

Personality and Spirituality

The Lamentation over Saul on Mount Gilboa—

We are indeed fortunate to have been called into the Lord and given the great grace of serving Him on the journey of following Him. Along this journey, an individual's personality and his spirituality, which belongs to God, are interrelated.

“Personality” refers to the nature that a person is born with. “Spirituality”, on the other hand, is the manifestation of God's image and likeness in a person after his encounter with God. If a person born with a deplorable nature makes good progress in cultivating his spirituality, his personality would also gradually improve.

In serving, a person who does not seek progress in his spirituality often causes his unstable personality to be distorted and become corrupt. Conversely, if a person born with a good personality does not work on his spirituality, his spirituality would not become good by the influence of his personality. For a person who constantly shouts, “spirituality! spirituality!” but does not humbly cultivate a personality after God's heart, his corrupt spirituality, however beautifully packaged, will collapse one day.

Saul, the first king anointed by God from the chosen people in the Old Testament, was the best example of this.

When Saul first appeared in the Bible, we see a mighty warrior with refined manners. There was not a more handsome person than he among the children of Israel (1 Sam 9:2).

When he first met Samuel, the prophet Samuel anointed him as king according to God's instructions. Then God gave him another heart and “the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among [the prophets]” (1 Sam 10:9-10). When he first stood before the people as their king, not only was he a head taller than the rest, he also had a higher spirituality than others. His kingship was not obtained through his wisdom and abilities, but appointed under God's acknowledgement and by the prophet's casting of lot upon the people's request for a king. When Samuel had chosen Saul by lot, Saul, being aware that he was from a humble background, hid himself in the equipment (1 Sam 9:21-22).

He was not puffed up or scornful. He did not lose himself in the people's shouts, “Long live the king!” and feel that he was above everyone else. That is why, when the rebels despised him and spoke condescendingly and sarcastically, Saul held his peace (1 Sam 10:23-27). Later, after the Spirit of God had come upon Saul mightily and given him victory over the Ammonites, the people demanded the death of the contemptuous rebels. Not only did Saul not pay back the rebels for their contempt, he even spoke words of grace: “Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has accomplished salvation in Israel” (1 Sam 11:13). With such a spirituality of humility and forbearance, Saul truly lived up to his status as the first king chosen by God as His vessel.

Saul's appearance indeed brought a decisive opportunity to the chosen people of Israel. Politically, he united the twelve tribes that had fallen into disarray since the death of Joshua and led them into the period of the United Kingdom. Militarily, “Saul established his sovereignty over Israel, and fought against all his enemies on every side...Wherever he turned, he harassed

them” (1 Sam 14:47-48). Their neighboring enemies could no longer freely oppress and extort the Israelites as they had done during the period of the judges. Economically, he clothed the daughters of Israel “in scarlet, with luxury” and put “ornaments of gold” on their apparel (2 Sam 1:24). Therefore, rising after four hundred years of gloom in the period of the judges, Saul the anointed could well be called a bright and burning lamp in God’s hand.

However, after he ascended to the throne, Saul gradually changed for the worse. During the forty years of his reign, he betrayed his own people time and again. He confidently released their enemy Agag king of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) but could bear putting to death Jonathan his son who had made great contributions to the country (1 Sam 14). He put off taking vengeance on the Philistines, who repeatedly harassed God’s chosen people, but exerted all that he had to capture David, who had made contributions to the nation and who had spared Saul’s life (1 Sam 18-26). Worse yet, he dared to slaughter the entire city of Nob along with the priests who innocently assisted David’s escape (1 Sam 22). In his old age, Saul became all the more absurd in his spirituality. He had once put the mediums and spiritists out of the kingdom of Israel. But he himself defied the religious law he had decreed and disguised himself to seek a medium (1 Sam 28).

In the end, on the same day and in the same battlefield, his three sons were killed by the Philistines. Saul himself was wounded by an arrow, and he fell on a sword to end his own life. The very head that made him a head taller than others was cut off by his enemies (1 Sam 31:9). What a tragedy it was for someone who was once greatly used by God as a vessel for that generation to end his life in such a gruesome manner! It is indeed heart-wrenching and regrettable.

The tragedy Saul played was due in part to problems with the spirituality between him and God, but all the more a result of his distorting his personality in his dealings with himself and with others. Starting with cracks, the vessel became irreparably broken in the end. Both personality and spirituality need nourishing and cultivation. If a believer consistently neglects disciplining his personality, he puts his spirituality in danger, and this may even lead to a shipwreck and being handed over to Satan (cf. 1 Tim 1:19), the result of which is a disgraceful death. We can learn the following from the Saul who had once been a vessel greatly used by God:

First: It is imperative to know God’s will, obey His commandments, and guard ourselves from falling into the trap of being lost in ourselves and our own wits.

After he had just ascended to the throne, Saul went to Gilgal according to the prophet’s instruction to wait for the prophet to come to offer a sacrifice and to give him further directives. Before the prophet arrived, Saul saw that the people were hiding in fear at the sight of the enemies who were in the tens of thousands. All those people who had been around Saul were leaving him. Saul found himself in a dangerous predicament where he could see neither the prophet before him nor the people behind him. At this moment, in terms of his spirituality, his inability to fully trust in God and wait for God became completely exposed (1 Sam 10:8; 13:1-14). Although he knew clearly that he must wait for the prophet and that offering sacrifice was the duty of priests, he presumed the role of a priest and felt compelled to offer a burnt offering (1 Sam 13:12). Afterwards, he wittingly resorted to various excuses, such as the dispersion of the people, the delay of the prophet, the fear of not praying to God in the face of the mighty enemies, etc. But in the eyes of God, what he had done were in fact

foolish acts (1 Sam 13:13). Just shortly before this, God's Spirit had come upon him mightily and he was able to utterly defeat the Ammonites and to save the chosen people of Gibeah. How did he forget so quickly his recent personal experience of victory through God (1 Sam 11)?

Even though Saul was reprimanded for the incident at Gilgal, God still did not forsake him completely. God sent him on a historic mission and commanded him to carry it out. This mission was to "utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalekites from under heaven" (Ex 17:14; cf. Num 24:20; Deut 25:17-19). Before the commission, God tirelessly detailed the motivation, purpose, method, and outcome of the operation (1 Sam 15:1-3). But Saul, who was lost in himself and who habitually overrode God's will and commands with his own wits, chose to complete only ninety percent of God's given task. He then used his wits to cover up and make up for what he had failed to do. He once again left behind a trace of shameful ego in the midst of God's perfect ministry.

God's command was to utterly destroy the Amalekites, their age-old enemy, and all that they had (1 Sam 15:3). However, "Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them". (1 Sam 15:9). After he had committed the first folly and was being corrected by Samuel, Saul completely refused to confess his wrongdoing, but evaded all responsibility: "When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed...then I said, '...I have not made supplication to the LORD'" (1 Sam 13:11). With regards to the incident with king Agag, when Samuel questioned him, saying, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" (1 Sam 15:14), Saul all the more pushed all responsibility away without hesitation, saying, "They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God" (1 Sam 15:15).

It was not until Samuel rebuked Saul sharply, saying "Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king," that Saul was forced to confess his wrongdoing. But his confession was purely to make sure he could be honored before the Israelites (1 Sam 15:30). His concern was not for the prosperity or decline of his spiritual life or of God's kingdom, but for his own face and kingship. In both transgressions he managed to draw connections between his own wits and desires with spiritual things: prayer in one scenario and offering in the other. Such a shallow and short-sighted selfishness was incredibly pitiable and sad!

After the incident with king Agag, "the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a distressing spirit from the LORD troubled him" (1 Sam 16:14). Surely, as Samuel had said, "Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king" (1 Sam 15:26). He was once a deliverer in whom the Israelites had put their hope, the anointed one, the king over God's inheritance, a vessel of God, a king to whom God had given a new heart, a leader on whom God's spirit had come mightily, and the incomparable elect of God. But now, he had become a foolish man acting foolishly, a transgressor of God's commands, an evil doer quick to plunder and commit what was evil in God's sight, a rebellious and stubborn man, one who had been rejected by God, a man from whom God's Spirit had departed, and someone troubled by an evil spirit. If a child of God does not watchfully cultivate his personality and undergo discipline, his spiritually will eventually be weighed down.