

The School of Obedience

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1. Obedience: Its place In Holy Scripture

In undertaking the study of a Bible word, or of truth of the Christian life, it is a great help to take a survey of the place it takes in Scripture. As we see where, and how often, and in what connections it is found, its relative importance may be apprehended as well as its bearing on the whole of revelation. Let me try in this first chapter to prepare the way for the study of what obedience is, by showing you where to go in GOD's Word to find the mind of GOD concerning it.

Take Scripture As A Whole

We begin with Paradise. In Genesis 2:16, we read: *And the Lord God commanded the man, saying. And later (3:11), 'Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?'*

Note how obedience to the command is the one virtue of Paradise, the one condition of man's abiding there, the one thing his Creator asks of him. Nothing is said of faith, or humility, or love: obedience includes all. As supreme as is the claim and authority of GOD is the demand for obedience as the one thing that is to

DECIDE HIS DESTINY

In the life of man, to obey is the one thing needful.

Turn now from the beginning to the close of the Bible. In its last chapter you read (Revelation 22:14), *'Blessed are they that do His commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life.'*

We have the same thought in chapters 12 and 14, where we read of the seed of the woman (12:17), *'which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus'*; and of the patience of the saints (14:12), *'Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.'*

From beginning to end, from Paradise lost to Paradise regained, the law is unchangeable--it is only obedience that gives access to the tree of life and the favor of GOD.

And if you ask how the change was effected out of the disobedience at the beginning that closed the way to the tree of life, to the obedience at the end that again gained entrance to it, turn to

THAT WHICH STANDS MIDWAY

between the beginning and the end--the cross of CHRIST.

Read a passage like Romans 5:19, '*so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.*'; or Philippians 2:8, '*He... became obedient unto death... wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him*'; or Hebrews 5:8, 9, '*Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered; And being made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him*' and you see how the whole redemption of CHRIST consists in restoring obedience to its place.

The beauty of His salvation consists in this, that He brings us back to the life of obedience, through which alone the creature can give the Creator the glory due to Him, or receive the glory of which his Creator desires to make him partaker.

Paradise, Calvary, Heaven, all proclaim with one voice:

'Child of GOD! the first and the last thing thy GOD asks of thee is simple, universal, unchanging obedience.'

LET US TURN TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

Here let us specially notice how, with any new beginning in the history of GOD's kingdom, obedience always comes into special prominence.

1. Take Noah, the new father of the human race, and you will find four times written (Genesis 6:22; 7:5, 9, 16), '*Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he.*'

It is the man who does what GOD commands, to whom GOD can entrust His work, whom GOD can use to be a savior of men.

2. Think of Abraham, the father of the chosen race. '*By faith Abraham... obeyed*' (Hebrews 11:8).

When he had been forty years in this school of faith-obedience, GOD came to perfect his faith, and to crown it with His fullest blessing. Nothing could fit him for this but a crowning act of obedience.

When he had bound his son on the altar, GOD came (Genesis 22:12, 18), *And He said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me... And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed My voice.*

And to Isaac He spake (26:3, 5), *Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I swore unto Abraham thy father... Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.*

Oh, when shall we learn how unspeakably pleasing obedience is in GOD's sight, and how unspeakable is the reward He bestows upon it! The way to be a blessing to the world is to be men of obedience; known by GOD and the world by this

ONE MARK

-- a will utterly given up to GOD's will. Let all who profess to walk in Abraham's footsteps walk thus.

3. Go on to Moses. At Sinai, GOD gave him the message to the people (Exodus 19:5), '***Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine.***'

In the very nature of things it cannot be otherwise. GOD's holy will is His glory and perfection; it is only by an entrance into His will, by obedience, that it is possible to be His people.

4. Take the building of the sanctuary in which GOD was to dwell. In the last three chapters of Exodus you have the expression numerous times, '*According to all that the Lord commanded Moses, so did [he].*' And then, '*The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.*' Just so again in Leviticus 8 and 9, you have, with reference to the consecration of the priests and the tabernacle, the same expression numerous times. And then, '***And there came a fire out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering.***'

Words cannot make it plainer, that it is amid what the obedience of His people has wrought that GOD delights to dwell, that it is the obedient He crowns with His favor and presence.

5. After the forty years wandering in the wilderness, and its terrible revelation of the fruit of disobedience, there was again a new beginning when the people were about to enter Canaan. Read Deuteronomy, with all Moses spoke in sight of the land, and you will find there is no book of the Bible which uses the word '**obey**' so frequently, or speaks so much of the blessing obedience will assuredly bring. The whole is summed up in the words (11:26-28), '***Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known.***'

Yes, '**a blessing if ye obey!**' That is the key-note of the blessed life. Canaan, just like Paradise and Heaven, can be the place of blessing as it is the place of obedience. Would GOD we might take it in! Do beware only of praying only for a blessing. Let us care for the obedience, GOD will care for the blessing. Let my one thought as a Christian be, how I can obey and please my GOD perfectly?

6. The next new beginning we have is in the appointment of kings in Israel. In the story of Saul we have the most solemn warning as to the need of exact and entire obedience in a man whom GOD is to trust as ruler of His people.

Samuel had commanded Saul (1 Samuel 10:8) to wait seven days for him to come and sacrifice, and to show him what to do. When Samuel delayed (13:8-14) Saul took it upon himself to sacrifice.

When Samuel came he said: *'Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which He commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the LORD hath sought him a man after His own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over His people, because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee.'*

GOD will not honor the man who is not obedient.

Saul has a second opportunity given him of showing what is in his heart. He is sent to execute GOD's judgment against Amalek. He obeys. He gathers an army of two hundred thousand men, undertakes the journey into the wilderness, and destroys Amalek. But while GOD had commanded him to *'utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not,'* he spared the best of the cattle and Agag. (See 1 Samuel 15)

GOD speaks to Samuel, *'It repenteth Me that I have set up Saul to be king: for he is turned back from following Me, and hath not performed My commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the LORD all night.'*

When Samuel comes, Saul twice over says, *'I have performed the commandment of the Lord;'* *'I have obeyed the voice of the Lord.'*

And so he had, as many would think, But his obedience had not been entire. GOD claims exact, full obedience. GOD had said, *'Utterly destroy all!... spare... not!'* This he had not done. He had spared the best sheep for a sacrifice unto the Lord.

And Samuel said: *'Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.'*

Sad type of so much obedience, which in part performs GOD's commandment, and yet is not the obedience GOD asks! GOD says of **all** sin and all disobedience: 'Utterly destroy all! spare not!' May GOD reveal to us whether we are indeed going all lengths with Him, seeking utterly to destroy all and spare nothing that is not in perfect harmony with His will. It is only a wholehearted obedience, down to the minutest details, that can satisfy GOD. Let nothing less satisfy you; lest while we say, **'I have obeyed,'** GOD says, **'Thou hast rejected the word of the Lord.'**

7. Just one word more from the Old Testament. Next to Deuteronomy, Jeremiah is the book most full of the word **'obey,'** though alas! mostly in connection with the complaint that the people had not obeyed. GOD sums up all His dealings with the fathers in the one word,

'But this thing commanded I them, saying, 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 unto

you.' (Jeremiah 7:23)

Would GOD that we could learn that all that GOD speaks of sacrifices, even of the sacrifice of His beloved Son, is subordinate to the one thing -- to have His creature restored to full obedience. Into all the inconceivable meaning of the word, *'I will be your God,'* there is no gateway but this, *'Obey My voice.'*

WE COME TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. Here we think at once of our blessed Lord, and the prominence He gives to obedience as the one thing for which He was come into the world. He who entered it with His *'Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God,'* ever confessed to men, *'I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me.'*

Of all He did and of all He suffered, even to the death, He said, *'This commandment have I received of My Father.'*

If we turn to His teaching, we find everywhere, that the obedience He rendered is what He claims from everyone who would be His disciple.

During His whole ministry, from beginning to end, obedience is

THE VERY ESSENCE OF SALVATION

In the Sermon on the Mount He began with it: No one could enter the kingdom, *'but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven.'* And in the farewell discourse, how wonderfully He reveals the spiritual character of true obedience as it is born of love and inspired by it, and as it also opens the way into the love of GOD.

Do take into your heart the wonderful words, (John 14:15, 16, 21, 23), *'If ye love Me, keep My commandments. And... the Father... shall give you another Comforter (the HOLY SPIRIT). He that hath My commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me: and he that loveth Me shall be loved of My Father, and I will love him, and will manifest Myself to him... If a man love Me, he will keep My words: and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him.'*

No words could express more simply or more powerfully the inconceivably glorious place CHRIST gives to obedience, with its twofold possibility, (1) as only possible to a loving heart, (2) as making possible all that GOD has to give of His HOLY SPIRIT, of His wonderful love, of His indwelling in CHRIST JESUS. I know of no passage in Scripture that gives a higher revelation of the spiritual life, or the power of loving obedience as its one condition.

Let us pray GOD very earnestly that by His HOLY SPIRIT its light may transfigure our daily obedience with its heavenly glory.

See how all this is confirmed in the next chapter. How well we know the parable of the vine! How often and how earnestly we have asked how to be able to abide continually in CHRIST. We

have thought of more study of the Word, more faith, more prayer, more communion with GOD, and we have overlooked the simple truth that JESUS teaches so clearly, *'If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love,'* with its divine sanction, *'even as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love.'*

For Him as for us, the only way under Heaven to abide in divine love is to keep the commandments. Do let me ask, have you known it, have you heard it preached, have you believed it and proved it true in your experience: obedience on earth is the key to a place in GOD's love in Heaven? Unless there be some correspondence between GOD's wholehearted love in Heaven, and our wholehearted, loving obedience on earth, CHRIST cannot manifest Himself to us, GOD cannot abide in us, we cannot abide in His love.

2. If we go on from our Lord JESUS to His apostles, we find in the Acts two words of Peter's which show how our Lord's teaching had entered into him. In the one, *'the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey Him,'* -- he proves how he knew what had been the preparation for Pentecost, the surrender to CHRIST. In the other, *'We ought to obey God rather than men'* -- we have the man-ward side: obedience is to be unto death; nothing on earth dare or can hinder it in the man who has given himself to GOD.

3. In Paul's Epistle to the Romans, we have, in the opening and closing verses the expression, *'obedience to the faith among all nations'* (1:5; 16:26), as that for which he was made an apostle. He speaks of what GOD had wrought *'to make the Gentiles obedient.'* He teaches that, as the obedience of CHRIST makes us righteous, we become the servants of obedience unto righteousness. As disobedience in Adam and in us was the one thing that wrought death, so obedience, in CHRIST and in us, is the one thing that the gospel makes known as the way of restoration to GOD and His favor.

4. We all know how James warns us not to be hearers of the Word only but doers, and expounds how Abraham was justified, and his faith perfected, by his works.

5. In Peter's First Epistle we have only to look at the first chapter, to see the place obedience has in his system. In verse 2, he speaks to the *'Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ,'* and so points us to obedience as the eternal purpose of the Father, as the great object of the work of the Spirit, and a chief part of the salvation of CHRIST. In verse 14-15 he writes, *'As obedient children,'* born of it, marked by it, subject to it, *'be ye holy in all manner of conversation.'* Obedience is

THE VERY STARTING POINT OF TRUE HOLINESS

In verse 22 we read, *'Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth,'* -- the whole acceptance of the truth of GOD was not merely a matter of intellectual assent or strong emotion: it was a subjection of the life to the dominion of the truth of GOD: the Christian life was in the first place obedience.

6. Of John we know how strong his statements are. *'He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar.'* Obedience is

THE ONE CERTIFICATE OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

'Let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him... And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.'

Obedience is the secret of good conscience, and of the confidence that GOD heareth us. *'This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.'* The obedience that keeps His commandments: this is the garment in which the hidden, invisible love reveals itself, and whereby it is known.

Such is the place obedience has in Holy Scripture, in the mind of GOD, in the hearts of His servants. We may well ask, Does it take that place in my heart and life? Have we indeed given obedience that supreme place of authority over us that GOD means it to have, as the inspiration of every action, and of every approach to Him? If we yield ourselves to the searching of GOD's Spirit, we may find that we never gave it its true proportion in our scheme of life, and that this lack is the cause of all our failure in prayer and in work. We may see that the deeper blessings of GOD's grace, and the full enjoyment of GOD's love and nearness, have been beyond our reach, simply because obedience was never made what GOD would have it be -- the starting-point and the goal of our Christian life.

Let this, our first study, waken in us an earnest desire to know GOD's will fully concerning this truth. Let us unite in praying that the HOLY SPIRIT may show us how defective the Christian's life is, where obedience does not rule all; how that life can be exchanged for one of full surrender to absolute obedience; and how sure it is that GOD in CHRIST will enable us to live it out.

~ end of chapter 1 ~
