

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE STONE OF HELP

(I Samuel 7:12)

“And in the strength of this I rode,
Shattering all evil customs everywhere,
And past through Pagan realms, and made them mine;
And clashed with Pagan hordes, and bore them down;
And broke through all;
and in the strength of this
Came victor.”

- Tennyson

“THEN Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called it Eben-ezer (the stone of help) saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.”

This was the same spot upon which Israel had suffered the great defeat which led to the capture of the Ark (5:1). How wonderful this was, that the story of the victory should be told upon the plain which had been the scene of defeat!

From that moment Samuel's supremacy in the country was established.

- The Philistines came no more during his judgeship within the border of Israel.
- The hand of the Lord was against the Philistines all his days.
- The alienated cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even unto Gath.
- The very Amorites, who had taken part with the Canaanites, found it to their advantage to side with Samuel and abstain from hostilities (verse 14).

As Dean Spence, in *“Ellicott's Commentary,”* says: “This success at Ebenezer was no mere solitary victory, but was the sign of a new spirit in Israel, which animated the nation during the lifetime of Samuel, and the reigns of David and Solomon and of the great Hebrew kings. The petty jealousies had disappeared and had given place to a great national desire for unity. The old idol-worship of Canaan, which degraded every nationality which practiced it, was in a great measure swept away from among the chosen people, while the pure religion of the Lord of Hosts was established, not only through the care and guardianship of the tribe of Levi, but by the new order of the prophets.”

What cannot prayer do? It can not only open and close Heaven, but will give the soul that prays an undisputed supremacy over his times, so that men will acknowledge that the saviour of the city is not so much the politician, the man of intellect, or the man of affairs, but he who has learned how to walk with God, and by his character and intercession to be the palladium of the national liberties and existence.

There are many such monoliths as the “Stone of Help,” to be found strewn through these northern lands, from such venerable circles as those of Stonehenge, to the single ones which are pointed out to the traveler in Northern Wales the last home of the Druids and ancient Britons.

Throughout the world, man has endeavored to associate himself, and the history of his life, with the permanent monuments of nature. In this he has approved alike his littleness and his greatness - his littleness, because every such endeavor is a confession on his part of the transience of his days, and his consciousness that he has so slight a hold on the earth, on which he is but a sojourner and a pilgrim; his greatness, because he is capable of investing with a halo of undying interest wild glens and barren rocks, darksome caves and deep, rushing rivers.

It is for this reason that every spot in the older countries of the world teems with interest. It is with difficulty that the tourist can make his way through England or Scotland, Germany or Italy; whereas he will haste, without hesitation or halting, through thousands of miles of Canada or the Western States. How different, for instance, is the interest of travelling through the New England States to travelling through Dakota and Wisconsin. Each square mile of the one is fragrant with some interesting reminiscence of the past, whilst the other only recalls a vanished race.

At the foot of this stone let us linger for a little, to learn one or two lessons more. For stones have ears and voices. Joshua said that the stone which he reared, at the end of his life-work, had heard; and our Lord said that the stones around Him might be expected to cry out (Joshua 24:27; Luke 19:40).

I. ITS SITE

It stood on ground which had witnessed a terrible defeat and disaster.

We are told, in the fourth chapter, that the great battle of Aphek was fought on this spot.

- **“Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Eben-ezer, and the Philistines pitched in Aphek.”**

- **“Now the Philistines had taken the Ark of God, and they brought it from Eben-ezer unto Ashdod” (4:1; 5:1).**

Many who gathered around Samuel, when he raised and named this stone, must have been present twenty years before on that fatal field, the Flodden of Israel’s glory. Here the fight had been fiercest, the slain thickest; there the corpses of Hebrews and Philistines had fallen like leaves in Vallombrosa, trampled beneath the feet of the combatants; yonder the fight had raged around the Ark of God, as it was taken and re-taken, and taken again.

At this point, desperate deeds of valor had been done to turn back Israel from a shameful flight, but in vain. There Hophni fell, and there Phinehas. In this place a brief stand was made, but again the ill-formed line was broken, and the children of a chosen race, whose forefathers turned not back in the day of Gideon and Jephthah, fled like sheep before the wolf.

But, notwithstanding all this, and though the spot was associated with the memories of disgrace and shame, which, in turn, were the result of deep transgression on the part of people and priesthood, yet there was the stone erected which spoke so eloquently of the Divine help.

What living encouragement is contained in this for us all!

We, too, may be traversing at this very hour battle fields which have been sadly marked by defeat. Again and again we have met the foes of our peace in mortal conflict, only to be repulsed. Our hopes have been dashed to the ground and our banners rolled in dust and blood.

We meant never to yield again, but we did yield. We meant that that solemn vow should be kept, that holy resolution carried into effect; but they were shivered in pieces.

We have been overthrown by our adversary, and overpowered, in spite of all our efforts, by our besetting sin. Yet take heart.

At the very place where you have fallen you shall stand, for **“God is able to make you stand”**;

- Where you have been overthrown you shall be more than a conqueror.
- You shall tread those very fields with songs of joy.
- The rocks which saw the withered leaves of autumn swirl in eddies around you shall behold the young green of spring and the mature fulness of summer. Be of good cheer!

The stone of Eben-ezer shall be raised on the very field of the fatal battle of Aphek.

II. ITS RETROSPECT

What a story this stone had to tell, if all were unfolded, of the wonderful dealings of God with his people. It looked back on the twenty years of patient work, by which the prophet Samuel had been leading the people homeward to the God of their fathers quiet, unobtrusive, and unseen work, like that of the coral insects from the bottom of the mighty ocean, till presently the islet emerges with its crown of fronded palms.

- It looked back on many a scene of iconoclasm as, from Dan to Beersheba, there had been a general putting away of the Baalim and Ashtaroth, the cutting down of groves and overthrow of altars.
- It looked back on that memorable convocation of all Israel at Mizpeh, when water was poured out before the Lord in confession of sin and humble penitence.
- It looked back specially, to the offering of the burnt-offering, which declared Israel’s resolve to be henceforth wholly devoted to God, and to Samuel’s piercing cry of intercession.

- Above all, it looked back on that memorable moment, when, as the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel, **“the Lord thundered with a great thunder upon the Philistines, and discomfited them, and they were smitten down before Israel.”**

If that stone had engraved slabs of memory within its old heart, as well as eyes and ears, it surely never would forget the mad onslaught of the men of Israel on their fleeing and panic-stricken foes, to avenge in one brief hour the wrongs and oppressions of twenty long years.

Has anything like this taken place in your life? On your answer much will depend. If since your last failure and defeat there have been no acts of the soul, like those which took place at Mizpeh, believe me, there is no probability of there being any break in the long monotony of your reverses. As you have been defeated, so you will be defeated; as you have failed, so you will fail; unless there is the pouring out of your heart before God, the putting away of idols, and the resolve to follow Him fully.

If I may be permitted to quote my own experience, I must bear witness to the incessant failure of my life, so long as I cherished things in my heart which were alien to God’s holy will. Rules for holy living, solemn and heart-stirring conventions, helpful books and addresses, produced but very small result. There was temporary amendment, but little else.

But when the scene at Mizpeh had been reflected in the inner mirror of the soul, then victory took place on the very spot marked by defeat.

Let my reader ponder this.

- You cannot keep the moth out of your house, so long as one old blanket, stored in some neglected cupboard or box, is full of it.
- You cannot keep diphtheria from your home, so long as one crack in the drains is emitting the poison of sewer-gas.
- You will never raise your stone of Eben-ezer until you have stood on the watch-tower of Mizpeh and put away all known sin, all complicity with what is grievous in the eyes of CHRIST.

Only so will even his keeping power avail.

You say that you cannot. The evil thing clings to you as the serpent folds around Laocoon and his sons. The deadly creeper has wound itself around the tree of your life, and threatens to crush it to death in its deadly embrace. How can you rid yourself of that which has so strong a fascination that you feel you cannot live apart from it? Ah, that is the point where the Great Physician is willing to interpose for your rescue and deliverance! What you cannot do for yourself, He will do.

The only question is, *Are you willing?* or, *Are you willing to be made willing?* Often enough in the history of the soul it happens that the will, like a tough piece of iron, resists and resents. Then there is one glad resource take it to CHRIST, tell Him that you cannot be as you would, or that you will not be as you should, and pray Him to undertake your difficult and almost desperate case.

Do not doubt the result. He takes what we give at the moment of our giving it; and when once He has taken it, we may press to our heart the consolation which the good Naomi gave to Ruth in a memorable moment of her life; “**Sit still, my daughter; . . . for the man will not rest until he have finished the thing this day.**”

III. ITS INSCRIPTION

“**Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.**”

Surely if the stone had a retrospect, as we have seen, it had also a prospect. It looked forward as well as backward. It seemed to say, As God has helped, so He will help.

It would have been impossible to secure such results as those twenty years had witnessed, culminating in this glorious victory, unless He had been a very present help; and could He have done so much without being prepared to finish what He had commenced? Would he have begun to build without calculating on his ability to finish? Would He have entered on a campaign without counting the cost of carrying it to a conclusion?

As we go through life, let us be careful to erect our Eben-ezer stones, so that when new responsibilities begin to crowd on us, or fresh and unforeseen difficulties threaten, we may be emboldened to sing with Newton;

His love in time past forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last in trouble to sink;
Each sweet Eben-ezer I have in review
Confirms his good pleasure to help me quite through.

All through life, if you will only trust God, if only by faith you will derive from Him grace for grace, if only you will claim a continuance and a crowning of all that He has begun you will have occasions to raise these stones of help and to say with the Apostle, “**Having, therefore, obtained the help that is from God, I stand unto this day, testifying both to small and great.**”

The last stone that we shall erect will be on the margin of the river. As we turn our back for ever on the land of our pilgrimage, and enter on the work and worship of eternity, we shall set up a great stone to the glory of our God, saying once more, with a deep sigh of perfected satisfaction, “**Hitherto hath the Lord helped.**”

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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