

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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edited for 3BSB by Baptist Bible Believer in the spirit of the Colportage Ministry of a century ago

CHAPTER TWELVE

INNER AND OUTER CONFLICTS

(I Samuel 11)

“What if He hath decreed that I shall first
Be try’d in humble state and things adverse,
By tribulations, injuries, insults,
Contempts, and scorns, and snares and violence!”

- Milton

THE eleventh verse records a great victory. It was the first public act of the reign of Saul, taking place a month after his inauguration. It at once justified his selection, and silenced the voice of detraction; he stood forth before the eyes of his own people, and of surrounding nations, as every inch a man and a king.

But in this chapter, for eyes that have looked beneath the surface, there is the record of another fight. There was the outward fight that Saul made for Israel; there was the inner and previous fight that Saul made for himself, against himself; and it was because he had conquered in the latter, of which there was probably no symptom to the outward eye, that he carried himself erect in the fight with Nahash.

This is always so; within the fight there is another fight. Within the fight that men are waging with the sin and darkness of the world, there is always the inner fight, which they must wage with themselves, and for themselves. If, to use the suggestion of another, you had been familiar with Howard, the great prison evangelist, or had known Clarkson, who delivered the slave; if you had been permitted to read the secrets of the heart of Garrison, the great American philanthropist you would have known that, full often, each was sick and weary with the inward combat, and closed the door of his heart upon the outward fight, that he might turn his thought and attention to himself; and you would have heard the soldier of Christ saying bitterly to himself; “It would be easy for me to conquer, and to win the battle for my Lord against these outward ills, if only I had not perpetually to wage this inward fight, if only I had solid ground to stand on, instead of the shifting sand of my own vacillating nature and irresolute temper.”

Perhaps you might even have heard these great soldiers saying; “Surely it would be better to relinquish the outward conflict, so as to bend all attention to the rule of the Home-land.”

Yet it is good for us all that these two conflicts should go on side by side; for if a man were only conflicting against the evil of the world, and knew nothing about the inward fight, he might become arrogant, and suppose that he stood aloof from the common sin and the common temptation whereas if, on the other hand, we were only to confine ourselves to the inward conflict, we might grow morbid and self-centered, dispirited and depressed.

No, let those two go on together, and let the victories that we win for God in the outward field of vision be weighed against the awful consciousness of failure that we all carry in our inner experience. Let these two go on side by side, and let every man know that if he conquers within, he will conquer without, and that if he fails within he will fail without. It is just in proportion as we are able to overcome, as Saul did, in his heart, that we shall overcome, as he did, against the Ammonites.

Two thoughts lie upon this chapter which are full of interest first, Saul's inward fight and conquest; secondly, Saul's outward fight and conquest.

I. SAUL'S INWARD FIGHT, CONFLICT, AND VICTORY

(1) He fought the subtle temptation to pride.

Samuel, eager to constitute the new kingdom, called a great national assembly at Mizpeh, where so great a defeat and victory had been recorded in earlier days. In their teeming multitudes the Israelites gathered there, and proceeded to elect their king by an appeal to God through a lot.

After prayer the lot was cast, and the disposing of it was left to God. First the tribe of Benjamin was taken, then the clan of the Matrites, then the family of Kish, and ultimately the lot indicated Saul, the son of Kish; but he was not to be found. He knew from his previous conversation with Samuel that he was God's designated king; that the anointing oil had flowed over his head; that he was possessed of a kingly presence, standing head and shoulders above all ordinary men. If ever a man might have stood to the front, and allowed ambition to master him, that was the moment when Saul might have stood forth and presented himself to his people as the unrivalled candidate for the crown. However, he was not to be found. They looked for him everywhere in vain. And it was only when, for the second time, they appealed to the direction of the Urim and Thummim, that he was discovered hiding among the baggage-wagons.

This modesty was extremely beautiful, and our admiration of the natural traits of Saul's character cannot but be greatly enhanced by his unobtrusiveness. It reminds one of Athanasius, who left the city of Alexandria that he might not be elected bishop; and of Ambrose, who more than once sought to evade the responsibility which was thrust upon him at Milan. It reminds us also of John Livingstone, who, when he was chosen to preach that famous sermon of Kirk o' Shotts, travelled as quickly as possible in another direction, and only after some hours was led by the Spirit of God to turn again and assume the blessed burden. Those that assume to themselves high positions, yielding before the proud spirit of self-assumption, fail; but they who humble themselves, who generally think others better than they are, who deprecate notoriety and show are such whom God exalts.

(2) There was the strong temptation which assailed him to vindictiveness.

Amid the shouts, “**God save the King!**” which applauded his nomination, there were the voices of detractors, men of Belial, who whispered, “**How shall this man save us?**” One such voice is enough to spoil all the adulation that may be strewn before us by the crowd. What public man is there who has not felt that the clamour of kind voices was marred by the one sentence of criticism and spite, so that the drop of vinegar turned all the rest acid?

These voices must have stung the heart of Saul. The adder’s poison must have penetrated to his heart; but he conquered the desire for revenge, and trampled beneath his feet the smouldering embers of vindictiveness. It was not that he was pusillanimous, for we are told in this same chapter, that when he heard of the cry of Jabesh-gilead, “**his anger was kindled greatly.**” He was capable of flaming forth against wrong, but in this case he held himself well in hand. To use the old English phrase of the A.V., “**He held his peace.**” The more one examines that phrase, the more fascinating it is to hold your peace, not to let it go, not to let it be taken or snatched from you, not to let it be trampled underfoot in anger, but to hold to it in the midst of irritation and fret to hold your ground.

The Hebrew, as suggested by the margin, is still more striking. “He was as though he had been deaf” - he pretended not to hear. He did hear; every word had struck deep into his soul, but he made as though he were deaf. It is a great power when a man can act as though he were deaf to slander, deaf to detraction, deaf to unkind and uncharitable speeches, and treat them as though they had not been spoken, turning from man to God, leaving with God his vindication, believing that God sooner or later will give him a chance, as He most certainly gave Saul a chance, of vindicating the true prowess and temper of his soul. If Saul had listened to these men and noticed them, he might have drifted into an awkward and perplexing position, for if, on the one hand, he had passed over their slander, he might have laid himself open to the imputation of cowardice; whereas if, on the other, he had noticed it, he might have been goaded to act tyrannically, and so as to alienate a large number of his people. He could not have done better than to act as though he were deaf, and to conquer the spirit of revenge by the spirit of self-restraint.

(3) There was one more temptation by which he must have been plied the temptation to ostentation.

When the assemblage was dispersed he returned from Mizpeh to Gibeah. He had been designated by Samuel, and kissed by him in token of homage. Sign after sign had indicated him to be God’s choice for Israel; he had stood forth amid the people’s clamour, the acknowledged king of the land; a number of young men, whose hearts were fired by loyal enthusiasm, had thronged about his path, and with songs of rejoicing had accompanied him to his home; he was conscious of being able to rally about him the chivalry and strength of his fatherland; and yet, when he was back again in Gibeah, in spite of every temptation to ostentation and excess, he was noble enough to return to his rustic life; he took again in hand his plough, and for one whole month he drove the oxen across the fields, meditating much on the strange chance which had befallen, and wondering when God would open the door for him to step forth into the manifestation of the royalty which was already his.

These were the elements of a truly great soul. We do not forget Gilboa; the frenzied insanity by which his career was afterwards blasted; how more than once or twice he hurled his javelin at David; that he became moody and morose; that he betrayed the heart of a murderer and died the death of a suicide; but at this time of his life at least, he remained humble; he put his foot upon the spirit of revenge and left it with God to vindicate him; he put his foot upon that love of ostentation that tempts us all, setting himself to do his daily work, and waiting until God summoned him to take the helm of the state. We cannot but admire this greatly.

You, too, may be conscious of the presence of many amiable natural traits, but unless the natural virtues of your soul be possessed and strengthened by the power of the Holy Ghost they will not be able ultimately to withstand the awful conflict of the world. See to it that in and through the traits of your own amiable nature there may come the transcendent life of the ever-glorious Saviour, that your character may not be the wild growth of nature, but the established and permanent indwelling of the Son of God.

II. THE OUTWARD CONFLICT

One evening, as Saul came back from the field, he heard that low wail of distress and panic by which the Eastern populace makes known its anguish; and as he drew near to Gibeah he asked what it meant. **“What aileth the people that they weep?”**

Then the story was told how, across the Jordan, in the land of Gilead, the city of Jabesh-gilead was hard pressed by the Ammonites, who, a hundred years before, had been disastrously defeated by Jephthah, but who had never relinquished their claim to the land. Under Nahash, the king, they had gathered in overwhelming numbers around the beleaguered city. Its citizens had tried their best to extricate themselves, but in vain. One week of respite alone had been extracted from the contemptuous clemency of Nahash; and if at the end of that week no deliverance came, then the right eye of every man would be put out, which, undoubtedly, would make him useless for purposes of war, because the left eye was, of course, always covered by the shield.

In despair the messengers came to Gibeah, of Benjamin, because in the days of the judges Jabesh-gilead had refused to join in the war of extermination against the Benjaminites, and had given four hundred of its daughters in marriage to their sons.

There was, therefore, a blood-tie between the people of Jabesh-gilead and those of Gibeah, and in this awful hour they felt they had a claim for help if they would not help who would! But the people of Gibeah despaired. It seemed as if it were impossible in that short space to send effectual help. Saul was living in the midst of them, but they had no hope that he could help them. The day threatened to close in hopeless despondency.

Then the man who had conquered himself became suddenly aware of the uprising of an altogether new power in his heart. We are told that **“the Spirit of God came mightily upon Saul”**; a little further on we learn that **“the fear of the Lord fell on the people”**; and still further on, **“the Lord wrought a great salvation for Israel.”**

If you will be true in the inward battle, if by the grace of God you will trample upon the sins which so easily beset you, the time will come in your life also, when the Spirit of God will come upon you with an almost overwhelming power, and bear you forward to do what otherwise would be absolutely impossible; and as He works on you, He will work also on the people and on the foe.

Instantly Saul laid hold of his bullocks, slew them, cut them in pieces, and by messengers sent those pieces throughout the land. In some such way, as Sir Walter Scott tells us, the old Highland chieftains used to summon the clans for war by the mission of the fiery cross.

Similarly the entire people throughout the whole land of Israel obeyed the royal summons. They were at first but an undisciplined mob; but Saul, in the power of God, marshaled them, directing them by three different routes to fall upon the Ammonites in the morning.

A message was sent to Jabesh-gilead to tell the people that help was coming, and their hearts were glad. Then, as the morning broke over the quiet hills and valleys of Gilead, from three different sides Saul launched his army upon the sleeping hosts. Panic-stricken, they sprang to their feet; hardly awake, they were unable to resist the onset of the men of Israel; and the rout was so complete that, by the noontide, two men were not left together. It was a wonderful victory, and an auspicious beginning for the new reign.

Would you not win such a victory over the sin of the world? If so, there must be the self-mastery. Gird your selves to fight “**the good fight of faith.**”

We are reminded that there are several circles to that fight.

First, there is, of course, *the outer circle of circumstances.*

A man must always begin with these, and rightly so. It is quite wise on your part to give up that business which is a constant source of temptation; to remove from that house where bad people live; to renounce that literature, those books, and that recreation, which are constantly causing you to offend; to extricate yourself from that friendship or fellowship which has been your curse.

That is the first thing to do. Get right with your circumstances; touch not, taste not, handle not; come out and be separate. At any cost deliver yourself from the conditions of life that tempt you to sin.

Secondly, *there is the inner circle of habit*

If our circumstances are like our clothes, our habits are like our skin, and every man has got to fight his lonely fight against habit; it may be of alcoholism; it may be of narcotism; it may be of impurity and immorality nothing but the power of God can break the bonds that bind you. That is the second great fight in a man's life.

Thirdly, *there is the battle against heredity.*

It may be that your father was a passionate man, and has passed on, perhaps from his ancestors, strong and vehement desires; that your mother was a vain, or proud, or quick-tempered woman, and that she has passed on to you something of her own quick, sensitive nature, that you cannot keep calm and still, cannot hold your peace, cannot seem as if you were deaf.

Every one has to meet with a certain number of predispositions in his life which he has inherited, and which make the battle harder. Enumerate them, consider them, know them; then in the name of God put the grave of Christ between you and them, and let them meet you only through Him that died. Die to them all, die to the first Adam, die to yourself because you have risen to the second. In acting thus you may break the entail, and arrest for others that awful inheritance into which you have come.

Then, after all, when all this is said and done, when your outward circumstances are adjusted, when by the grace of God you have broken the spell of habit, when you have died to heredity then you come face to face with the inner citadel of yourself.

There are things that you must not do, temptations to which you must not yield, an inner self which you must crucify. Ah, that lonely fight! Ah, the flowers and grass that become trampled down in the wrestle whilst the blood of your heart is sprinkled on the sword, and you know that all the possessions of your outward life are as nothing to you compared to the agony of the inward conflict. What is success? What is applause? What is the crown of victory compared with your confessed failure to yourself? Thus we fight our fight, and win in the power of the loving Christ. And then Ammon, Ammon, Ammon. Ah, not two men will be left together.

Fight, fight, fight the good fight of faith; lay hold upon the life which is life indeed.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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