

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

F. B. Meyer, B.A

CHAPTER NINE

A GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT

(I Samuel 7, 8)

“They who have steeped their souls in Prayer
Can every anguish calmly bear;
They who have learnt to pray aright
From pain’s dark well draw up delight.”

- Houghton.

THE supreme test of character is disappointment and apparent failure. When the flowing stream is with us, and our plans are ripening into fruition, it is easy enough to be at our best. But what we really are does not appear under such conditions. Let the tide turn against us; let men avert their faces and refuse our counsels; let us be driven to stand on the defense against a world in arms then our true metal is approved. We are now to see how Samuel bore himself in the face of a keen disappointment. This at least may be said of him, as of old it was said of Job, that he still held fast his integrity.

I. HOW THE DISAPPOINTMENT BEFEL

During the years that followed the glorious victory of Aphek, Samuel set himself to build up in the hearts of his fellow-country men something of that profound belief in the Reign of the Divine King, which we know as the Theocracy, and which was so dear to all devout Hebrews.

His headquarters and home were at Ramah, the scene of his happy childhood’s years.

Thence he went on itinerating journeys, and wherever he came, Samuel strove to act only as the representative and agent of the Divine King. Who was he but the messenger and minister of the Lord of Hosts? With all the force of his character and eloquence of his speech he insisted that the people were the subjects of the Lord, owing allegiance to Him alone, and receiving from Him direction in times of perplexity, and deliverance in days of battle.

They needed no king the Lord was King; no officials, but those who uttered His messages; no code of laws, but those that emanated from Him. It was a beautiful and inspiring conception; and as he went to and fro throughout the land of Israel, still upon his lips, like a musical refrain, the words were constantly being breathed, “**Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.**”

The same object was in his mind as he instituted the schools of the prophets. To Samuel's wise interpretation of his times we must attribute the institution of these seats of learning. The priesthood had forfeited its right to stand between the Lord and his people. Eli and his sons had failed too abjectly and entirely to realize the purpose for which their office was instituted, to encourage the hope of the resuscitation of the priestly order. It was clear that some other religious body must be called into existence.

The times demanded an order of men, who should be trained in the law of God, who should be fitted to interpret the holy oracles to the people, and from the midst of whom men should arise from time to time to tell in the light what they had heard in the darkness, to proclaim on the house tops what God had whispered to their ears in secret. We find these schools flourishing in the days of Elijah and Elisha some apparently on the same sites, where they had been instituted by Samuel (10:3-5; 19:23, 24; II Kings 2).

As Samuel laboriously built up these institutions, he had but one purpose in his heart. It was his eager desire to imbue the minds of his countrymen with his own sublime conceptions of the Divine Kingship; and how would he do it better than by these young and ardent disciples? And it must have been a constant inspiration to them to live in contact with this great and illustrious man, who was statesman and saint in one, whom they revered for the loftiness of his character, whilst they felt the inspiration of his high ideals.

They saw how respected he was in his own city by young and old (9:12, 13); how accessible he was to all who needed his assistance (ver. 9); how mightily he wrestled and prevailed in prayer (7:17; 8:10, 21, 22); and they counted it their highest honour to be associated with him.

But the failure to realize his high purpose seems to have befallen, through the failure of his sons.

As Samuel became old, he was less able to administer justice, and continue to act as the adviser of his people in their national and domestic affairs. The burden of administering the government, in the name of the unseen King, became too heavy for him, and he appointed his sons to assist him on the extreme frontiers of the South country. The experiment proved, however, to be a disastrous failure. They **“walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment.”**

This precipitated the catastrophe; and **“all the elders of Israel,”** who evidently formed a kind of representative and popular assembly, came to Samuel at Ramah, to urge that he should make more satisfactory and permanent arrangements for the perpetuation of his authority.

They said **“Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways; now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.”**

Looked at from the human standpoint, there was much to warrant the request.

- The Philistines were pushing their outposts into the heart of the country (13:3, 5);
- Nahash the Ammonite was a dangerous neighbour on the Eastern frontier (11:1);
- There was fear that disintegration might again separate the people on Samuel's death.

But, on the other hand, the request shattered the prophet's hopes.

It showed him that his ideal was too lofty and spiritual for the people to appreciate and maintain. They could not believe only in the invisible; they must have the outward symbols and splendor of royalty.

This is the universal failure of the heart of man. It is always craving for the sensuous and visible. Like the children of Israel, with their cry, "**Make us gods which may go before us,**" men demand something which they may see and handle, and before which they may prostrate themselves. Hence all spiritual worship shows a tendency to become materialistic. It is hard to believe that God is a Spirit, and that He must be worshipped in spirit and in truth; it is easier to enter into the debate, whether "**in this mountain or in Jerusalem men ought to worship.**"

This chapter was written in a country where this fact is strikingly illustrated.

Its national Church was the earliest product of Apostolic days the Church of Athanasius, Cyril, and Chrysostom. From its earliest days it recited the prayers and read the Scriptures in the tongue of the people; eschewed images, and insisted on spiritual worship. Yet its churches are full of the pictures of the saints, before which women burn candles and men cross themselves; the Holy of Holies is shut off from the common foot by golden gates; the deep bass of the reader mingles with the exquisite voices of boys in rendering the service in an almost unknown tongue everything that can appeal to the sense is called into requisition.

Apparently the people love to have it so, for they stand in dense crowds on the spacious pavements, following each invocation of the Divine Name with profuse genuflections and obeisance.

As I turned from these ornate and splendid symbols to other gatherings of God's people, in which the eye has nothing to allure, or the ear to attract; where the thought is centered on God, and the only splendor is in those great conceptions that elevate and ennoble I did not wonder that the nature of the ordinary man rebels and cries out for something more suited to the common levels of daily experience.

To combat desires like these, the Epistle to the Hebrews was written, that our minds and hearts might thither ascend, and there continually dwell, where the Lord has gone before us.

For us,

- Not a mount that can be touched, but a mount not less certainly - Mount Zion;
- Not a city, whose minarets and monuments catch the rays of the rising and setting sun, but a city as surely, whose streets we may walk each day the heavenly Jerusalem;
- not the festal crowds of worshippers that jostled each other in their climb to the Temple of Solomon, but fellow-worshippers equally real and numerous the hosts of angels, the spirits of just men made perfect, the Church of the firstborn, with whom we come into contact at each hour of prayer.

II. HOW SAMUEL BORE HIS DISAPPOINTMENT

“The thing displeased Samuel when they said, Give us a king to judge us.”

It was not so much that they had rejected himself, but that they had rejected God that He should not be King over them. They had failed to grasp the great conception, and had fallen to the level of the nations around. The one hope that had arisen in his soul, nurtured by the dew and sun of every summer, was frustrated; and it was clear that there could never be the realization of his cherished dream, since it was impossible to imagine circumstances more favourable for giving it effect.

If it failed in Israel it would fail entirely unless, indeed, the Divine Kingdom could be set up, which would never pass away.

Under these bitter circumstances, he made for the one Harbor of Refuge - the one assured safeguard for all broken hearts and wrecked lives, for all that labour and are heavy laden;
“Samuel prayed unto the Lord.”

By how many disappointed ones these words may be read!

Women whose young hearts were filled on their marriage-day with high and buoyant hope, as they dreamed of an ideal life of love and blessedness, but who are mourning over the withered vows, the broken promises, the irrecoverable sense of trust and peace!

Men that meant to effect such great things by their lives, to succeed in business, to lead society, to mould and fashion the State!

Ministers who, on the threshold of their sacred calling, saw visions of consecration, tenderness, shepherd-care, and paternal solicitude, which have vanished, as the pictures of foliage reflected in deep lakes when a breath of wind stirs the surface of the water!

What are such to do? Whither can they go? What resort is there for broken hearts?

There is no answer to these questions but that suggested by Samuel's action, when he prayed unto the Lord. Go to Him, and tell everything. Weep your tears out at his feet. He can understand, can sympathize, can bind and heal. There is Balm in Gilead; there is a Physician there. There is help for the helpless, and comfort for the comfortless. To tell God everything is to be far along the road to peace; and where you cannot tell, where the sobs choke the utterance, there the Father seeth, knoweth, and comforteth. Through his love you may be as one whom his mother comforteth.

Then the Lord answered his servant. He always does, and will, answer. The voice may be so soft and low as to be almost inaudible; but it will be there. The words may not quite chime in with our notions at first. Unlike the prophet's roll, they may be bitter in the mouth, but they will be sweet to the heart.

“Be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God; and the peace of God that passeth all understanding shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.”

III. THE DIVINE ANSWER AND ENCOURAGEMENT

When Samuel cried to the Lord about his sore trouble, in the Divine answer it was made clear that the cherished ideal of a lifetime would have to be abandoned. The distinct impression was borne in on the prophet's mind that he must renounce his high purpose, abdicate his position, and step down to become subordinate to a king. **“Now, therefore,”** said his Almighty Friend and Confidant, **“hearken unto their voice.”**

At the same time his sorrow was greatly mitigated by discovering that God was his Fellow-Sufferer, and that the sorrow of the Divine heart was infinitely greater than his own. **“They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me.”**

It is a great honour when a man is summoned to enter into fellowship with God in the awful pain and grief which men bring on his tender and Holy Spirit.

The Suffering of God. Surely none will count the phrase extravagant which attributes suffering to God, on account of his rejection by human hearts, which refuse his reign and do despite to the Spirit of his Grace. Did not Jesus suffer when his own received Him not; when his brethren believed not; when the city, which He loved with patriot devotion, refused to shelter under his shadowing wings, and when his chosen disciples forsook Him and fled?

The very abandonment of his self-sacrifice proved the tenderness of his yearning love, and this could not have been present to so large an extent within Him without exposing Him to excessive suffering on account of human sin. It has been beautifully said by a modern writer; “There is a common saying that cruelty and cowardice go together, so also do self-sacrifice and tenderness. They are different sides of the same idea, and all the delicacy of Christian tenderness is perceptibly an outgrowth of the Cross. It seems as though, till Christ had lived and died, that fulness of human sympathy was impossible.”

Now, if that be true - if the Cross of Christ has exhaled through the world the aroma of tender sympathy - how strong this element must have been in his Holy Nature, and how acutely He must have suffered when the keepers of the vineyard cast Him out and slew Him. But He did not suffer alone; they that saw Him saw the Father. He taught us that God was not impassive; but that He yearned, sorrowed, loved, as human fathers do, only with heights and depths of intensity which are indeed Divine.

Thou who hast borne all burdens bear our load
Bear Thou our load, whatever load it be;
Our guilt, our shame, our helpless misery.
Bear Thou who only canst, O God, my God,
Seek us and find us, for we cannot Thee.

The prophet says that God was pressed beneath the sin and rebellion of men, as the groaning wagon is pressed beneath its sheaves.

IV. SAMUEL S NOBLE BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS THE PEOPLE DEMANDS OUR NOTICE

The request of the people for a king was, no doubt, in part based on Deuteronomy 17:14, which seemed to anticipate just such a crisis as had now arisen. In Hannah's song, also, there had been an unmistakable prophecy of the day when the Lord should give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed (I Samuel 2:10). But the present request had been sprung on Samuel prematurely, and with undue passion and haste. Instead of seeking to ascertain the mind of God, the people had made up their own mind; instead of consulting the aged prophet, they dictated the policy on which they had set their hearts.

Under these circumstances, and with the express direction of God, he protested solemnly to the deputation of elders, and through them to the people, showing the manner of the king that would reign. It was impossible that a king demanded in such a spirit as characterized the people could be a man after God's own heart.

They wanted one who, in his stature and bearing, in his martial prowess and deeds, should be worthy to compare with neighboring monarchs. This was much more to them than character, obedience to God, or loyalty to the Mosaic code. And as they desired, so it was done unto them. Ah! how often it happens that God gives us according to our request, but sends leanness into our souls (Psalm 106:15).

Dangers that Samuel foresaw.

All the Oriental extravagance and prodigality of human life, which were the familiar accompaniment of royalty in neighboring countries, were destined to reappear in the court of the Kings of Israel.

- They would enforce the service of the young men to fabricate their weapons, fight their battles, and minister to their royal state.
- They would exact unremunerated labour in the tillage of their lands.
- From the daughters and wives of the people they would demand confectionaries and bakemeats, and other elaborate luxuries for the royal appetite.
- A vineyards and oliveyards, farms and lands, would be confiscated at their caprice.
- A system of heavy taxation would be imposed on the produce of the land, and on the flocks and herds which covered the pasture lands; while the people would have to stand still and see their hard-earned money squandered on the pleasures and self-indulgence of the palace.

A brief experience of this kind would lead to a universal outcry, as the nation awoke to its grievous mistake; but the step so rashly taken would be found to be irreparable. **“Ye shall cry out in that day, because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the Lord will not answer you in that day.”**

Samuel's protest and remonstrance were, however, alike in vain. **"The people refused to hearken unto the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us."**

- They trusted in man, and in the arm of flesh;
- Their heart departed from the Lord;

And in the sequel they were destined to see

- Their king slain,
- their land over-run, and
- The national fortunes reduced to the lowest possible ebb.

Does thy heart cry out for a king for one who shall reduce the conflicting passions of thy nature to unity and order? - beware lest thou choose after the sight of thine eyes, or the hearing of thine ears; let not sense nor appetite make the selection; take heed of the lust of thy flesh, the lust of thy eyes, and the pride of thy life! Let thy King be the Man whom God hath chosen, the Man of Calvary, whom He hath exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour. He will not exact from, but bring to thee. He does not impoverish, but enrich. His sceptre is the broken reed; his steed, a foal; his crown, of thorns!

When Samuel saw that the people had made up their mind, he dismissed the assembly, and set himself with remarkable magnanimity to do the best he could for them. He did this in obedience to the Divine summons, which lay along the line of his own thoughts.

This is very remarkable, and justifies the remark of Ewald:

"Samuel is one of the few great men in history who, in critical times, by sheer force of character and inimitable energy, terminate the previous form of a great existing system at first against their own will, but afterwards, when convinced of the necessity, with all the force and eagerness of their nature; and who then initiate a better form with the happiest results, amid much personal suffering."

During the early years of his life, and well on into the maturity of his power, Samuel sought to vitalize the existing institutions, which were ready to his hands. Only slowly, and against his wishes, he awoke to realize that he must abandon further efforts in this direction, and set himself to build up an entirely new organization.

In doing this he had to sacrifice his previous convictions, and do violence to his better judgment; he had to pull down the very structure that he had been at such pains to establish; he had to be second, where he had been an unchallenged first. But when once he realized that there was no alternative, he became the most devoted and efficient organizer of the new age; just as Dr. Chalmers, when he found that it was impossible to secure what he sought within the borders of the Established Church of Scotland, stepped out from its pale, and began to build the Free Church, which has become one of the greatest Churches of the age.

“And,” continues Ewald, “if David’s visible deeds are greater or more dazzling than Samuel’s, still there can be no doubt that David’s blaze of glory would have been impossible without Samuel’s less conspicuous, but far more influential career; so that all the greatness of which the following century boasts goes back to him as its real author.”

There are supreme crises in the lives of some of us, which search us to the quick.

The people whom we have loved, have suffered and sacrificed for, suddenly turn from us. They want something else, and something more. We realize that we must abdicate, and are tempted to do it with grudging courtesy and an ill grace. Why should we make way for others why renounce our rights and refuse to press our claims?

At such times let us remember Samuel’s heroism; let us acknowledge that God’s will is leading us by a right way; let us care for the flock over which we have been placed as overseers more than we care for ourselves; let us adapt ourselves to the new order; nay, let us expedite it with all the grace and grit that we can command, knowing that the blood of our self-sacrifice will, by God’s blessing, be the best cement of our handiwork.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
