

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

MISFORTUNE ON MISFORTUNE

(I Samuel 4, 5, 6)

“Oh, the outward hath gone! but in glory and power,
The Spirit surviveth the things of an hour;
Unchanged, undecaying, its Pentecost flame
On the heart’s secret altar is burning the same.”

- Whittier.

THE scanty records of these chapters (5:1; 7:7) bridge over a considerable tract of Scripture; covering, perhaps, forty years. The details of Samuel’s life and growing influence given by the sacred historian during that period are very fragmentary; but the narrative of events is profoundly interesting, and must be understood by those who would have a right conception of the great service that Samuel rendered to his people. It will appear, also, that there is a remarkable parallel, not only between those days and our own, but between the work he did and the work that is needed as urgently now.

It was an age of disunion and anarchy. After the deaths of Joshua, Caleb, and of all that generation, **“there arose another generation after them, which knew not the LORD, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel”** (Judges 2:10).

There was no man, and no tribe, able to unite the people under one leadership, or recall them to the lofty Monotheism the worship of the one Lord which characterized the founders of their commonwealth.

The bonds of their national unity were loosened; each tribe and each great city asserted its independence of all the rest; the heart of the national life beat feebly, and, in the expressive phrase which so completely represents the age of the judges, **“Every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”**

The only common center was afforded by the Tabernacle, the Ark, and the High Priesthood; but even the influence of these had become greatly reduced.

“The children of Israel forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, which brought them up out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the peoples that were round about them, and bowed themselves down unto them.”

There was, therefore, nothing to hinder the steady encroachments of the neighboring nations.

Now it was the children of Ammon on the east, then the Amalekites and Midianites from the desert, and again the Philistines on the south-west, that broke in on the Land of Promise. From time to time judges were raised up, but their authority was only temporary and limited. For the most part it ceased with their death, and was the means of delivering only a section of the land.

“And when the LORD raised them up judges, then the LORD was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies . . . it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way” (Judges 2:18-19).

Our story is specially connected with the southern and midland districts of Canaan, which, notwithstanding Samson’s heroic exploits for he was contemporary with Samuel’s early years lay under the tyrannous yoke of the Philistines, who seem about this time to have been largely reinforced from the original seat of their empire in the neighboring island of Crete, and to have made the position of the Hebrews almost intolerable.

In these Philistines stealing up from their own territories and cities to dominate the Hebrews, in the land which God gave them for an heritage a land to which the Philistines could have no possible claim, but which was certainly the allotted possession of the chosen people I see the type of much which is always taking place in our own experience.

For instance, they stand for unholy desires and evil habits, from which we were once set free by the risen Son of God, but which, in subsequent years, may have come back to assert their former sway and tyranny.

And again, they represent the inroads of worldliness into the Church, and of wickedness into the State. The forces of evil are never at rest. Just as the spirit of destruction and waste is perpetually at work in untiling our roofs, stripping off our wall-papers, pulling down our walls, and sowing our gardens with weeds whilst we sleep; so the evil tendencies in the heart, the Church, and the nation are ever warring against the law of the mind, and bringing men into captivity to the law of sin.

In the insidious attempts to rob us of our Rest Day, and turn it into one of public amusement; in the unblushing effrontery of vice in various forms; in the threatened domination of all other interests by the mad greed for money; in the spirit of amusement which infects society; in the worldliness and luxury which divide with the spiritual and heavenly the hearts and lives of professing Christians we are brought face to face with the bands of the Philistines as they steal up from their lowlands to the uplands of religious constancy and strength.

They have no rights, but they never fail to assert their pretensions; and sometimes we almost lose heart and begin to question whether there is any use in opposing them. Why this constant strife? Were it not better to yield the point in controversy and to acquiesce? At other times, like the children of Israel, we are goaded to make one desperate effort for freedom.

I. AN ILL-FATED ATTEMPT

“Now Israel went out against the Philistines to battle, and pitched beside Ebenezer, and the Philistines pitched in Aphek.”

From these words we infer that the war was commenced by Israel because the yoke of Philistia was too galling to be endured; but it is almost certain that from the first it was an ill-starred and badly-managed campaign. Very distinct directions were issued by Moses as to the way in which a campaign should be commenced and conducted (Deuteronomy 20), but none of them seems to have been put in force on this occasion. No priest was called in to ask counsel of God; not even Samuel, in whom the people were beginning to recognize the servant and prophet of the Lord, seems to have been consulted. It was the sudden flaming out of a spirit of hatred and revenge from a race of slaves, who were stung to the quick by the taunts, the insults, and the scorpion-whips of their masters.

Such has been the spirit in which we have sometimes turned on the powerful sins which have asserted their mastery over us. We have seen the ruin to which they were bringing us; we have winced at the shame and indignation which they were causing to others; we have felt insulted and outraged in any lingering sense of honour and nobility that may have escaped the general wreck; and we have turned on our tormentors. We have signed the pledge against the use of intoxicants; we have taken a solemn oath nevermore to yield to our besetting sin; we have vowed that we will be free. But within a month we have been back in the old state. It has not gone better with us than with Israel; for this battle is not to the strong.

The Israelitish hosts, hastily summoned and insufficiently armed, suffered a heavy defeat. Four thousand men lay dead on the battlefield, and a spirit of intimidation and dismay spread through the entire host. Such will ever be the result when God’s people leave Him out of account. Their education is so costly and necessary that He can afford to let them suffer again and again that an arrest may be put on courses that are not good.

II. THE ARK, BUT NOT GOD, TO THE RESCUE

On the evening of that disastrous day the elders of Israel held a council of war (ver. 3). It was evident that their defeat must be attributed to some failure in their relations with the Lord. They said, **“Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us to-day before the Philistines?”**

They were conscious that they had left Him out of their reckoning, and suddenly bethought themselves of a happy expedient by which they might almost compel Him to take sides with them against their foes. **“Let us fetch,”** they cried, **“the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh, that it may come among us, and save us out of the hand of our enemies.”**

They remembered the wonderful scenes in which that Ark had played a part; how the waters of the Jordan had fled before it, and the walls of Jericho had fallen down. Its going forth, in the words of the great lawgiver, had always meant the scattering and flight of the Lord’s foes. Surely it would do the same again.

They did not realize that God's very present help depended not on the presence of a material symbol, but on moral and spiritual conditions, which they should have set themselves to understand and fulfil.

It was much as though a high Sacramentarian should depend for deliverance from trial on wearing some amulet or charm, or even carrying a piece of the consecrated wafer in a golden casket upon his person, instead of exercising himself in manly faith and prayer.

The arrival of the Ark, in due course, borne by the Levites, and accompanied by the sons of Eli as its custodians, was received with the exultant shouts of the entire host. Eli had evidently been most unwilling to allow it to leave the sacred enclosure "**his heart trembled for the Ark of God**" but he had yielded too often and too long to be able to sustain a successful protest; and probably no one else had any misgivings, for "**when the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord came into camp, all Israel shouted with a great shout, so that the earth rang again.**"

As soon as the Philistines, by means of their scouts, were acquainted with the cause of this exuberant outburst, they were correspondingly depressed, for they, too, identified the presence of the God of Israel with the advent of the Ark, which had always been associated in their minds with the hand of "**these mighty gods that smote the Egyptians.**"

Neither had they any idea of those moral considerations on which alone the co-operation of God could be given. "**Woe unto us!**" they cried, "**for there hath not been such a thing heretofore. Woe unto us! Who shall deliver us?**"

It was necessary that a decisive answer should be given to these materialistic conceptions of the Hebrews and their foes. It must be demonstrated that the mere possession of the symbol of the Covenant was valueless, so long as the strange gods and the Ashtaroth were tenaciously cherished, and the abominations of the heathen were constantly and shamelessly pursued (vii. 3, 4). The asseveration of the holy words, the quoting of venerable precedents, the reliance on sacred emblems, are alike in vain, unless the heart is pure and the hands clean. "**If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.**"

The Philistines seem to have stirred themselves to deeds of desperate valor, because they believed that they were to fight, not only against flesh and blood, but against the deities which had led Israel in one long succession of victories. They advanced to the conflict with the words of their leaders ringing in their ears.

"Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Quit yourselves like men and fight" (see I Corinthians 16:13).

The issue of that terrible day was disastrous in the extreme.

"Israel was smitten, and they fled every man to his tent, and there was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen."

Around the Ark the ground must have been heaped with corpses, as the Hebrews fought desperately in the defence of the symbol of their faith; but in vain, for the Ark of God was taken, and the two sons of Eli were slain. Thus had Samuel foretold, and thus it befell.

That afternoon a Benjamite, with his clothes rent and dust upon his head, bore the tidings to the hamlets and villages that lay all along the ascending and open road to Shiloh; and, as he passed through eager and expectant groups, a wail arose that grew in volume as he sped onwards, until it reached its climax in the City of the High Priest, the capital, so far as there was any, of the entire land. **“When the man came into the city, and told it, all the city cried out.”**

On the still evening air arose a piercing outburst of lamentation, for what was there to hinder the immediate march of the victorious army on the city, deprived in one day of its warriors, and apparently of its God!

The old man, Eli, blind and anxious, had caused himself to be seated on his throne, facing on the main thoroughfare. He had a foreboding that bad news was in the air, and when the noise of the tumult arose, he anxiously inquired of the attendant priests and Levites, and, perhaps, of Samuel, waiting as usual to respond to his least appeal for help, **“What meaneth the noise of this tumult?”**

At the same moment the messenger appears to have burst into the presence of the little group, telling Eli who he was, and in answer to the eager inquiry of the High Priest, **“How went the matter, my son?”** without warning or preface, and with no care to soften the asperity of the harsh words, he blurted out, with an ever-rising climax of dread awfulness; **“Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people, and thy two sons also are dead, and the Ark of God is taken.”**

The old man received the tidings in silence.

The three first shots hit him severely, but not mortally; but **“when he made mention of the Ark of God, he fell from off his seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake and he died.”**

With her last gasp the wife of Phinehas gathered up the horror of the situation in the single word which she uttered as the name of her child, prematurely born. It was sorrow indeed that she was a widow; sorrow that her father-in-law had died at the moment when he was needed so sorely; but sorrow most of all that the Ark was taken, for with it the glory had departed. True soul that she was, and worthy to be classed with Hannah in her loyal devotion to the name and house of God!

But worse troubles still befell.

In frantic haste the Israelites bore away the remnants of the sacred tent and its furniture, and concealed them. In subsequent years they were at Nob (I Samuel 21:1). The removal of these precious relics was hardly effected before the Philistine invasion burst on the deserted city as an overflowing flood.

“Go ye now,” says Jeremiah, in the Divine Name, **“unto my place which was in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel”** (Jeremiah 7:12).

And the further fate of the city, which for three hundred years had been the center of the national life and worship, may be guessed from the pathetic words of the Psalmist;

**“He forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh,
The tent which he placed among men;
And delivered his strength into captivity,
And his glory into the enemy’s hand.
He gave his people over also unto the sword,
And was wroth with his inheritance;
The fire consumed their young men,
And their maidens were not given to marriage;
Their priests fell by the sword,
And their widows made no lamentation.”**

(Psalm 78:60-64)

III. THE AWFUL NAME OF GOD

This part of the history more closely concerns the growing illumination of the surrounding nations as to the true nature of the God of Israel.

There was no other way in which the Spirit of God could inform the people of Philistia, as to his holiness and power, than that which He adopted in the present instance.

They bore the Ark from the battle-field to the Temple of Dagon in exuberant triumph. It seemed as though they had not only triumphed over Israel, but over its tutelary deity, and that Dagon was superior to the Lord. But it would have been a great disaster had they been allowed to cherish this idea in perpetuity.

As in Egypt, centuries before, so now in Philistia, God must reveal His lonely and unapproachable supremacy. He cannot give his glory to another, nor his praise to graven images, and therefore He suits Himself to the crude and materialistic conceptions of these blinded idolaters, and meets them in their own sphere.

They would not have been impressed by the message of a prophet.

They would have scouted and stoned any who opposed the universal, national adoration of Dagon; but they could not resist the conclusions forced on them when, on two following mornings, they found his image prostrate before the emblem of the Lord, and on the second occasion the head and arms severed from the body, so that the only part which was left intact was the fish’s tail with which the figure ended.

That it might be made still clearer that this was no coincidence, but the act of God, and that He had a controversy with them, a terrible plague of “**emerods**” (tumors) broke out on each successive city to which the Ark was removed, and a visitation of destructive vermin on the country districts where it may have been deposited.

We must not suppose, of course, that God had no love towards these untutored souls, but that there was no other way of convincing them of his real nature and prerogatives. The plagues of Egypt were ordained, not only to punish the sins of pride and obstinacy with which Pharaoh made himself strong against the Almighty but that the Egyptians might be forced to recognize that He was the great God of Heaven, of whom now and again they caught a glimpse.

Similarly, in this instance, the prostrated form of Dagon, the painful disease by which they were smitten, and the devastation of their crops, caused them to cry unto Heaven (ver. 12), as though they realized that they were being dealt with by a greater than Dagon by the great Being who was superior to all local gods.

What a sublime revelation this is of the Divine methods with man!

With an infinite longing He desires to win the allegiance and devotion of all men. The consummate and unapproachable revelation which He has made for this purpose is in the Son of his Love. “**The only begotten of the Father, He hath declared Him.**” But of what use had it been to have spoken of his Son in those early days, when the hearts of men were darkened by the grossest conceptions and basest morals? No! Line must be on line, precept upon precept. The times of ignorance must be “**winked at.**”

The light must be tempered to the weak and diseased eyes. God must adopt the language that could be understood by the children of men, whom He loved, just as in after days our Lord exposed his hands and side to the incredulous Thomas, condescending to a method of demonstration which he could appreciate and had himself suggested.

If the Philistines could have understood Epistles like those of John, they would, without doubt, have been written for their learning and correction, and communicated to them by some man of God; but since they could not understand such means of instruction, they were reached by the overthrow and shattering of their idol, the plagues which accompanied the progress of the ark, and the direction taken by the milch kine, which, whilst lowing for their little ones, bore their sacred burden along the straight road which led them from their home towards Beth-shemesh.

Similarly, the inhabitants of that frontier town had to learn by a stern lesson that God was a holy God, and that He could not permit them to manifest a wanton curiosity and irreverence in handling the sacred emblem of his presence.

To pry into the Ark as they did, was forbidden to the priests, and even the high priest himself; how much more to them? It had been distinctly asserted, when the two sons of Aaron perished on the day of their inauguration to the priesthood, that God would be sanctified in all that came nigh Him, and before all the people He would be glorified (Leviticus 10:3).

The reverence due to Him must be shown to the vessels of the sanctuary, which were carefully veiled by the priests before they were taken up for transportation by the Levites (Numbers 1:50, 51; 4: 5, 16-30).

The swift retribution which followed on this act of irreverence extorted the reverent acknowledgement of the awful holiness of God, as the men of Beth-shemesh said, “**Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?**”

When, on the other hand, the Ark had been reverently borne to Kirjath-jearim, the city of the woods, some three miles distant from the great valley of Bethshemesh, on which the crops were goldening in the sun, and had been carefully entrusted to the custody of Abinadab and his son Eleazar, the blessing that befell his house was an indication of the tender love and pity of the Divine nature, who is willing to dwell with him that is of a humble and lowly heart, and that trembleth at his Word.

Oh, do not fear the Lord with the dread of a craven heart, but with the loyal love and devotion of sons, and open your heart to receive not the Ark of the Covenant only, but Him whom God hath set forth for a propitiation, and who is the Propitiation for our sins, i.e., the mercy-seat which covers the Ark of the Covenant, sprinkled with Blood, and exactly fitting and hiding the Tables of Law beneath.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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