving.

Saul's first battle was against the Ammonites in the cross-Jordan country, and he won it. This made the people sure that he was the right one for their king, but unfortunately it also made Saul himself too sure of his own power and ability. He was well-meaning and brave, but not very wise. So when the Philistines rose up and threatened Israel again, Saul was in too much of a hurry to take the proper means of approach to the battle. He knew that although he was king, Samuel was still the Lord's prophet, and Samuel had

told him to wait seven days for him to come and offer sacrifices before the battle. But Saul grew impatient and on the seventh day offered the sacrifices himself before Samuel got there. Then Samuel told him that because he trusted in himself instead of obeying the Lord, his kingdom would be short-lived.

Both the Ammonites, over whom Saul had won his first victory, and the Philistines were open enemies of Israel; and both had collected armies and prepared to attack before Saul went out to meet them. But now Samuel tells Saul to hunt out and attack an old enemy which did not seem to be threatening them at the moment.

Who was this enemy?

When have we heard of them before?

How was the victory won that first time?

What was the method of attack of the Amalekites?

Saul did not hesitate to obey the Lord's command to go out against the Amalekites. He was a strong man and liked to fight. And he and his army won a complete victory. But he did not obey the Lord completely. He thought he knew better.

What had Samuel told him to do to the Amalekites?

How did he disobey?

Saul destroyed everything that seemed to him bad and worthless, but he could not resist the temptation to save what looked valuable. Once before—in Joshua's time—someone had disobeyed in this same way, and Israel had suffered for it. You will find the story in Joshua 7.

The wars of Israel picture our battles against our selfish desires and wrong thoughts. We all are willing to fight these things, because we know that they do us harm and make trouble for us. But we are often like Saul. We want to destroy only what we clearly see to be harmful and to keep the things which seem pleasant and which we enjoy—"the best of the sheep and of the oxen"—even though the Lord has told us to get rid of our selfishness completely. In fact, we sometimes rather like our weaknesses. Have you ever heard someone say, "Oh, I have a terrible temper," as if he were rather proud of it? He learns, as a matter of common sense, to

control his temper whenever losing it would make him ashamed of himself, but with his family and friends he rather enjoys showing it off. We “save the king” when, while destroying what appears outwardly bad, we leave the root of the trouble untouched in our hearts.

What excuse did Saul give for saving the best of the cattle?

What did Samuel tell him?

How did Saul try to keep Samuel from leaving him?

What happened?

What did Samuel say it meant?

What happened to Agag?



Intermediate

Identify Saul as the first of the series of three great kings. Stress the immaturity of the understanding of divine truth which he represents and the reason for his failures. Young people are hard to reason with when they are in the heat of an argument with their parents in favor of something they want, but if the realization that their present understanding may be rather limited has been brought home to them in Sunday school, when they are in a quiet and receptive mood, it may come back to them when they need it and prove a help to their parents.

In the Bible, a king represents a ruling principle. All three great kings of the Israelites—Saul, David, and Solomon—were chosen by the Lord and represent the Lord’s truth governing in our lives. But our understanding of the Lord’s truth develops gradually as we use it. We have to learn many things by experience. At first we have only a natural understanding of the Word and of its application to life. We mean to obey the Lord, but our judgment as to what He would have us do is hasty and shallow. This level of understanding is represented by Saul. The Lord chose Saul as the first king because he was the only kind of leader the people would have accepted and followed at that time. I Samuel 10:23-24 tells us that he was “higher than any of the people from his shoulders and upward,” and so they were delighted with him. They judged him by his appearance, as we are all prone to judge things before

experience has taught us to look more deeply.

Saul won his first battle, which was with the Ammonites in the cross-Jordan country. The cross-Jordan country represents the outward plane of conduct. The natural understanding of truth represented by Saul can easily see and resist temptations on this plane. But Saul's first victory gave him a confidence in himself which was his undoing. We have already learned how, when his enemy was the Philistines, he was too impatient to wait for Samuel to come and offer the necessary sacrifices, and instead offered them himself. His army overcame the Philistines not through Saul's leadership, but by means of the exploit of his son Jonathan, who trusted in the Lord instead of in himself. And we remember that at that time Samuel told Saul that his kingdom would not be of long duration.

Our natural understanding of truth, pictured by Saul as king, is pleasing to us, and is able to overcome some external evils; but it is easily deceived by appearances and is impatient with the Lord's commands when they do not appear to bring immediate results. Our story today illustrates the inadequacy of this degree of understanding.

The enemies that the Israelites were to destroy were the Amalekites, descendants of Esau. Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, represents goodness on the natural plane, while Jacob represents truth. When they were separated and striving against each other, many evils resulted. Esau went to live in the wilderness, as good intentions always do when they are without truth to guide them. One of the bad results of this separate life is liable to be an inner feeling of satisfaction with one's own good intentions. We feel sure that we "mean well" and therefore that our own ideas of right and wrong must be correct. This is a deep-seated kind of self-love, often not recognized as an enemy at all until it suddenly leads one into trouble. Amalek, as a descendant of Esau, represents false ideas which spring from hidden self-satisfaction, often leading to discouragement in the face of the demands of spiritual living. The Amalekites always struck from ambush, as we learned in our lesson

about Israel's first battle with them at Rephidim, or they combined with other enemies, as they had in the time of the Judge Gideon (Judges 6:3). And we remember that at Rephidim they were conquered only by Moses going up on the mountain and keeping his hands uplifted to the Lord. We cannot conquer this temptation when we are self-confident.

Apparently, although they were known to be hostile, the Amalekites were not openly attacking in Saul's time. But the Lord through Samuel commanded Saul to hunt them out and utterly destroy them. Saul was willing enough to make the attack and won a victory, but he again set up his own judgment against the Lord's and did not completely obey. He saved the king (who symbolizes the principal falsity) alive, and brought back the best of the sheep and oxen (which represent the outward manifestations of this evil) which to our natural reason seem to be harmless and even useful.

When Samuel pointed out Saul's disobedience, Saul claimed that he had saved these things as sacrifices to the Lord. This pictures a very common excuse for disobeying the commandments. For example, sharp practices in business are winked at when part of the resulting fortune is used for endowing charitable institutions. A common example of this evil was condemned by the Lord in Mark 7:9-13.

Samuel as prophet pictures the Word, and his garments the letter of the Word. Saul's tearing Samuel's mantle pictures his unwillingness to keep the truth whole. This was the reason why the kingdom had to pass from his line.

Basic Correspondences

Saul = a natural understanding of
divine truth

Agag = self-satisfaction ruling in the life

Senior

The teacher should study the quotations at the end of the lesson and be pre-

pared with examples of “Amalek temptations” suited to the experience of the class. The effort should be to show the young people how prone we are to accept thoughts and arguments which favor our own natural self-interest as true.

Israel, after conquering the Holy Land under Joshua, became lax under prosperity and, in the period of the Judges, was more and more troubled by its enemies until it came to desire a king who could organize concerted resistance.

Samuel, the last of the Judges, at the Lord’s command anointed Saul, and Saul was welcomed by the people because of his height and fine appearance. Saul, the first of the three kings of the united nation, represents a natural understanding of the truth such as we are likely to have when we are young people. It desires to serve the Lord and is eager for action, but it is impatient under delays and, reasoning from appearances, is liable to set itself up as a better judge of what should be done than even the Lord. Saul won his first victory over the Ammonites; but in his struggle against the Philistines refused to wait for Samuel’s sanction and won only because his son Jonathan, who did trust wholly in the Lord, opened the way for his army.

At that time Samuel rebuked Saul and told him that the kingdom must pass out of his line, which pictures the fact that as we progress, a natural understanding of the truth is not sufficient to rule our lives.

Our story today shows still more clearly Saul’s strength and weakness. The two foes he had so far overcome were open enemies, gathered in force for attack. Now he is told to seek out and destroy the Amalekites, an enemy who never attacked openly, but lay in wait for their foes. Saul is perfectly willing to attack this foe also and wins a victory, but contrary to the Lord’s command to destroy the enemy utterly, he saves the king and the best of the sheep and oxen, again setting up his own judgment above the Lord’s command, and drawing final condemnation upon himself.

Swedenborg says that Amalek represents “falsity from interior evil.” We know from our own experience how readily we see as good those things which serve our self-interest, even when we sin-

cerely believe we are trying to do right. A natural understanding of truth inevitably condemns only the obvious evils, and takes to itself the fair-seeming practices—the best of the sheep and oxen—leaving untouched the deep selfish root idea—represented by king Agag. Saul’s claim that he saved the sheep and oxen as a sacrifice to the Lord also has a familiar ring. In business, in society, and in political life today many basically selfish and wrong acts are excused with the argument that “the end justifies the means.”

When Samuel told Saul that the kingdom was to be taken from him and started to move away from him, we read that Saul caught hold of the skirt of Samuel’s mantle and tore it. Samuel, we remember, represents the Word; so his mantle represents the letter of the Word. Saul’s weakness was his unwillingness to keep the letter of the divine command. To symbolize this Samuel’s garment was torn by his hand. Our spiritual power is dependent upon our obedience to the divine commands. Our own judgment must not be allowed to interfere with this. The Lord is always and forever wiser than men.

One of the quotations at the end of this lesson describes more exactly the temptation represented by Amalek, and its source. You remember that Amalek was the first enemy the children of Israel actually had to fight after they left Egypt. It was the battle at Rephidim, when Moses went up on the mountain and Aaron and Hur held up his hands to the Lord throughout the battle, because when he let his hands fall, Amalek prevailed. The quotation refers to the last verse of that story (Exodus 17:16) which says that “the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.” Swedenborg calls the evil spirits whom Amalek represents “evil genii” because of their malignancy and subtlety. The thoughts they inspire in us appeal to our natural selfishness, and our first natural understanding of truth, with its tendency to self-confidence, is no match for them. Saul alone could not “root out” the Amalekites. Only the humble acknowledgment of our own weakness and self-love and the persistent lifting of our thoughts above worldly and selfish considerations to the Lord can win a

complete victory.

Adult

The best discussion material for this class will probably be based on the general correspondence of Saul and the enemies he could and could not overcome. In a church society we need constantly to help people of all ages to understand each other, to distinguish between good intentions and wisdom, to make allowances for each other, and to work together harmoniously in the Lord's service.

The three great kings who ruled over the whole land—Saul, David, and Solomon—all picture the Lord's divine truth ruling in our life. The enemies they fought are symbolic of evils and falsities within ourselves which oppose the rule of divine truth. Yet Saul, David, and Solomon were not perfect men, nor were they always victorious. Divine truth is received by us individually in different ways and in each of us differently at different stages of our progress through life. In a general sense the period of the kings represents an adult state, a time when we are making our own choices and are responsible for them. And also this period represents a part of the regenerate life. The Holy Land has been entered and has become our home. And we have also passed through the temptation to imagine that no more effort is required of us—the period of the Judges—and are ready to resume the conquest of our inner and outer evils under the rule of divine truth. We accept the Word as our guide—Samuel is still the Lord's prophet. Why are we not always victorious?

It is because our understanding of the truth is imperfect and because our inherited tendency to self-love and self-assertion is ever present and active, whether we recognize it or not. Saul represents divine truth as we first see it at this stage of regeneration. He was acceptable to the people because he stood head and shoulders above them. The Lord had told Samuel to let the people have their king, and He had chosen Saul and commanded Samuel to anoint him. The Lord leads each of us as best He can according to our states, preserving our freedom.

A study of attitudes of “young adult” groups in churches will help us to understand the reign of Saul. Usually they mean well, and they start out with the recognition of their inexperience. When Samuel first told Saul that he was to be king, Saul said: “Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin?” And later, when at Mizpah the lot fell upon Saul, Saul had “hid himself among the stuff.” And Saul, like the young adults in the church, was brave and eager and very willing to go into battle; and he won his first battle. It was against the Ammonites, who were attacking Jabesh-Gilead in the cross-Jordan country. It represents resistance against an obvious external temptation. But this first victory was all that was needed to disclose Saul’s inadequacy for the kingship. For it “turned his head.” It gave him confidence in himself instead of in the Lord. When we are young, we are much like Saul in this respect. It takes only a very little success and praise to make us self-confident and impatient of advice or control.

In the story of Saul and Jonathan and the battle with the Philistines, you remember, Saul had been told to wait seven days until Samuel should come and offer the proper sacrifices before beginning the battle. But Saul saw the Philistine reinforcements coming in and his own men deserting, and he decided that he himself could offer the sacrifices as well as Samuel. Like Saul, our first understanding of divine truth is based on appearances. We are impatient with delay and in a hurry to “get things done.” It was only after Jonathan, who trusted in the Lord instead of in himself, had by his simple exploit thrown the Philistine army into confusion that Saul was able to attack and defeat it. The Philistine temptation to think that knowing the truth will save us without obedience to it can obviously not be overcome by confidence in self.

This lesson gives us Saul’s final failure, although he continued to be king in name for some time afterward. The Amalekites were the first enemy who attacked the Israelites after they left Egypt. We have had the story of this first battle at Rephidim, which the Israelites won only because Moses went up into the mountain and,

with the help of Aaron and Hur, kept his hands lifted to the Lord until the sun went down. The Amalekites represent “falsity from interior evil.” Swedenborg, in speaking of Amalek in AC 8593, says: “Interior evil is that which lies inwardly concealed with man, hidden in his will, and thence in his thought, no trace of which appears in his externals, as in his actions, speech, and face.” He says that those in the other world who are in this kind of evil are not called evil spirits but “evil genii,” and that in their effort to influence us they “do not attack the truths of faith, but the goods of faith; for they act by means of depraved affections, whereby they pervert good thoughts, and this in a manner almost incomprehensible,” and that they “never attack a man openly, nor when he is capable of vigorous resistance; but when it appears that a man is falling so as to yield, they are suddenly at hand, and push him on to a complete fall.”

We can see why Saul—picturing the natural understanding of divine truth, based on appearances—was seduced by this enemy into sparing the things which seemed to him good, and so also sparing the king—the ruling principle—of the Amalekites. Swedenborg (in the same number quoted above) refers to the evil genii again in connection with verse 32 of our chapter: “‘To go delicately’ signifies the outward blandishments of such spirits in the presence of others.” It takes a good deal of experience for one to be able to see through the specious arguments of such spirits, and older people should be wise enough to help young people patiently through their period of “snap judgments.”

Read carefully verses 22 and 23 of our lesson. Saul’s yielding to this temptation in the face of the Lord’s explicit commands finished his actual kingship, for we read in the very next chapter that Samuel was sent to anoint David and that as soon as David was anointed “the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.” The tearing of Samuel’s robe by Saul was the sign of this change. AE 395⁵ tells us: “The words of Samuel make clear that ‘the rending of the skirt of the cloak’ signified the rending of the kingdom from Saul, for he said after it was done, “Jehovah hath rent the

kingdom of Israel from thee this day,' 'a king' and 'his kingdom' signifying the Divine truth of the church, and 'the skirt of a cloak' signifying Divine truth in ultimates, that is, all Divine truth in general; for the kings that were over the sons of Israel represented the Lord in relation to Divine truth, and their kingdom signified the church in relation to Divine truth; therefore this historical fact signifies that king Saul was such that he could no longer represent the Lord, and that the representation of the church would perish if the kingdom were not rent from him."

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 8593: "Interior evil is that which lies inwardly concealed with man, hidden in his will, and thence in his thought, no trace of which appears in his externals, as in his actions, speech, and face. They who are in such evil study by every method and art to hide and hoard it under the semblance of what is honorable and just, and under the semblance of love of the neighbor; yet still they devise nothing else within themselves than how they can inflict evil, and so far as they can they do inflict evil by means of others, taking care that it should not appear to be from them; they also color over the evil itself, that it may not seem like evil. The greatest delight of their life is to meditate such things, and to attempt them in concealment. This is called interior evil . . . They who are in this evil do not attack the truths of faith, but the goods of faith; for they act by means of depraved affections, whereby they pervert good thoughts, and this in a manner almost incomprehensible. . . . These infernal genii never attack a man openly, nor when he is capable of vigorous resistance; but when it appears that a man is falling so as to yield, they are then suddenly at hand, and push him on to a complete fall . . . From all this it can be seen what is the quality of those who are represented by Amalek, and why the judgment came upon Amalek from Jehovah that there should be perpetual war against them."

Apocalypse Explained, n. 395³: "'Prophets' signify those who teach truths from the Word, and in an abstract sense, the truths of doctrine from the Word; and because of this signification of 'prophets' they were clothed with a mantle of hair, 'the mantle of hair' signifying Divine truth in ultimates."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

P. Who was the first king? *Saul*

- P. How was he chosen? *by lot*
- P. Why did the people like him? *tall, strong*
- J. In what part of the country did he win his first victory? *across Jordan*
- J. What was the second enemy he fought? *Philistines*
- P. What mistake did he make? *did not wait for Samuel*
- P. By whose help was the victory finally won? *Jonathan*
- P. In our lesson for today, what enemy is Saul told to attack? *Amalek*
- J. Where have we heard of the Amalekites before? *first enemy in wilderness*
- J. How was the first battle against them won? *Moses' hands held up*
- J. What did the Lord tell Saul to do to them? *destroy completely*
- P. How was Saul disobedient? *saved king, best animals*
- J. What did Samuel tell him? *he would lose kingdom*
- J. What sign was given of this? *torn robe*
- P. What happened to Agag? *Samuel killed him*
- S. What do the Amalekites represent? *falsity based on interior evil which leads to discouragement*
- I. What does Saul as king represent? *worldly idea of truth*