

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER TEN

THE VOICE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

(I Samuel 9, 10)

Yes! thou dost well to build a fence about
Thine inward faith. O mount a stalwart guard
Of answers, to oppose invading doubt.
All aids are needful, for the strife is hard.”

- Coleridge

“WHOSO is wise and will observe these things, ye even he shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord.”

In these words the psalmist sums up his five tableaux of human life (Psalm 107).

- The track of the pilgrim-host,
- The experience of the prisoner languishing in his chains,
- The recovery of the sick from long depression,
- The deliverance of the storm-tossed crew from the angry breakers,
- The evolution of a smiling paradise from an arid and parched wilderness.

All these things, if carefully observed, yield their testimony and assurance that God is in all events permitting, directing, controlling, and causing all things to work out his perfect plan.

In all Scripture there is no passage more illustrative of this than the chapters before us, which show how clearly and mightily God is in the circumstances of our lives. It was the spring of the day. With exquisite clearness and purity the dawn was breaking in the Eastern sky, when three men descended the steep ascent on which Ramah stood, and emerged from the city gate (vss. 11, 12, 14, 26).

The group was a remarkable one, comprising the aged seer; **“a young man and a goodly,”** who was the king-elect, though he did not realize it; and a herdsman, Doeg, so tradition states, who afterwards attained such an unhappy notoriety, but was at that time simply a servant in attendance on his master’s son.

When the city gate had been left behind, the servant was sent on in front, that he might not be a witness to the solemn transaction, which inaugurated a new epoch in the life of Saul.

“As they were going down at the end of the city, Samuel said to Saul, Bid thy servant pass on before us, but stand thou still at this time, that I may cause thee to hear the Word of God.”

I. THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED UP TO THIS INCIDENT

(1) The asses of Kish, Saul’s father, were lost. But they were too valuable to lose. **“And Kish said to Saul, his son, Take now one of the servants with thee, and arise, go seek the asses.”**

But when they left home they little realized how far their search would lead them.

“And he passed through the hill country of Ephraim, and passed through the land of Shalisha, but they found them not; then they passed through the land of Shalim, and there they found them not; and he passed through the land of the Benjamites, but they found them not.”

Three days were consumed in this fruitless search, in stopping every traveler, asking many questions, scrutinizing every trail but all to no purpose. Lost she-asses! Well, what of them! Let them stray! Yes, but they are worth seeking, not for their worth only, but because the man who tracks them will presently come on a kingdom! Be faithful in a little, and God will promote thee to be faithful in much. Do what thou hast to do for God, and He shall call thee for the highest service! Often the finding of the hid treasure depends on the care with which we drive the plough of lowly labour along the common furrow of daily toil.

(2) By God’s providence, which some call chance, the seekers found themselves in the land of Joseph, and there the thought of his father’s possible anxiety arrested the steps of the young farmer, and he said, **“Come, and let us return, lest my father leave caring for the asses, and take thought for us.”**

This remark indicated a good and commendable trait in Saul’s character. On the whole, a man who cares for the feelings of those nearest to him is likeliest to be a good ruler of men. Would that all our young men and women, especially those who are away from home in our great cities, would be a little more considerate of the heart strings stretched even to breaking, and the eyes that often brim with tears, because the tidings of their welfare are so scanty and intermittent! Saul feared the effect of three days on his father. What would he have thought of three weeks or months without tidings?

(3) Having arranged for the offering of the piece of silver which was discovered in the bottom of the servant’s pocket, as their gift to the Seer, the two men made for the gate of the little city, **“which was set on a hill,”** its white houses glistening in the intense sunshine. The maidens of whom they made inquiries, the fact that Samuel was in the city, and on his way to a feast in the high place, the encounter with Samuel himself in the main street, and the tidings that the asses were found were like so many sign posts that pointed them by the way which they should go, till they came to the place that awaited them, the seat and portion prepared by the instruction of the prophet.

How evidently a Divine hand was in all these circumstances! They could not have happened by chance. Clearly every separate detail had been wrought out in a designing mind with the express purpose of driving Saul into the precise position where he might stand still and hear the word of the Lord.

But if it was so with these circumstances, must we not believe that as much may be said of all circumstances? If a hair cannot fall to the ground from our head, or a sparrow from the tree, apart from God, can we say of anything, that it is too trivial to come into the Divine plan?

Even let it be granted that many incidents happen at the instigation of evil men, yet they are permitted to reach us by the will of God, and therefore we may as much trace God's will in them for our own discipline and ennoblement, as in those others which are evidently of his direct sending. God's purpose ran through the wicked deeds of the betrayers and murderers of our Lord. There was not a single event on all those fateful days that was not marked on the chart of Divine Providence; and since God is everywhere the same, and the same infinitely, so that we cannot say that He is more present there than here, or was more powerful then than now, we must admit that He is still as much in every circumstance of our lot, as on those memorable and awful days when creation herself beheld the scenes of Gethsemane and Calvary with evident emotion.

Let it never be forgotten that straying asses, an unexpected encounter in the street, the presence of a coin in the pockets or its absence, are all part of a Divine plan. He who has opened eyes may read the Father's handwriting, and take the direction of his path, as though angels had flashed before his eyes to direct him. And the prepared path always leads to the vacant seat and the waiting portion.

The road may be long, but the Father never leads his trustful and obedient child into a quagmire, or leads him out on the moorland to perish of exposure to the cold. There is always a destination to which the road leads, and it only awaits the quick eye, the ready ear, and the obedient heart, to detect the things that God hath prepared for them that love Him.

II. THE INCIDENT OR SAUL'S FIRST ANOINTING

Saul slept at Samuel's house that night, and on the housetop. The prophet had prepared his couch there with a special purpose, which burnt like a clear flame in his heart; for when the house was quiet, he stole up to the young man, who was pondering the strange events of the day, and **"communed with Saul on the housetop."**

He longed to stir his soul with a profound sympathy in his own passionate and patriotic longings. He may have poured into the listening ear the story of his hopes and fears, of hopes that had been frustrated, of fears that seemed on the point of being realized. Probably he told the story of his own rejection, and of the failure of his sons. He may have whispered into those young ears his longing that someone might appear at this juncture, who would gather up the frayed and tangled threads and work out the Divine pattern.

Thus, with careful skill, Samuel awoke the sleeping soul of the young son of the soil, who probably had lived in a narrow, circumscribed sphere, interested in flocks and herds, in vines and crops, in the talk of the country-side, but with few thoughts of the national welfare.

He was awoke by Samuel before the breath that announced the dawn had stirred the leaves of the sleeping woods. **“Samuel called to Saul on the housetop, saying, Up, that I may send thee away.”** Then on the descent at the end of the city the servant was sent on, and as the two stood together, Samuel took from out of his breast the vial of oil, and poured it upon the strong young head bent beneath his touch, giving him the anointing which designated the king, and kissing him in token of his own fealty. **“Is it not,”** said he, **“that the Lord hath anointed thee to be prince over his inheritance?”**

It was a great hour in Saul’s life. No wonder that **“when he had turned his back to go from Samuel,”** it was with **“another heart.”** The chronicle does not say that he received a new heart; there was no saving regeneration or conversion, no such radical change as comes over the soul at the hour of the new birth, or he would never have perished as he did on the field of Gilboa. But he had new aims, new conceptions of the importance and significance of life, new determinations and resolves. In a sense, though not the deepest, old things had passed away, and everything had become new.

Let us mark this distinction. It is possible to have another, but not a new heart to be arrested by some stronger mind, and inspired by a fresh ideal; but beneath the rapid sprouting of the seed there may be a slab of impenetrable and unchangeable rock. The work has been only on the surface, but the dew has sped before the sun, and the cloud which seemed to presage rain has dissolved again into the sky. See that you make sure work for eternity.

III. THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT FOLLOWED

When we are on God’s path, we may certainly count on the corroboration of outward circumstances. If, in travelling by the railway, one questions whether one is in the right train, it is a comfort to consult the time-tables, to see if the names of the stations, as we hurry through them, are those which are mentioned in the list. So, when questions arise, as they will when we are confronted by difficulties and obstacles, of whether we are in the line of God’s will, it is an immense reassurance to meet with corroborating circumstances which tell us that we are right. Is not this what is meant by the words, **“I will make my mountains a way”**?

It was not enough that Peter should hear a voice speaking to his heart, or see the sheet let down from Heaven; he must hear the knock of the three men sent from Cornelius, as they stand at the door enquiring for him (Acts 10). In all great decisions seek the corroboration of circumstance. We will trace this in the subsequent chapter.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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