

WILLIAM BLAIKIE

THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE:
THE FIRST BOOK OF
SAMUEL

William Blaikie
The Expositor's Bible:
The First Book of Samuel

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24168948

The Expositor's Bible: The First Book of Samuel:

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	4
CHAPTER II.	18
CHAPTER III.	30
CHAPTER IV.	43
CHAPTER V.	56
CHAPTER VI.	69
CHAPTER VII.	82
CHAPTER VIII.	95
CHAPTER IX.	108
CHAPTER X.	121
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	123

W. G. Blaikie

The Expositor's Bible:

The First Book of Samuel

CHAPTER I.

HANNAH'S TRIAL AND TRUST

1 Samuel i 1–18

The prophet Samuel, like the book which bears his name, comes in as a connecting link between the Judges and the Kings of Israel. He belonged to a transition period. It was appointed to him to pilot the nation between two stages of its history: from a republic to a monarchy; from a condition of somewhat casual and indefinite arrangements to one of more systematic and orderly government. The great object of his life was to secure that this change should be made in the way most beneficial for the nation, and especially most beneficial for its spiritual interests. Care must be taken that while becoming like the nations in having a king, Israel shall not become like them in religion, but shall continue to stand out in hearty and unswerving allegiance to the

law and covenant of their fathers' God.

Samuel was the last of the judges, and in a sense the first of the prophets. The last of the judges, but not a military judge; not ruling like Samson by physical strength, but by high spiritual qualities and prayer; not so much wrestling against flesh and blood, as against principalities and powers, and the rulers of the darkness of this world, and spiritual wickedness in high places. In this respect his function as judge blended with his work as prophet. Before him, the prophetic office was but a casual illumination; under him it becomes a more steady and systematic light. He was the first of a succession of prophets whom God placed side by side with the kings and priests of Israel to supply that fresh moral and spiritual force which the prevailing worldliness of the one and formalism of the other rendered so necessary for the great ends for which Israel was chosen. With some fine exceptions, the kings and priests would have allowed the seed of Abraham to drift away from the noble purpose for which God had called them; conformity to the world in spirit if not in form was the prevailing tendency; the prophets were raised up to hold the nation firmly to the covenant, to vindicate the claims of its heavenly King, to thunder judgments against idolatry and all rebellion, and pour words of comfort into the hearts of all who were faithful to their God, and who looked for redemption in Israel. Of this order of God's servants Samuel was the first. And called as he was to this office at a transition period, the importance of it was all the greater. It was a work for which

no ordinary man was needed, and for which no ordinary man was found.

Very often the finger of God is seen very clearly in connection with the birth and early training of those who are to become His greatest agents. The instances of Moses, Samson, and John the Baptist, to say nothing of our blessed Lord, are familiar to us all. Very often the family from which the great man is raised up is among the obscurest and least distinguished of the country. The “certain man” who lived in some quiet cottage at Ramathaim-Zophim would never probably have emerged from his native obscurity but for God’s purpose to make a chosen vessel of his son. In the case of this family, and in the circumstances of Samuel’s birth, we see a remarkable overruling of human infirmity to the purposes of the Divine will. If Peninnah had been kind to Hannah, Samuel might never have been born. It was the unbearable harshness of Peninnah that drove Hannah to the throne of grace, and brought to her wrestling faith the blessing she so eagerly pled for. What must have seemed to Hannah at the time a most painful dispensation became the occasion of a glorious rejoicing. The very element that aggravated her trial was that which led to her triumph. Like many another, Hannah found the beginning of her life intensely painful, and as a godly woman she no doubt wondered why God seemed to care for her so little. But at evening time there was light; like Job, she saw “the end of the Lord;” the mystery cleared away, and to her as to the patriarch it appeared very clearly that “the Lord is very pitiful and of tender

mercy.”

The home in which Samuel is born has some points of quiet interest about it; but these are marred by serious defects. It is a religious household, at least in the sense that the outward duties of religion are carefully attended to; but the moral tone is defective. First, there is that radical blemish – want of unity. No doubt it was tacitly permitted to a man in those days to have two wives. But where there were two wives there were two centres of interest and feeling, and discord must ensue.

Elkanah does not seem to have felt that in having two wives he could do justice to neither. And he had but little sympathy for the particular disappointment of Hannah. He calculated that a woman’s heart-hunger in one direction ought to be satisfied by copious gifts in another. And as to Peninnah, so little idea had she of the connection of true religion and high moral tone, that the occasion of the most solemn religious service of the nation was her time for pouring out her bitterest passion. Hannah is the only one of the three of whom nothing but what is favourable is recorded.

With regard to the origin of the family, it seems to have been of the tribe of Levi. If so, Elkanah would occasionally have to serve the sanctuary; but no mention is made of such service. For anything that appears, Elkanah may have spent his life in the same occupations as the great bulk of the people. The place of his residence was not many miles from Shiloh, which was at that time the national sanctuary. But the moral influence from

that quarter was by no means beneficial; a decrepit high priest, unable to restrain the profligacy of his sons, whose vile character brought religion into contempt, and led men to associate gross wickedness with Divine service, – of such a state of things the influence seemed fitted rather to aggravate than to lessen the defects of Elkanah's household.

Inside Elkanah's house we see two strange arrangements of Providence, of a kind that often moves our astonishment elsewhere. First, we see a woman eminently fitted to bring up children, but having none to bring up. On the other hand, we see another woman, whose temper and ways are fitted to ruin children, entrusted with the rearing of a family. In the one case a God-fearing woman does not receive the gifts of Providence; in the other case a woman of a selfish and cruel nature seems loaded with His benefits. In looking round us, we often see a similar arrangement of other gifts; we see riches, for example, in the very worst of hands; while those who from their principles and character are fitted to make the best use of them have often difficulty in securing the bare necessities of life. How is this? Does God really govern, or do time and chance regulate all? If it were God's purpose to distribute His gifts exactly as men are able to estimate and use them aright, we should doubtless see a very different distribution; but God's aim in this world is much more to try and to train than to reward and fulfil. All these anomalies of Providence point to a future state. What God does we know not now, but we shall know hereafter. The misuse of

God's gifts brings its punishment both here and in the life to come. To whom much is given, of them much shall be required. For those who have shown the capacity to use God's gifts aright, there will be splendid opportunities in another life. To those who have received much, but abused much, there comes a fearful reckoning, and a dismal experience of the "the unprofitable servant's doom."

The trial which Hannah had to bear was peculiarly heavy, as is well known, to a Hebrew woman. To have no child was not only a disappointment, but seemed to mark one out as dishonoured by God, – as unworthy of any part or lot in the means that were to bring about the fulfilment of the promise, "In thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." In the case of Hannah, the trial was aggravated by the very presence of Peninnah and her children in the same household. Had she been alone, her mind might not have brooded over her want, and she and her husband might have so ordered their life as almost to forget the blank. But with Peninnah and her children constantly before her eyes, such a course was impossible. She could never forget the contrast between the two wives. Like an aching tooth or an aching head, it bred a perpetual pain.

In many cases home affords a refuge from our trials, but in this case home was the very scene of the trial. There is another refuge from trial, which is very grateful to devout hearts – the house of God and the exercises of public worship. A member of Hannah's race, who was afterwards to pass through many a trial,

was able even when far away, to find great comfort in the very thought of the house of God, with its songs of joy and praise, and its multitude of happy worshippers, and to rally his desponding feelings into cheerfulness and hope. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the health of His countenance." But from Hannah this resource likewise was cut off. The days of high festival were her days of bitter prostration.

It was the custom in religious households for the head of the house to give presents at the public festivals. Elkanah, a kind-hearted but not very discriminating man, kept up the custom, and as we suppose, to compensate Hannah for the want of children, he gave her at these times a worthy or double portion. But his kindness was inconsiderate. It only raised the jealousy of Peninnah. For her and her children to get less than the childless Hannah was intolerable. No sense of courtesy restrained her from uttering her feeling. No sisterly compassion urged her to spare the feelings of her rival. No regard for God or His worship kept back the storm of bitterness. With the reckless impetuosity of a bitter heart she took these opportunities to reproach Hannah with her childless condition. She knew the tender spot of her heart, and, instead of sparing it, she selected it as the very spot on which to plant her blows. Her very object was to give Hannah pain, to give her the greatest pain she could. And so the very place that should have been a rebuke to every bitter feeling, the very time which was sacred to joyous festivity, and the very sorrow

that should have been kept furthest from Hannah's thoughts, were selected by her bitter rival to poison all her happiness, and overwhelm her with lamentation and woe.

After all, was Hannah or Peninnah the more wretched of the two? To suffer in the tenderest part of one's nature is no doubt a heavy affliction. But to have a heart eager to inflict such suffering on another is far more awful. Young people that sting a comrade when out of temper, that call him names, that reproach him with his infirmities, are far more wretched and pitiable creatures than those whom they try to irritate. It has always been regarded as a natural proof of the holiness of God that He has made man so that there is a pleasure in the exercise of his amiable feelings, while his evil passions, in the very play of them, produce pain and misery. Lady Macbeth is miserable over the murdered king, even while exulting in the triumph of her ambition. Torn by her heartless and reckless passions, her bosom is like a hell. The tumult in her raging soul is like the writhing of an evil spirit. Yes, my friends, if you accept the offices of sin, if you make passion the instrument of your purposes, if you make it your business to sting and to stab those who in some way cross your path, you may succeed for the moment, and you may experience whatever of satisfaction can be found in gloated revenge. But know this, that you have been cherishing a viper in your bosom that will not content itself with fulfilling your desire. It will make itself a habitual resident in your heart, and distil its poison over it. It will make it impossible for you to know anything of the sweetness

of love, the serenity of a well-ordered heart, the joy of trust, the peace of heaven. You will be like the troubled sea, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. You will find the truth of that solemn word, “There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.”

If the heart of Peninnah was actuated by this infernal desire to make her neighbour fret, it need not surprise us that she chose the most solemn season of religious worship to gratify her desire. What could religion be to such a one but a form? What communion could she have, or care to have, with God? How could she realize what she did in disturbing the communion of another heart? If we could suppose her realizing the presence of God, and holding soul-to-soul communion with Him, she would have received such a withering rebuke to her bitter feelings as would have filled her with shame and contrition. But when religious services are a mere form, there is absolutely nothing in them to prevent, at such times, the outbreak of the heart’s worst passions. There are men and women whose visits to the house of God are often the occasions of rousing their worst, or at least very unworthy, passions. Pride, scorn, malice, vanity – how often are they moved by the very sight of others in the house of God! What strange and unworthy conceptions of Divine service such persons must have! What a dishonouring idea of God, if they imagine that the service of their bodies or of their lips is anything to Him. Surely in the house of God, and in the presence of God, men ought to feel that among the things most offensive in His eyes are a foul heart, a fierce temper, and the spirit that hateth a brother.

While, on the other hand, if we would serve Him acceptably, we must lay aside all malice and all guile and hypocrisies, envies and all evil speakings. Instead of trying to make others fret, we should try, young and old alike, to make the crooked places of men's hearts straight, and the rough places of their lives plain; try to give the soft answer that turneth away wrath; try to extinguish the flame of passion, to lessen the sum-total of sin, and stimulate all that is lovely and of good report in the world around us.

But to return to Hannah and her trial. Year by year it went on, and her sensitive spirit, instead of feeling it less, seemed to feel it more. It would appear that, on one occasion, her distress reached a climax. She was so overcome that even the sacred feast remained by her untasted. Her husband's attention was now thoroughly roused. "Hannah, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?" There was not much comfort in these questions. He did not understand the poor woman's feeling. Possibly his attempts to show her how little cause she had to complain only aggravated her distress. Perhaps she thought, "When my very husband does not understand me, it is time for me to cease from man." With the double feeling – my distress is beyond endurance, and there is no sympathy for me in any fellow-creature – the thought may have come into her mind, "I will arise and go to my Father." However it came about, her trials had the happy effect of sending her to God. Blessed fruit of affliction! Is not this the reason why afflictions are often so severe? If they were of

ordinary intensity, then, in the world's phrase, we might "grin and bear them." It is when they become intolerable that men think of God. As Archbishop Leighton has said, God closes up the way to every broken cistern, one after another, that He may induce you, baffled everywhere else, to take the way to the fountain of living waters. "I looked on my right hand and beheld, but there was no man that would know me; refuge failed me, no man cared for my soul. I cried unto thee, O Lord; I said, Thou art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living."

Behold Hannah, then, overwhelmed with distress, in "the temple of the Lord" (as His house at Shiloh was called), transacting solemnly with God. "She vowed a vow." She entered into a transaction with God, as really and as directly as one man transacts with another. It is this directness and distinctness of dealing with God that is so striking a feature in the piety of those early times. She asked God for a man child. But she did not ask this gift merely to gratify her personal wish. In the very act of dealing with God she felt that it was His glory and not her personal feelings that she was called chiefly to respect. No doubt she wished the child, and she asked the child in fulfilment of her own vehement desire. But beyond and above that desire there arose in her soul the sense of God's claim and God's glory, and to these high considerations she desired to subordinate every feeling of her own. If God should give her the man child, he would not be hers, but God's. He would be specially dedicated as a Nazarite to God's service. No razor should come on his head;

no drop of strong drink should pass his lips. And this would not be a mere temporary dedication, it would last all the days of his life. Eagerly though Hannah desired a son, she did not wish him merely for personal gratification. She was not to make herself the end of her child's existence, but would sacrifice even her reasonable and natural claims upon him in order that he might be more thoroughly the servant of God.

Hannah, as she continued praying, must have felt something of that peace of soul which ever comes from conscious communion with a prayer-hearing God. But probably her faith needed the element of strengthening which a kindly and favourable word from one high in God's service would have imparted. It must have been terrible for her to find, when the high priest spoke to her, that it was to insult her, and accuse her of an offence against decency itself from which her very soul would have recoiled. Well meaning, but weak and blundering, Eli never made a more outrageous mistake. With firmness and dignity, and yet in perfect courtesy, Hannah repudiated the charge. Others might try to drown their sorrows with strong drink, but she had poured out her soul before God. The high priest must have felt ashamed of his rude and unworthy charge, as well as rebuked by the dignity and self-possession of this much-tried but upright, godly woman. He sent her away with a hearty benediction, which seemed to convey to her an assurance that her prayer would be fulfilled. As yet it is all a matter of faith; but her "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Her burden is

completely removed; her soul has returned to its quiet rest. This chapter of the history has a happy ending – “The woman went her way and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad.”

Is not this whole history just like one of the Psalms, expressed not in words but in deeds? First the wail of distress; then the wrestling of the troubled heart with God; then the repose and triumph of faith. What a blessing, amid the multitude of this world’s sorrows; that such a process should be practicable! What a blessed thing is faith, faith in God’s word, and faith in God’s heart, that faith which becomes a bridge to the distressed from the region of desolation and misery to the region of peace and joy? Is there any fact more abundantly verified than this experience is – this passage out of the depths, this way of shaking one’s self from the dust, and putting on the garments of praise? Are any of you tired, worried, wearied in the battle of life, and yet ignorant of this blessed process? Do any receive your fresh troubles with nothing better than a growl of irritation – I will not say an angry curse? Alas for your thorny experience! an experience which knows no way of blunting the point of the thorns. Know, my friends, that in Gilead there is a balm for soothing these bitter irritations. There is a peace of God that passeth all understanding, and that keeps the hearts and minds of His people through Christ Jesus. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee.”

But let those who profess to be Christ’s see that they

are consistent here. A fretful, complaining Christian is a contradiction in terms. How unlike to Christ! How forgetful such a one is of the grand argument, “He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” “Be patient, brethren, for the coming of the Lord draweth near.” Amid the agitations of life often steal away to the green pastures and the still waters, and they will calm your soul. And while “the trial of your faith is much more precious than of gold that perisheth, although it be tried with fire,” it shall be “found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.”

CHAPTER II.

HANNAH'S FAITH REWARDED

1 Samuel i. 19–28

In all the transactions recorded in these verses, we see in Hannah the directing and regulating power of the family; while Elkanah appears acquiescing cordially in all that she proposes, and devoutly seconding her great act of consecration, – the surrender of Samuel to the perpetual service of God. For a moment it might be thought that Hannah assumed a place that hardly belonged to her; that she became the leader and director in the house, while her proper position was that of a helpmeet to her husband. We are constrained, however, to dismiss this thought, for it does not fit in to the character of Hannah, and it is not in keeping with the general tone of the passage. There are two reasons that account sufficiently for the part she took. In the first place, it was she that had dealt with God in the matter, and it was with her too that God had dealt. She had been God-directed in the earlier part of the transaction, and therefore was specially able to see what was right and proper to be done in following up God's remarkable acknowledgment and answer of her prayer. The course to be taken came to her as an intuition, – an intuition

not to be reasoned about, not to be exposed to the criticism of another, to be simply accepted and obeyed. As she gave no heed to those impulses of her own heart that might have desired a different destination for her child, so she was disposed to give none to the impulses of any other. The name, and the training, and the life-work of a child given so remarkably were all clear as sunbeams to her godly heart; and in such a matter it would have been nothing but weakness to confer with flesh and blood.

And in the second place, Elkanah could be in no humour to resist his wife, even if he had had any reason to do so. For he was in a manner reprov'd of God for not being more concerned about her sadness of spirit. God had treated her sorrow more seriously than he had. God had not said to her that her husband was better to her than ten sons. God had recognised the hunger of her heart for a son as a legitimate craving, and when she brought her wish to Him, and meekly and humbly asked Him to fulfil it, He had heard her prayer, and granted her request. In a sense Hannah, in the depth of her sorrow, had appealed from her husband to a higher court, and the appeal had been decided in her favour. Elkanah could not but feel that in faith, in lofty principle, in nearness of fellowship with God, he had been surpassed by his wife. It was no wonder he surrendered to her the future direction of a life given thus in answer to her prayers. Yet in thus surrendering his right he showed no sullenness of temper, but acted in harmony with her, not only in naming and dedicating the child, but in taking a vow on himself, and at the

proper moment fulfilling that vow. The three bullocks, with the ephah of flour and the bottle of wine brought to Shiloh when the child was presented to the Lord, were probably the fulfilment of Elkanah's vow.

But to come more particularly to what is recorded in the text.

1. We notice, first, the fact of the answer to prayer. The answer was prompt, clear, explicit. It is an important question, Why are some prayers answered and not others? Many a good man and woman feel it to be the greatest trial that their prayers for definite objects are not answered. Many a mother will say, Why did God not answer me when I prayed Him to spare my infant's life? I am sure I prayed with my whole heart and soul, but it seemed to make no difference, the child sank and died just as if no one had been praying for him. Many a wife will say, Why does God not convert my husband? I have agonized, I have wept and made supplication on his behalf, and in particular, with reference to his besetting infirmity, I have implored God to break his chain and set him free; but there he is, the same as ever. Many a young person under serious impressions will say, Why does God not hear my prayer? I have prayed with heart and soul for faith and love, for peace in believing, for consciousness of my interest in Christ; but my prayers seem directed against a wall of brass, they seem never to reach the ears of the Lord of hosts. In spite of all such objections and difficulties, we maintain that God is the hearer of prayer. Every sincere prayer offered in the name of Christ is heard, and dealt with by God in such way as seems good to Him. There are

good reasons why some prayers are not answered at all, and there are also good reasons why the visible answer to some prayers is delayed. Some prayers are not answered because the spirit of them is bad. "Ye ask but receive not because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts." What is asked merely to gratify a selfish feeling is asked amiss. It is not holy prayer; it does not fit in with the sacred purposes of life; it is not asked to make us better, or enable us to serve God better, or make our life more useful to our fellows; but simply to increase our pleasure, to make our surroundings more agreeable. Some prayers are not answered because what is asked would be hurtful; the prayer is answered in spirit though denied in form. A Christian lady, over the sick bed of an only son, once prayed with intense fervour that he might be restored, and positively refused to say, "Thy will be done." Falling asleep, she seemed to see a panorama of her son's life had he survived; it was a succession of sorrows, rising into terrible agonies, – so pitiful a sight that she could no longer desire his life to be prolonged, and gave up the battle against the will of God. Some prayers are not answered at the time, because a discipline of patience is needed for those who offer them; they have to be taught the grace of waiting patiently for the Lord; they have to learn more fully than hitherto to walk by faith, not by sight; they have to learn to take the promise of God against all appearances, and to remember that heaven and earth shall pass away, but God's word shall not pass away.

But whatever be the reasons for the apparent silence of God,

we may rest assured that hearing prayer is the law of His kingdom. Old Testament and New alike bear witness to this. Every verse of the Psalms proclaims it. Alike by precept and example our Lord constantly enforced it. Every Apostle takes up the theme, and urges the duty and the privilege. We may say of prayer as St. Paul said of the resurrection – if prayer be not heard our preaching is vain, and your faith is vain. And what true Christian is there who cannot add testimonies from his own history to the same effect? If the answer to some of your prayers be delayed, has it not come to many of them? Come, too, very conspicuously, so that you were amazed, and almost awed? And if there be prayers that have not yet been answered, or in reference to which you have no knowledge of an answer, can you not afford to wait till God gives the explanation? And when the explanation comes, have you not much cause to believe that it will redound to the praise of God, and that many things, in reference to which you could at the time see nothing but what was dark and terrible, may turn out when fully explained to furnish new and overwhelming testimony that “God is love?”

2. The next point is the name given by Hannah to her son. The name Samuel, in its literal import, does not mean “asked of the Lord,” but “heard of the Lord.” The reason assigned by Hannah for giving this name to her son is not an explanation of the word, but a reference to the circumstances. In point of fact, “heard of the Lord” is more expressive than even “asked of the Lord,” because it was God’s hearing (in a favourable sense), more than

Hannah's asking, that was the decisive point in the transaction. Still, as far as Hannah was concerned, he was asked of the Lord. The name was designed to be a perpetual memorial of the circumstances of his birth. For the good of the child himself, and for the instruction of all that might come in contact with him, it was designed to perpetuate the fact that before his birth a solemn transaction in prayer took place between his mother and the Almighty. The very existence of this child was a perpetual witness, first of all of the truth that God exists, and then of the truth that He is a prayer-hearing God. The very name of this child is a rebuke to those parents who never think of God in connection with their children, who never thank God for giving them, nor think of what He would like in their education and training. Even where no such special transaction by prayer has taken place as in the case of Samuel's mother, children are to be regarded as sacred gifts of God. "Lo, children are the heritage of the Lord, and the fruit of the womb is His reward." Many a child has had the name Samuel given him since these distant days in Judæa under the influence of this feeling. Many a parent has felt what a solemn thing it is to receive from God's hands an immortal creature, that may become either an angel or a devil, and to be entrusted with the first stage of a life that may spread desolation and misery on the one hand, or joy and blessing wherever its influence reaches. Do not treat lightly, O parents, the connection between God and your children! Cherish the thought that they are God's gifts, God's heritage to you, committed by Him to

you to bring up, but not apart from Him, not in separation from those holy influences which He alone can impart, and which He is willing to impart. What a cruel thing it is to cut this early connection between them and God, and send them drifting through the world like a ship with a forsaken rudder, that flaps hither and thither with every current of the sea! What a blessed thing when, above all things, the grace and blessing of God are sought by parents for their children, when all the earnest lessons of childhood are directed to this end, and before childhood has passed into youth the grace of God rules the young heart, and the holy purpose is formed to live in His fear through Jesus Christ, and to honour Him for evermore!

3. Hannah's arrangements for the child. From the very first she had decided that at the earliest possible period he should be placed under the high priest at Shiloh. Hannah's fulfilment of her vow was to be an ample, prompt, honourable fulfilment. Many a one who makes vows or resolutions under the pressure and pinch of distress immediately begins to pare them down when the pinch is removed, like the merchant in the storm who vowed a hecatomb to Jupiter, then reduced the hecatomb to a single bullock, the bullock to a sheep, the sheep to a few dates; but even these he ate on the way to the altar, laying on it only the stones. Not one jot would Hannah abate of the full sweep and compass of her vow. She would keep the child by her only till he was weaned, and then he should be presented at Shiloh. It is said that Jewish mothers sometimes suckled their children to

the age of three years, and this was probably little Samuel's age when he was taken to Shiloh. Meanwhile, she resolved that till that time was reached she would not go up to the feast. Had she gone before her son was weaned she must have taken him with her, and brought him away with her, and that would have broken the solemnity of the transaction when at last she should take him for good and all. No. The very first visit that she and her son should pay to Shiloh would be the decisive visit. The very first time that she should present herself at that holy place where God had heard her prayer and her vow would be the time when she should fulfil her vow. The first time that she should remind the high priest of their old interview would be when she came to offer to God's perpetual service the answer to her prayer and the fruit of her vow. To miss the feast would be a privation, it might even be a spiritual loss, but she had in her son that which itself was a means of grace to her, and a blessed link to God and heaven; while she remained with him God would still remain with her; and in prayer for him, and the people whom he might one day influence, her heart might be as much enlarged and warmed as if she were mingling with the thousands of Israel, amid the holy excitement of the great national feast.

4. Elkanah's offering at Shiloh. When Elkanah heard his wife's plan with reference to Samuel, he simply acquiesced, bade her remain at Shiloh, "only the Lord establish His word." What word? Literally, the Lord had spoken no word about Samuel, unless the word of Eli to Hannah "The God of Israel grant thee

thy petition that thou hast asked of Him” could be regarded as a word from God. That word, however, had already been fulfilled; and Elkanah’s prayer meant, The Lord bring to pass those further blessings of which the birth of Samuel was the promise and the prelude; the Lord accept, in due time, the offering of this child to His service, and grant that out of that offering there may come to Israel all the good that it is capable of yielding.

The cordiality with which Elkanah accepted his wife’s view of the case is seen further in the ample offering which he took to Shiloh – three bullocks, an ephah of flour, and a bottle of wine. One bullock would have sufficed as a burnt-offering for the child now given for the service of God, and in ver. 25 special mention is made of one being slain. The other two were added to mark the speciality of the occasion, to make the offering, so to speak, round and complete, to testify the ungrudging cordiality with which the whole transaction was entered into. One might perhaps have thought that in connection with such a service there was hardly any need of a bloody sacrifice, A little child of two or three years old – the very type and picture of innocence – surely needed little in the way of expiation. Not so, however, the view of the law of Moses. Even a newborn infant could not be presented to the Lord without some symbol of expiation. There is such a virus of corruption in every human soul that not even infants can be brought to God for acceptance and blessing without a token of atonement. Sin has so separated the whole race from God, that not one member of it can be

brought near, can be brought into the region of benediction, without shedding of blood. And if no member of it can be even accepted without atonement, much less can any be taken to be God's servant, taken to stand before Him, to represent Him, to be His organ to others, to speak in His name. What a solemn truth for all who desire to be employed in the public service of Jesus Christ! Remember how unworthy you are to stand before him. Remember how stained your garments are with sin and worldliness, how distracted your heart is with other thoughts and feelings, how poor the service is you are capable of rendering. Remember how gloriously Jesus is served by the angels that excel in strength, that do His commandments, hearkening to the voice of His word. And when you give yourselves to Him, or ask to be allowed to take your place among His servants, seek as you do so to be sprinkled with the blood of cleansing, own your personal unworthiness, and pray to be accepted through the merit of His sacrifice!

5. And now, the bullock being slain, they bring the child to Eli. Hannah is the speaker, and her words are few and well chosen. She reminds Eli of what she had done the last time she was there. Generous and courteous, she makes no allusion to anything unpleasant that had passed between them. Small matters of that sort are absorbed in the solemnity and importance of the transaction. In her words to Eli she touches briefly on the past, the present, and the future. What occurred in the past was, that she stood there a few years ago praying unto the Lord.

What was true of the present was, that the Lord had granted her petition, and given her this child for whom she had prayed. And what was going to happen in the future was (as the Revised Version has it), "I have granted him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he is granted to the Lord."

It is interesting to remark that no word of Eli's is introduced. This Nazarite child is accepted for the perpetual service of God at once and without remark. No remonstrance is made on the score of his tender years. No doubt is insinuated as to how he may turn out. If Samuel's family was a Levitical one, he would have been entitled to take part in the service of God, but only occasionally, and at the Levitical age. But his mother brings him to the Lord long before the Levitical age, and leaves him at Shiloh, bound over to a lifelong service. How was she able to do it? For three years that child had been her constant companion, had lain in her bosom, had warmed her heart with his smiles, had amused her with his prattle, had charmed her with all his engaging little ways. How was she able to part with him? Would he not miss her too as much as she would miss him? Shiloh was not a very attractive place, Eli was old and feeble, Hophni and Phinehas were beasts, the atmosphere was offensive and pernicious. Nevertheless, it was God's house, and if a little child should be brought to it, capable of rendering to God real service, God would take care of the child. Already he was God's child. Asked of God, and heard of God, he bore already the mark of his Master. God would be with him, as He had been with Joseph,

as He had been with Moses – “He shall call on Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will be with him and honour him.”

Noble in her spirit of endurance in the time of trial, Hannah is still more noble in the spirit of self-denial in the time of prosperity. It was no common grace that could so completely sacrifice all her personal feelings, and so thoroughly honour God. What a rebuke to those parents that keep back their children from God’s service, that will not part with their sons to be missionaries, that look on the ministry of the Gospel as but a poor occupation! What a rebuke, too, to many Christian men and women who are so unwilling to commit themselves openly to any form of Christian service, – unwilling to be identified with religious work! Yet, on the other hand, let us rejoice that in this our age, more perhaps than in any other, so many are willing, nay eager, for Christian service. Let us rejoice that both among young men and young women recruits for the mission-field are offering themselves in such numbers. After all, it is true wisdom, and true policy, although not done as a matter of policy. It will yield far the greatest satisfaction in the end. God is not unrighteous to forget the work and labour of love of His children. And “every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for My name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.”

CHAPTER III.

HANNAH'S SONG

OF THANKSGIVING

1 Samuel ii. 1–10

The emotion that filled Hannah's breast after she had granted Samuel to the Lord, and left him settled at Shiloh, was one of triumphant joy. In her song we see no trace of depression, like that of a bereaved and desolate mother. Some may be disposed to think less of Hannah on this account; they may think she would have been more of a true mother if something of human regret had been apparent in her song. But surely we ought not to blame her if the Divine emotion that so completely filled her soul excluded for the time every ordinary feeling. In the very first words of her song we see how closely God was connected with the emotions that swelled in her breast. "My heart rejoiceth *in the Lord*, mine horn is exalted *in the Lord*." The feeling that was so rapturous was the sense of God's gracious owning of her; His taking her into partnership, so to speak, with Himself; His accepting of her son as an instrument for carrying out His gracious purposes to Israel and the world. Only those who have

experienced it can understand the overwhelming blessedness of this feeling. That the infinite God should draw near to His sinful creature, and not only accept him, but identify Himself with him, as it were, taking him and those dearest to him into His confidence, and using them to carry out His plans, is something almost too wonderful for the human spirit to bear. This was Hannah's feeling, as it afterwards was that of Elizabeth, and still more of the Virgin Mary, and it is no wonder that their songs, which bear a close resemblance to each other, should have been used by the Christian Church to express the very highest degree of thankfulness.

The emotion of Hannah was intensified by another consideration. What had taken place in her experience was not the only thing of this kind that had ever happened or that ever was to happen. On the contrary, it was the outcome of a great law of God's kingdom, which law regulated the ordinary procedure of His providence. Hannah's heart was enlarged as she thought how many others had shared or would share what had befallen her; as she thought how such pride and arrogance as that which had tormented her was doomed to be rebuked and brought low under God's government; how many lowly souls that brought their burden to Him were to be relieved; and how many empty and hungry hearts, pining for food and rest, were to find how He "satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness."

But it would seem that her thoughts took a still wider sweep.

Looking on herself as representing the nation of Israel, she seems to have felt that what had happened to her on a small scale was to happen to the nation on a large; for God would draw nigh to Israel as He had to her, make him His friend and confidential servant, humble the proud and malignant nations around him, and exalt him, if only he endeavoured humbly and thankfully to comply with the Divine will. Is it possible that her thoughts took a more definite form? May not the Holy Spirit have given her a glimpse of the great truth – “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given”? May she not have surmised that it was to be through one born in the same land that the great redemption was to be achieved? May she not have seen in her little Samuel the type and symbol of another Child, to be more wonderfully born than hers, to be dedicated to God’s service in a higher sense, to fulfil all righteousness far beyond anything in Samuel’s power? And may not this high theme, carrying her far into future times, carrying her on to the end of the world’s history, bearing her up even to eternity and infinity, have been the cause of that utter absence of human regret, that apparent want of motherly heart-sinking, which we mark in the song?

When we examine the substance of the song more carefully, we find that Hannah derives her joy from four things about God: – 1. His nature (vv. 2–3); 2. His providential government (vv. 4–8); 3. His most gracious treatment of His saints (v. 9); 4. The glorious destiny of the kingdom of His anointed.

1. In the second and third verses we find comfort derived

from (1) God's holiness, (2) His unity, (3) His strength, (4) His knowledge, and (5) His justice.

(1) The *holiness*, the spotlessness of God is a source of comfort, – “There is none holy as the Lord.” To the wicked this attribute is no comfort, but only a terror. Left to themselves, men take away this attribute, and, like the Greeks and Romans and other pagans, ascribe to their gods the lusts and passions of poor human creatures. Yet to those who *can* appreciate it, how blessed a thing is the holiness of God! No darkness in Him, no corruption, no infirmity; absolutely pure, He governs all on the principles of absolute purity; He keeps all up, even in a sinful, crumbling world, to that high standard; and when His schemes are completed, the blessed outcome will be “the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.”

(2) His *unity* gives comfort, – “There is none besides Thee.” None to thwart His righteous and gracious plans, or make those to tremble whose trust is placed in Him. He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, “What doest Thou?”

(3) His *strength* gives comfort, – “Neither is there any rock like our God.” “If God be for us, who can be against us?” “Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, nor is weary? There is no searching of His understanding? He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might He increaseth

strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall; but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint.”

(4) His *knowledge* gives comfort, – “The Lord is a God of knowledge.” He sees all secret wickedness, and knows how to deal with it. His eye is on every plot hatched in the darkness. He knows His faithful servants, what they aim at, what they suffer, what a strain is often put on their fidelity. And He never can forget them, and never can desert them, for “the angel of the Lord encampeth about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.”

(5) His *justice* gives comfort. “By Him actions are weighed.” Their true quality is ascertained; what is done for mean, selfish ends stands out before Him in all its native ugliness, and draws down the retribution that is meet. Men may perform the outward services of religion with great regularity and apparent zeal, while their hearts are full of all uncleanness and wickedness. The hypocrite may rise to honour, the thief may become rich, men that prey upon the infirmities or the simplicity of their fellows may prosper; but there is a God in heaven by Whom all evil devices are weighed, and Who in His own time will effectually checkmate all that either deny His existence or fancy they can elude His righteous judgment.

2. These views of God’s holy government are more fully enlarged on in the second part of the song (vv. 3–8). The main feature of God’s providence dwelt on here is the changes that

occur in the lot of certain classes. The class against whom God's providence bears chiefly is the haughty, the self-sufficient, the men of physical might who are ready to use that might to the injury of others. Those again who lie in the path of God's mercies are the weak, the hungry, the childless, the beggar. Hannah uses a variety of figures. Now it is from the profession of soldiers – "the bows of the mighty are broken"; and on the other hand they that for very weakness were stumbling and staggering are girded with strength. Now it is from the appetite for food – they that were full have had to hire out themselves for bread, and they that were hungry are hungry no more. Now it is from family life, and from a feature of family life that came home to Hannah – "the barren hath borne seven, and she that had many children is waxed feeble." And these changes are the doing of God, "The Lord killeth and maketh alive; He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up. The Lord maketh poor and maketh rich, He bringeth low and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory; for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and He hath set the world upon them." If nothing were taught here but that there are great vicissitudes of fortune among men, then a lesson would come from it alike to high and low – let the high beware lest they glory in their fortune, let the low not sink into dejection and despair. If it be further borne in mind that these changes of fortune are all in the hands of God, a further

lesson arises, to beware how we offend God, and to live in the earnest desire to enjoy His favour. But there is a further lesson. The class of qualities that are here marked as offensive to God are pride, self-seeking, self-sufficiency both in ordinary matters and in their spiritual development. Your tyrannical and haughty Pharaohs, your high-vaunting Sennacheribs, your pride-intoxicated Nebuchadnezzars, are objects of special dislike to God. So is your proud Pharisee, who goes up to the temple thanking God that he is not as other men, no, nor like that poor publican, who is smiting on his breast, as well such a sinner may. It is the lowly in heart that God takes pleasure in. "Thus saith the high and lofty One, that inhabiteth eternity, and whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and in the holy place, but with him also that is of a humble and contrite heart; to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite one."

When we turn to the song of the Virgin we find the same strain – "He hath showed strength with His arm, He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away." Undoubtedly these words have primary reference to the social conditions of men. Thanks are given that the highest privilege that God could bestow on a creature had been conferred not on any one rolling in luxury, but on a maiden of the lowest class. This meaning does not exhaust the scope of the thanksgiving, which doubtless embraces that law of the spiritual

kingdom to which Christ gave expression in the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Yet it is plain that both the song of Hannah and the song of Mary dwell with complacency on that feature of providence by which men of low degree are sometimes exalted, by which the beggar is sometimes lifted from the dunghill, and set among princes to inherit the throne of glory. Why is this? Can God have any sympathy with the spirit which often prevails in the bosom of the poor towards the rich, which rejoices in their downfall just because they are rich, and in the elevation of others simply because they belong to the same class with themselves? The thought is not to be entertained for a moment. In God's government there is nothing partial or capricious. But the principle is this. Riches, fulness, luxury are apt to breed pride and contempt of the poor; and it pleases God at times, when such evil fruits appear, to bring down these worthless rich men to the dust, in order to give a conspicuous rebuke to the vanity, the ambition, the remorseless selfishness which were so conspicuous in their character. What but this was the lesson from the sudden fall of Cardinal Wolsey? Men, and even the best of men, thanked God for that fall. Not that it gave them pleasure to see a poor wretch who had been clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day, reduced to so pitiful a plight; but because they felt it a righteous thing and a wholesome thing that so proud and so wicked a career should be terminated by a conspicuous manifestation of the displeasure of God. The

best instincts of men's nature longed for a check to the monstrous pride and wicked avarice of that man; and when that check was given, and given with such tremendous emphasis, there was not an honest man or woman in all England who did not utter a hearty "Praise God!" when they heard the terrible news.

So also it pleases God to give conspicuous proofs from time to time that qualities that in poor men are often associated with a hard-working, humble career are well-pleasing in His sight. For what qualities on the part of the poor are so valuable, in a social point of view, as industry, self-denying diligence, systematic, unwearied devotion even to work which brings them such scanty remuneration? By far the greater part of such men and women are called to work on, unnoticed and unrewarded, and when their day is over to sink into an undistinguished grave. But from time to time some such persons rise to distinction. The class to which they belong is ennobled by their achievements. When God wished in the sixteenth century to achieve the great object of punishing the Church which had fallen into such miserable inefficiency and immorality, and wrenching half of Europe from its grasp, he found his principal agent in a poor miner's cottage in Saxony. When he desired to summon a sleeping Church to the great work of evangelising India, the man he called to the front was Carey, a poor cobbler of Northampton. When it was his purpose to present His Church with an unrivalled picture of the Christian pilgrimage, its dangers and trials, its joys, its sorrows, and its triumphs, the artist appointed to the task was

John Bunyan, the tinker of Elstow. When the object was to provide a man that would open the great continent of Africa to civilisation and Christianity, and who needed, in order to do this, to face dangers and trials before which all ordinary men had shrunk, he found his agent in a poor spinner-boy, who was working twelve hours a day in a cotton mill on the banks of the Clyde. In all such matters, in humbling the rich and exalting the poor, God's object is not to punish the one because they are rich, or to exalt the other because they are poor. In the one case it is to punish vices bred from an improper use of wealth, and in the other to reward virtues that have sprung from the soil of poverty. "Poor *and* pious parents," wrote David Livingstone on the tombstone of his parents at Hamilton, when he wished to record the grounds of his thankfulness for the position in life which they held. "I would not exchange my peasant father for any king," said Thomas Carlyle, when he thought of the gems of Christian worth that had shone out all the brighter amid the hard conditions of his father's life. Riches are no reproach, and poverty is no merit; but the pride so apt to be bred of riches, the idleness, the injustice, the selfishness so often associated with them, is what God likes to reprove; and the graces that may be found in the poor man's home, the unwearied devotion to duty, the neighbourliness and brotherly love, and above all the faith, the hope, and the charity are what He delights to honour.

In the spiritual sense there is no more important ingredient of character in God's sight than the sense of emptiness, and

the conviction that all goodness, all strength, all blessing must come from God. The heart, thus emptied, is prepared to welcome the grace that is offered to supply its needs. Air rushes into an exhausted receiver. Where the idea prevails either that we are possessed of considerable native goodness, or that we have only to take pains with ourselves to get it, there is no welcome for the truth that “by grace are ye saved.” Whoever says, “I am rich and increased in goods, and have need of nothing,” knows not that “he is wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.” Miserable they who live and die in this delusion! Happy they who have been taught, “In me dwelleth no good thing.” “All my springs are in Thee.” Jesus Christ “is made to us of God wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” “Out of His fulness have we all received, and grace for grace.”

3. The third topic in Hannah’s song is God’s very gracious treatment of His saints. “He will keep the feet of His saints.” The term “feet” shows the reference to be to their earthly life, their steps, their course through the world. It is a promise which others would care for but little, but which is very precious to all believers. To know the way in which God would have one to go is of prime importance to every godly heart. To be kept from wandering into unblest ways, kept from trifling with temptation, and dallying with sin is an infinite blessing. “Oh that my ways were directed to keep Thy statutes! Then shall I not be ashamed when I have respect unto all Thy commandments.” “He will keep the feet of His saints.”

4. And lastly, Hannah rejoices in that dispensation of mercy that was coming in connection with God's "king, His anointed" (v. 10). Guided by the Spirit, she sees that a king is coming, that a kingdom is to be set up, and ruled over by the Lord's anointed. She sees that God's blessing is to come down on the king, the anointed, and that under him the kingdom is to prosper and to spread. Did she catch a glimpse of what was to happen under such kings as David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah? Did she see in prophetic vision the loving care of such kings for the welfare of the people, their holy zeal for God, their activity and earnestness in doing good? And did the glimpse of these coming benefits suggest to her the thought of what was to be achieved by Him who was to be the anointed one, the Messiah in a higher sense? We can hardly avoid giving this scope to her song. It was but a small measure of these blessings that her son personally could bring about. Her son seems to give place to a higher Son, through whom the land would be blessed as no one else could have blessed it, and all hungry and thirsty souls would be guided to that living bread and living water of which whosoever ate and drank should never hunger or thirst again.

What is the great lesson of this song? That for the answer to prayer, for deliverance from trial, for the fulfilment of hopes, for the glorious things yet spoken of the city of our God, our most cordial thanksgivings are due to God. Every Christian life presents numberless occasions that very specially call for such thanksgiving. But there is one thanksgiving that must take

precedence of all – “Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift.” “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a living hope, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last day.”

CHAPTER IV.

ELI'S HOUSE

1 Samuel ii. 11–36

The notices of little Samuel, that alternate in this passage with the sad accounts of Eli and his house, are like the green spots that vary the dull stretches of sand in a desert; or like the little bits of blue sky that charm your eye when the firmament is darkened by a storm. First we are told how, after Elkanah and Hannah departed, the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli the priest (v. 11); then comes an ugly picture of the wickedness practised at Shiloh by Eli's sons (vv. 12–17); another episode brings Samuel again before us, with some details of his own history and that of his family (vv. 18–21); this is followed by an account of Eli's feeble endeavours to restrain the wickedness of his sons (vv. 22–25). Once more we have a bright glimpse of Samuel, and of his progress in life and character, very similar in terms to St. Luke's account of the growth of the child Jesus (v. 26); and finally the series closes with a painful narrative – the visit of a man of God to Eli, reproving his guilty laxity in connection with his sons, and announcing the downfall of his house (vv. 27–36). In the wickedness of Eli's sons we see the

enemy coming in like a flood; in the progress of little Samuel we see the Spirit of the Lord lifting up a standard against him. We see evil powerful and most destructive; we see the instrument of healing very feeble – a mere infant. Yet the power of God is with the infant, and in due time the force which he represents will prevail. It is just a picture of the grand conflict of sin and grace in the world. It was verified emphatically when Jesus was a child. How slender the force seemed that was to scatter the world's darkness, roll back its wickedness, and take away its guilt! How striking the lesson for us not to be afraid though the apparent force of truth and goodness in the world be infinitesimally small. The worm Jacob shall yet thresh the mountains; the little flock shall yet possess the kingdom; "there shall be a handful of corn on the top of the mountains, the fruit thereof shall shake like Lebanon, and they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth."

It is mainly the picture of Eli's house and the behaviour of his family that fills our eye in this chapter. It is to be noticed that Eli was a descendant, not of Eleazar, the elder son of Aaron, but of Ithamar, the younger. Why the high priesthood was transferred from the one family to the other, in the person of Eli, we do not know. Evidently Eli's claim to the priesthood was a valid one, for in the reproof addressed to him it is fully assumed that he was the proper occupant of the office. One is led to think that either from youth or natural feebleness the proper heir in Eleazar's line had been unfit for the office, and that Eli had been appointed to it

as possessing the personal qualifications which the other wanted. Probably therefore he was a man of vigour in his earlier days, one capable of being at the head of affairs; and if so his loose government of his family was all the more worthy of blame. It could not have been that the male line in Eleazar's family had failed; for in the time of David Zadok of the family of Eleazar was priest, along with Abiathar, of the family of Ithamar and Eli. From Eli's administration great things would seem to have been expected; all the more lamentable and shameful was the state of things that ensued.

1. First our attention is turned to the gross wickedness and scandalous behaviour of Eli's sons. There are many dark pictures in the history of Israel in the time of the Judges, – pictures of idolatry, pictures of lust, pictures of treachery, pictures of bloodshed; but there is none more awful than the picture of the high priest's family at Shiloh. In the other cases members of the nation had become grossly wicked; but in this case it is the salt that has lost its savour – it is those who should have led the people in the ways of God that have become the ringleaders of the devil's army. Hophni and Phinehas take their places in that unhonoured band where the names of Alexander Borgia, and many a high ecclesiastic of the Middle Ages send forth their stinking savour. They are marked by the two prevailing vices of the lowest natures – greed and lechery. Their greed preys upon the worthy men who brought their offerings to God's sanctuary in obedience to His law; their lechery seduces the very women who,

employed in the service of the place (see Revised Version), might have reasonably thought of it as the gate to heaven rather than the avenue of hell. So shameless were they in both kinds of vice that they were at no pains to conceal either the one or the other. It mattered nothing what regulations God had made as to the parts of the offering the priest was to have; down went their fork into the sacrificial caldron, and whatever it drew up became theirs. It mattered not that the fat of certain sacrifices was due to God, and that it ought to have been given off before any other use was made of the flesh; the priests claimed the flesh in its integrity, and if the offerer would not willingly surrender it their servant fell upon him and wrenched it away. It is difficult to say whether the greater hurt was inflicted by such conduct on the cause of religion or on the cause of ordinary morality. As for the cause of religion, it suffered that terrible blow which it always suffers whenever it is dissociated from morality. The very heart and soul is torn out of religion when men are led to believe that their duty consists in merely believing certain dogmas, attending to outward observances, paying dues, and “performing” worship. What kind of conception of God can men have who are encouraged to believe that justice, mercy, and truth have nothing to do with His service? How can they ever think of Him as a Spirit, who requires of them that worship Him that they worship Him in spirit and in truth? How can such religion give men a real veneration for God, or inspire them with that spirit of obedience, trust, and delight of which he ought ever to be the object? Under such religion all

belief in God's existence tends to vanish. Though His existence may continue to be acknowledged, it is not a power, it has no influence; it neither stimulates to good nor restrains from evil. Religion becomes a miserable form, without life, without vigour, without beauty – a mere carcase deserving only to be buried out of sight.

And if such a condition of things is fatal to religion, it is fatal to morality too. Men are but too ready by nature to play loose with conscience. But when the religious heads of the nation are seen at once robbing man and robbing God, and when this is done apparently with impunity, it seems foolish to ordinary men to mind moral restraints. "Why should we mind the barriers of conscience" (the young men of Israel might argue) "when these young priests disregard them? If we do as the priest does we shall do very well." Men of corrupt lives at the head of religion, who are shameless in their profligacy, have a lowering effect on the moral life of the whole community. Down and down goes the standard of living. Class after class gets infected. The mischief spreads like dry rot in a building; ere long the whole fabric of society is infected with the poison.

2. And how did the high priest deal with this state of things? In the worst possible way. He spoke against it but he did not act against it. He showed that he knew of it, he owned it to be very wicked; but he contented himself with words of remonstrance, which in the case of such hardened transgression were of no more avail than a child's breath against a brazen wall. At the end

of the day, it is true that Eli was a decrepit old man, from whom much vigour of action could not have been expected. But the evil began before he was so old and decrepit, and his fault was that he did not restrain his sons at the time when he ought and might have restrained them. Yes, but even if Eli was old and decrepit when the actual state of things first burst on his view, there was enough of the awful in the conduct of his sons to have roused him to unwonted activity. David was old and decrepit, lying feebly at the edge of death, when word was brought to him that Adonijah had been proclaimed king in place of Solomon, for whom he had destined the throne. But there was enough of the startling in this intelligence to bring back a portion of its youthful fire to David's heart, and set him to devise the most vigorous measures to prevent the mischief that was so ready to be perpetrated. Fancy King David sending a meek message to Adonijah – "Nay, my son, it is not on your head but on Solomon's that my crown is to rest; go home, my son, and do nothing more in a course hurtful to yourself and hurtful to your people." But; it was this foolish and most inefficient course that Eli took with his sons. Had he acted as he should have acted at the beginning, matters would never have come to such a flagrant pass. But when the state of things became so terrible, there was but one course that should have been thought of. When the wickedness of the acting priests was so outrageous that men abhorred the offering of the Lord, the father ought to have been sunk in the high priest; the men who had so dishonoured their office should have been driven

from the place, and the very remembrance of the crime they had committed should have been obliterated by the holy lives and holy service of better men. It was inexcusable in Eli to allow them to remain. If he had had a right sense of his office he would never for one moment have allowed the interest of his family to outweigh the claims of God. What! Had God in the wilderness, by a solemn and deadly judgment, removed from office and from life the two elder sons of Aaron simply because they had offered strange fire in their censers? And what was the crime of offering strange fire compared to the crime of robbing God, of violating the Decalogue, of openly practising gross and daring wickedness, under the very shadow of the tabernacle? If Eli did not take steps for stopping these atrocious proceedings, he might rely on it that steps would be taken in another quarter – God Himself would mark His sense of the sin.

For what were the interests of his sons compared with the credit of the national worship? What mattered it that the sudden stroke would fall on them with startling violence? If it did not lead to their repentance and salvation it would at least save the national religion from degradation, and it would thus bring benefit to tens of thousands in the land. All this Eli did not regard. He could not bring himself to be harsh to his own sons. He could not bear that they should be disgraced and degraded. He would satisfy himself with a mild remonstrance, notwithstanding that every day new disgrace was heaped on the sanctuary, and new encouragement given to others to practise wickedness, by the very men who

should have been foremost in honouring God, and sensitive to every breath that would tarnish His name.

How differently God's servants acted in other days! How differently Moses acted when he came down from the mount and found the people worshipping the golden calf! "It came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands and brake them beneath the mount. And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it... And Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, Who is on the Lord's side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. And he said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate through the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour." Do we think this too sharp and severe a retribution? At all events it marked in a suitable way the enormity of the offence of Aaron and the people, and the awful provocation of Divine judgments which the affair of the golden calf implied. It denoted that in presence of such a sin the claims of kindred were never for a moment to be thought of; and in the blessing of Moses it was a special commendation of the zeal of Levi, that "he said unto his father, and to his mother, I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew his own children." It was the

outrageous character of the offence in the matter of the golden calf that justified the severe and abrupt procedure; but it was Eli's condemnation that though the sin of his sons was equally outrageous, he was moved to no indignation, and took no step to rid the tabernacle of men so utterly unworthy.

It is often very difficult to explain how it comes to pass that godly men have had ungodly children. There is little difficulty in accounting for this on the present occasion. There was a fatal defect in the method of Eli. His remonstrance with his sons is not made at the proper time. It is not made in the fitting tone. When disregarded, it is not followed up by the proper consequences. We can easily think of Eli letting the boys have their own will and their own way when they were young; threatening them for disobedience, but not executing the threat; angry at them when they did wrong, but not punishing the offence; vacillating perhaps between occasional severity and habitual indulgence, till by-and-bye all fear of sinning had left them, and they coolly calculated that the grossest wickedness would meet with nothing worse than a reproof. How sad the career of the young men themselves! We must not forget that, however inexcusable their father was, the great guilt of the proceeding was theirs. How must they have hardened their hearts against the example of Eli, against the solemn claims of God, against the holy traditions of the service, against the interests and claims of those whom they ruined, against the welfare of God's chosen people! How terribly did their familiarity with sacred things react on their

character, making them treat even the holy priesthood as a mere trade, a trade in which the most sacred interests that could be conceived were only as counters, to be turned by them into gain and sensual pleasure! Could anything come nearer to the sin against the Holy Ghost? No wonder though their doom was that of persons judicially blinded and hardened. They were given up to a reprobate mind, to do those things that were not convenient. “They hearkened not to the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them.” They experienced the fate of men who deliberately sin against the light, who love their lusts so well that nothing will induce them to fight against them; they were so hardened that repentance became impossible, and it was necessary for them to undergo the full retribution of their wickedness.

3. But it is time we should look at the message brought to Eli by the man of God. In that message Eli was first reminded of the gracious kindness shown to the house of Aaron in their being entrusted with the priesthood, and in their having an honourable provision secured for them. Next he is asked why he trampled on God’s sacrifice and offering (marg. Revised Version), and considered the interests of his sons above the honour of God? Then he is told that any previous promise of the perpetuity of his house is now qualified by the necessity God is under to have regard to the character of his priests, and honour or degrade them accordingly. In accordance with this rule the house of Eli would suffer a terrible degradation. He (this includes his successors

in office) would be stript of “his arm,” that is, his strength. No member of his house would reach a good old age. The establishment at Shiloh would fall more and more into decay, as if there was an enemy in God’s habitation. Any who might remain of the family would be a grief and distress to those whom Eli represented. The young men themselves, Hophni and Phinehas, would die the same day. Those who shared their spirit would come crouching to the high priest of the day and implore him to put them into one of the priest’s offices, not to give them the opportunity of serving God, but that they might eat a piece of bread. Terrible catalogue of curses and calamities! Oh, sin, what a brood of sorrows dost thou bring forth! Oh, young man, who walkest in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes, what a myriad of distresses dost thou prepare for those whom thou art most bound to care for and to bless! Oh, minister of the gospel, who allowest thyself to tamper with the cravings of the flesh till thou hast brought ruin on thyself, disgrace on thy family, and confusion on thy Church, what infatuation was it to admit thy worst foe to the sanctuary of thy bosom, and allow him to establish himself in the citadel till thou couldst not get quit of him, so that thou art now helpless in his hands, with nothing but sadness for thy present inheritance, and for the future a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation!

One word, in conclusion, respecting that great principle of the kingdom of God announced by the prophet as that on which Jehovah would act in reference to His priests – “Them that

honour Me I will honour, but they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.” It is one of the grandest sayings in Scripture. It is the eternal rule of the kingdom of God, not limited to the days of Hophni and Phinehas, but, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, eternal as the ordinances of heaven. It is a law confirmed by all history; every man’s life confirms it, for though this life is but the beginning of our career, and the final clearing up of Divine providence is to be left to the judgment-day, yet when we look back on the world’s history we find that those that have honoured God, God has honoured them, while they that have despised Him have indeed been lightly esteemed. However men may try to get their destiny into their own hands; however they may secure themselves from this trouble and from that; however, like the first Napoleon, they may seem to become omnipotent, and to wield an irresistible power, yet the day of retribution comes at last; having sown to the flesh, of the flesh also they reap corruption. While the men that have honoured God, the men that have made their own interests of no account, but have set themselves resolutely to obey God’s will and do God’s work; the men that have believed in God as the holy Ruler and Judge of the world, and have laboured in private life and in public service to carry out the great rules of His kingdom, – justice, mercy, the love of God and the love of man, – these are the men that God has honoured; these are the men whose work abides; these are the men whose names shine with undying honour, and from whose example and achievements young hearts

in every following age draw their inspiration and encouragement. What a grand rule of life it is, for old and young! Do you wish a maxim that shall be of high service to you in the voyage of life, that shall enable you to steer your barque safely both amid the open assaults of evil, and its secret currents, so that, however tossed you may be, you may have the assurance that the ship's head is in the right direction, and that you are moving steadily towards the desired haven; where can you find anything more clear, more fitting, more sure and certain than just these words of the Almighty, "Them that honour Me I will honour; but they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed"?

CHAPTER V.

SAMUEL'S VISION

1 Samuel iii

It is evident that Samuel must have taken very kindly to the duties of the sanctuary. He was manifestly one of those who are sanctified from infancy, and whose hearts go from the first with sacred duties. There were no wayward impulses to subdue, no hankerings after worldly freedom and worldly enjoyment; there was no necessity for coercive measures, either to restrain him from outbursts of frivolity or to compel him to diligence and regularity in his calling. From the first he looked with solemn awe and holy interest on all that related to the worship of God; that, to him, was the duty above all other duties, the privilege above all other privileges. God to him was not a mere idea, an abstraction, representing merely the dogmas and services of religion. God was a reality, a personality, a Being who dealt very closely with men, and with whom they were called to deal very closely too. We can easily conceive how desirous little Samuel would be to know something of the meaning of the services at Shiloh; how scrupulous to perform every duty, how regular and real in his prayers, and how full of reverence and affection

for God. He would go about all his duties with a grave, sweet, earnest face, conscious of their importance and solemnity; always thinking more of them than of anything else, – thinking perhaps of the service of the angels in heaven, and trying to serve God as they served Him, to do God's will on earth as it was done in heaven.

At the opening of this chapter he seems to be the confidential servant of the high priest, sleeping near to him, and in the habit of receiving directions from him. He must be more than a child now, otherwise he would not be entrusted, as he was, with the opening of the doors of the house of the Lord.

The evil example of Hophni and Phinehas, so far from corrupting him, seems to have made him more resolute the other way. It was horrid and disgusting; and as gross drunkenness on the part of a father sometimes sets the children the more against it, so the profligacy of the young priests would make Samuel more vigilant in every matter of duty. That Eli bore as he did with the conduct of his sons must have been a great perplexity to him, and a great sorrow; but it did not become one at his time of life to argue the question with the aged high priest. This conduct of Eli's did not in any respect diminish the respectful bearing of Samuel towards him, or his readiness to comply with his every wish. For Eli was God's high priest; and in engaging to be God's servant in the tabernacle Samuel knew well that he took the high priest as his earthly master.

1. The first thing that engages our special attention in this

chapter is the singular way in which Samuel was called to receive God's message in the temple.

The word of God was rare in those days; there was no open vision, or rather no vision that came abroad, that was promulgated to the nation as the expression of God's will. From the tone in which this is referred to, it was evidently looked on as a want, as placing the nation in a less desirable position than in days when God was constantly communicating His will. Now, however, God is to come into closer contact with the people, and for this purpose He is to employ a new instrument as the medium of His messages. For God is never at a loss for suitable instruments – they are always ready when peculiar work has to be done. In the selection of the boy Samuel as his prophet there is something painful, but likewise something very interesting. It is painful to find the old high priest passed over; his venerable years and venerable office would naturally have pointed to him; but in spite of many good qualities, in one point he is grossly unfaithful, and the very purpose of the vision now to be made is to declare the outcome of his faithlessness. But it is interesting to find that already the child of Hannah is marked out for this distinguished service. Even in his case there is opportunity for verifying the rule, "Them that honour Me I will honour." His entire devotion to God's service, so beautiful in one of such tender years, is the sign of a character well adapted to become the medium of God's habitual communications with His people. Young though he is, his very youth in one sense will prove an advantage. It will show

that what he speaks is not the mere fruit of his own thinking, but is the message of God. It will show that the spiritual power that goes forth with his words is not his own native force, but the force of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. It will thus be made apparent to all that God has not forsaken His people, corrupt and lamentably wicked though the young priests are.

Both Eli and Samuel sleep within the precincts of the tabernacle. Not, however, in the sanctuary itself, but in one of those buildings that opened into its courts, which were erected for the accommodation of the priests and Levites. Eli's sight was failing him, and perhaps the care of the lamp as well as the door was entrusted to Samuel. The lamp was to burn always (Exod. xxvii. 20), that is, it was to be trimmed and lighted every morning and evening (Exod. xxx. 7, 8); and to attend to this was primarily the high priest's duty. The lamp had doubtless been duly trimmed, and it would probably continue burning through a good part of the night. It was not yet out when a voice fell on the ears of Samuel, loud enough to rouse him from the profound slumber into which he had probably fallen. Thinking it was Eli's, he ran to his side; but Eli had not called him. Again the voice sounded, again Samuel springs to his feet and hastens to the high priest; again he is sent back with the same assurance. A third time the voice calls; a third time the willing and dutiful Samuel flies to Eli's side, but this time he is sent back with a different answer. Hitherto Samuel had not known the Lord – that is, he had not been cognisant of His way of communicating with men

in a supernatural form – and it had never occurred to him that such a thing could happen in his case. But Eli knew that such communications were made at times by God, and, remembering the visit of the man of God to himself, he may have surmised that this was another such occasion. The voice evidently was no natural voice; so Samuel is told to lie down once more, to take the attitude of simple receptiveness, and humbly invite God to utter His message.

There are some lesser traits of Samuel's character in this part of the transaction which ought not to be passed over without remark. The readiness with which he springs from his bed time after time, and the meekness and patience with which he asks Eli for his orders, without a word of complaint on his apparently unreasonable conduct, make it very clear that Samuel had learned to subdue two things – to subdue his body and to subdue his temper. It is not an easy thing for a young person in the midst of a deep sleep to spring to his feet time after time. In such circumstances the body is very apt to overcome the mind. But Samuel's mind overcame the body. The body was the servant, not the master. What an admirable lesson Samuel had already learned! Few parts of early education are so important as to learn to keep the body in subjection. To resist bodily cravings, whether greater or smaller, which unfit one for duty; temptations to drink, or smoke, or dawdle, or lie in bed, or waste time when one ought to be up and doing; to be always ready for one's work, punctual, methodical, purpose-like, save only when sickness intervenes, –

denotes a very admirable discipline for a young person, and is a sure token of success in life. Not less admirable is that control over the temper which Samuel had evidently acquired. To be treated by Eli as he supposed that he had been, was highly provoking. Why drag him out of bed at that time of night at all? Why drag him over the cold stones in the chill darkness, and why tantalise him first by denying that he called him and then by calling him again? As far as appears, Samuel's temper was in no degree ruffled by the treatment he appeared to be receiving from Eli; he felt that he was a servant, and Eli was his master, and it was his part to obey his master, however unreasonable his treatment might be.

2. We proceed now to the message itself, and Samuel's reception of it. It is substantially a repetition of what God had already communicated to Eli by the man of God a few years before; only it is more peremptory, and the bearing of it is more fixed and rigid. When God denounced His judgment on Eli's house by the prophet, he seems to have intended to give them an opportunity to repent. If Eli had bestirred himself then, and banished the young men from Shiloh, and if his sons in their affliction and humiliation had repented of their wickedness, the threatened doom might have been averted. So at least we are led to believe by this second message having been superadded to the first. Now the opportunity of repentance has passed away. God's words are very explicit – "I have sworn unto the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with

sacrifice nor offering for ever.” After the previous warning, Eli seems to have gone on lamenting but not chastising. Hophni and Phinehas seem to have gone on sinning as before, and heedless of the scandal they were causing. In announcing to Samuel the coming catastrophe, God shows Himself thoroughly alive to the magnitude of the punishment He is to inflict, and the calamity that is to happen. It is such that the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. God shows also that, painful though it is, it has been deliberately determined, and no relenting will occur when once the terrible retribution begins. “In that day will I perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house; when I begin I will also make an end.” But terrible though the punishment will be, there is only too good cause for it. “For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.” There are some good parents whose sons have made themselves vile, and they would fain have restrained them but their efforts to restrain have been in vain. The fault of Eli was, that he might have restrained them and he did not restrain them. In those times fathers had more authority over their families than is given them now. The head of the house was counted responsible for the house, because it was only by his neglecting the power he had that his family could become openly wicked. It was only by Eli neglecting the power he had that his sons could have become so vile. Where his sons were heirs to such sacred functions there was a double call to restrain them,

and that call he neglected. He neglected it at the time when he might have done it, and that time could never be recalled.

So, there is an age when children may be restrained, and if that age is allowed to pass the power of restraining them goes along with it. There are faults in this matter on the part of many parents, on the right hand and on the left. Many err by not restraining at all. Mothers begin while their children are yet infants to humour their every whim, and cannot bear to hold back from them anything they may wish. It is this habit that is liable to have such a terrible reaction. There are other parents that while they restrain do not restrain wisely. They punish, but they do not punish in love. They are angry because their children have broken their rules; they punish in anger, and the punishment falls merely as the blow of a stronger person on a weaker. It does not humble, it does not soften. What awful consequences it often brings! What skeletons it lodges in many a house! God has designed the family to be the nurse of what is best and purest in human life, and when this design is crossed then the family institution, which was designed to bring the purest joy, breeds the darkest misery. And this is one of the forms of retribution on wickedness which we see carried out in their fulness in the present life! How strange, that men should be in any doubt as to God carrying out the retribution of wickedness to the bitter end! How singular they should disbelieve in a hell! The end of many a career is written in these words: – “Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee; know

therefore, and see that it is an evil thing and bitter that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that My fear is not in thee, saith the Lord God of hosts.”

3. And now we go on to the meeting of Eli and Samuel. Samuel is in no haste to communicate to Eli the painful message he has received. He has not been required to do it, and he lies till the morning, awake we may believe, but staggered and dismayed. As usual he goes to open the doors of God’s house. And then it is that Eli calls him. “What is the thing that He hath said unto thee?” he asks. He adjures Samuel to tell him all. And Samuel does tell him all. And Eli listens in silence, and when it is over he says, with meek resignation, “It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth Him good.”

We are touched by this behaviour of Eli. First we are touched by his bearing toward Samuel. He knows that God has conferred an honour on Samuel which He has not bestowed on him, but young though Samuel is he feels no jealousy, he betrays no sign of wounded pride. It is not easy for God’s servants to bear being passed over in favour of others, in favour of younger men. A feeling of mortification is apt to steal on them, accompanied with some bitterness toward the object of God’s preference. This venerable old man shows nothing of that feeling. He is not too proud to ask Samuel for a full account of God’s message. He will not have him leave anything out, out of regard to his feelings. He must know the whole, however painful it may be. He has learned to reverence God’s truth, and he cannot bear the idea

of not knowing all. And Samuel, who did not wish to tell him anything, is now constrained to tell him the whole. “He told him every whit, and hid nothing from him.” He did not shun to declare to him the whole counsel of God. Admirable example for all God’s servants! How averse some men are to hear the truth! And how prone are we to try to soften what is disagreeable in our message to sinners – to take off the sharp edge, and sheathe it in generalities and possibilities. It is no real kindness. The kindest thing we can do is to declare God’s doom on sin, and to assure men that any hopes they may cherish of His relenting to do as He has said are vain hopes – “When I begin,” says God, “I will also make an end.”

And we are touched further by Eli’s resignation to God’s will. The words of Samuel must have raised a deep agony in his spirit when he thought of the doom of his sons. Feeble though he was, there might have arisen in his heart a gust of fierce rebellion against that doom. But nothing of the kind took place. Eli was memorable for the passive virtues. He could bear much, though he could dare little. He could submit, but he could not fight. We find him here meekly recognizing the Divine will. God has a right to do what He will with His own; and who am I that I should cry out against Him? He is the Supreme Disposer of all events; why should a worm like me stand in His way? He submits implicitly to God. “The thing formed must not say to Him that formed him, Why hast Thou formed me thus”? What God ordains must be right. It is a terrible blow to Eli, but he may understand the

bearings of it better in another state. He bows to that Supreme Will which he has learned to trust and to honour above every force in the universe.

Yes, we are touched by Eli's meekness and submission. And yet, though Eli had in him the stuff that martyrs are often made of, his character was essentially feeble, and his influence was not wholesome. He wanted that resolute purpose which men like Daniel possessed. His will was too feeble to control his life. He was too apprehensive of immediate trouble, of present inconvenience and unpleasantness, to carry out firm principles of action against wickedness, even in his own family. He was a memorable instance of the soundness of the principle afterwards laid down by St. Paul: "If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the Church of God?" He greatly needed the exhortation which God gave to Joshua – "Be strong and of a good courage." It is true his infirmity was one of natural temperament. Men might say he could not help it. Neither can one overcome temperament altogether. But men of feeble temperament, especially when set over others, have great need to watch it, and ask God to strengthen them where they are weak. Divine grace has a wonderful power to make up the defects of nature. Timid, irresolute Peter was a different man after his fall. Divine grace turned him into a rock after all. The coward who had shrunk from before a maiden got courage to defy a whole Sanhedrim. In the ministers of God's house the timid, crouching spirit is specially unseemly. They, at least, would need to rest on

firm convictions, and to be governed by a resolute will. “Finally, brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”

4. Samuel is now openly known to be the prophet of the Lord. “Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground.” Little didst thou think, Hannah, some twenty years ago, that the child thou didst then ask of the Lord would ere long supersede the high priest who showed so little tact and judgment in interpreting the agitation of thy spirit! No, thou hast no feeling against the venerable old man; but thou canst not but wonder at the ups and downs of Providence; thou canst not but recall the words of thine own song, “He bringeth low, and lifteth up.” And Samuel has not to fight his way to public recognition, or wait long till it come. “All Israel, from Dan even to Beersheba, knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord.”

And by-and-bye other oracles came to him, by which all men might have known that he was the recognized channel of communication between God and the people. We shall see in our next chapter into what trouble the nation was brought by disregarding his prophetic office, and recklessly determining to drag the ark of God into the battlefield. Meanwhile we cannot but remark what a dangerous position, in a mere human point of view, Samuel now occupied. The danger was that which a young man encounters when suddenly or early raised to the possession

of high spiritual power. Samuel, though little more than a boy, was now virtually the chief man in Israel. Set so high, his natural danger was great. But God, who placed him there, sustained in him the spirit of humble dependence. After all he was but God's servant. Humble obedience was still his duty. And in this higher sphere his career was but a continuation of what had been described when it was said, "The child Samuel ministered to the Lord in Shiloh."

CHAPTER VI.

THE ARK OF GOD TAKEN BY THE PHILISTINES

1 Samuel iv

We are liable to form an erroneous impression of the connection of Samuel with the transactions of this chapter, in consequence of a clause which ought to belong to the last chapter, being placed, in the Authorized Version, at the beginning of this. The clause “And the word of Samuel came to all Israel” belongs really to the preceding chapter. It denotes that Samuel was now over all Israel the recognized channel of communication between the people and God. But it does not denote that the war with the Philistines, of which mention is immediately made, was undertaken at Samuel’s instance. In fact, the whole chapter is remarkable for the absence of Samuel’s name. What is thus denoted seems to be that Samuel was not consulted either about the war or about the taking of the ark into the battle. Whatever he may have thought of the war, he would undoubtedly have been horrified at the proposal about the ark. That whole transaction must have seemed to him a piece of infatuation. Probably it was

carried into effect in a kind of tumultuous frenzy. But there can be no reasonable doubt that whatever Samuel could have done to oppose it would have been done with the greatest eagerness.

The history is silent about the Philistines from the days of Samson. The last we have heard of them was the fearful tragedy at the death of that great Judge of Israel, when the house fell upon the lords and the people, and such a prodigious slaughter of their great men took place. From that calamity they seem now to have revived. They would naturally be desirous to revenge that unexampled catastrophe, and as Ebenezer and Aphek are situated in the land of Israel, it would seem that the Philistines were the aggressors. They had come up from the Philistine plain to the mountainous country of Israel, and no doubt had already sent many of the people to flight through whose farms they came. As the Israelites had no standing army, the troops that opposed the Philistines could be little better than an untrained horde. When they joined battle, Israel was smitten before the Philistines, and they slew of the army about four thousand men. In a moral point of view the defeat was strange; the Philistines had made the attack, and the Israelites were fighting for their homes and hearths; yet victory was given to the invaders, and in four thousand homes of Israel there was lamentation and woe.

But this was not really strange. Israel needed chastening, and the Philistines were God's instruments for that purpose. In particular, judgment was due to the sons of Eli; and the defeat inflicted by the Philistines, and the mistaken and superstitious

notion which seized on the people that they would do well to take God's ark into the battle, were the means by which their punishment came. How often Providence seems to follow a retrograde course! And yet it is a forward course all the time, although from our point of view it seems backward; just as those planets which are nearer the sun than the earth sometimes seem to us to reverse the direction of their movement; although if we were placed in the centre of the system we should see very plainly that they are moving steadily forward all the time.

Three things call for special notice in the main narrative of this chapter – 1. The preparation for the battle; 2. The battle itself; and 3. The result when the news was carried to Shiloh.

1. The preparation for the battle was the sending for the ark of the Lord to Shiloh, so that Israel might fight under the immediate presence and protection of their God.

It seemed a brilliant idea. Whichever of the elders first suggested it, it caught at once, and was promptly acted on. There were two great objections to it, but if they were so much as entertained they certainly had no effect given them. The first was, that the elders had no legitimate control over the ark. The custody of it belonged to the priests and the Levites, and Eli was the high priest. If the rulers of the nation at any time desired to remove the ark (as David afterwards did when he placed it on Mount Zion), that could only be done after clear indications that the step was in accordance with the will of God, and with the full consent of the priests. There is no reason to suppose that any

means were taken to find out whether its removal to the camp was in accordance with the will of God; and as to the mind of the priests, Eli was probably passed over as too old and too blind to be consulted, and Hophni and Phinehas would be restrained by no scruples from an act which every one seemed to approve. The second great objection to the step was that it was a superstitious and irreverent use of the symbol of God's presence. Evidently the people ascribed to the symbol the glorious properties that belonged only to the reality. They expected that the symbol of God's presence would do for them all that might be done by His presence itself. And doubtless there had been occasions when the symbol and the reality went together. In the wilderness, in the days of Moses, "It came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said, Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered, and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee" (Num. x. 35). But these were occasions determined by the cloud rising and going before the host, an unmistakable indication of the will of God (Num. ix. 15–22). God's real presence accompanied the ark on these occasions, and all that was expressed in the symbol was actually enjoyed by the people. There was no essential or inherent connection between the two; the actual connection was determined merely by the good pleasure of God. It pleased Him to connect them, and connected they were. But the ignorant and superstitious elders forgot that the connection between the symbol and the reality was of this nature; they believed it to be inherent and essential. In their unthinking and unreasoning

minds the symbol might be relied on to produce all the effect of the reality. If only the ark of God were carried into the battle, the same effect would take place as when Moses said in the wilderness, "Rise up, Lord, and let Thine enemies be scattered."

Could anything show more clearly the unspiritual tendencies of the human mind in its conceptions of God, and of the kind of worship He should receive? The idea of God as the living God is strangely foreign to the human heart. To think of God as one who has a will and purpose of His own, and who will never give His countenance to any undertaking that does not agree with that will and purpose, is very hard for the unspiritual man. To make the will of God the first consideration in any enterprise, so that it is not to be thought of if He do not approve, and is never to be despaired of if He be favourable, is a bondage and a trouble beyond his ability. Yet even superstitious men believe in a supernatural power. And they believe in the possibility of enlisting that power on their side. And the method they take is to ascribe the virtue of a charm to certain external objects with which that power is associated. The elders of Israel ascribed this virtue to the ark. They never inquired whether the enterprise was agreeable to the mind and will of God. They never asked whether in this case there was any ground for believing that the symbol and the reality would go together. They simply ascribed to the symbol the power of a talisman, and felt secure of victory under its shadow.

Would that we could think of this spirit as extinct even in

Christian communities! What is the Romish and the very High Church doctrine of the sacraments but an ascription to them, when rightly used, of the power of a charm? The sacraments, as Scripture teaches, are symbols of very glorious realities, and wherever the symbols are used in accordance with God's will the realities are sure to be enjoyed. But it has long been the doctrine of the Church of Rome, and it is the doctrine of Churches, with similar views, that the sacraments are reservoirs of grace, and that to those who place no fatal obstacle in their way, grace comes from them *ex opere operato*, from the very act of receiving them. It is the Protestant and scriptural doctrine that by stimulating faith, by encouraging us to look to the living Saviour, and draw from Him in whom all fulness dwells, the sacraments bring to us copious supplies of grace, but that without the presence of that living Saviour they would be merely as empty wells. The High Church view regards them as charms, that have a magic virtue to bless the soul. The superstitious mother thinks if only her child is baptised it will be saved, the act of baptism will do it, and she never thinks of the living Saviour and His glorious grace. The dying sinner thinks, if only he had the last sacraments, he would be borne peacefully and well through the dark scenes of death and judgment, and forgets that the commandment of Scripture is not, Look unto the last sacraments, but, "Look *unto Me* and be ye saved." Alas! what will men not substitute for personal dealings with the living God? The first book and the last book of the Bible present sad proof of his recoil from such contact. In Genesis, as

man hears God's voice, he runs to hide himself among the trees of the garden. In Revelation, when the Judge appears, men call on the mountains to fall on them and hide them from Him that sitteth on the throne. Only when we see God's face, beautiful and loving, in Christ, can this aversion be overcome.

If the presence of the ark in the field of battle did much to excite the hopes of the Israelites, it did not less to raise the fears of their opponents. The shout with which its arrival was hailed by the one struck something of consternation into the breasts of the other. But now, an effect took place on which the Israelites had not reckoned. The Philistines were too wise a people to yield to panic. If the Hebrew God, that did such wonders in the wilderness, was present with their opponents, there was all the more need for their bestirring themselves and quitting them like men. The elders of Israel had not reckoned on this wise plan. It teaches us, even from a heathen point of view, never to yield to panic. Even when everything looks desperate, there may be some untried resource to fall back on. And if this be a lesson to be learnt from pagans, much more surely may it be thought of by believers, who know that man's extremity is often God's opportunity, and that no peril is too imminent for God not to be able to deliver.

2. And now the battle rages. The hope of misguided Israel turns out an illusion. They find, to their consternation, that the symbol does not carry the reality. It pleases God to allow the ark with which His name is so intimately associated to be seized by

the enemy. The Philistines carry everything before them. The ark is taken, Hophni and Phinehas are slain, and there fall of Israel thirty thousand footmen.

Can we fancy the feelings of the two priests who attended the ark as the defeat of the army of Israel became inevitable? The ark would probably be carried near the van of the army, preceded by some of the most valiant troops of Israel. No doubt it had been reckoned on that as soon as its sacred form was recognized by the Philistines, fear would seize on them, and they would fly before it. It must have made the two priests look grave when nothing of the kind took place, but the host of the Philistines advanced in firm and intrepid phalanx to the fight. But surely the first onset of the advanced guard will show with whose army the victory is to lie. The advanced guards are at close quarters, and the men of Israel give way. Was there conscience enough left in these two men to flash into their minds that God, whose Holy Spirit they had vexed, was turned to be their enemy, and was now fighting against them? Did they, in that supreme moment, get one of those momentary glimpses, in which the whole iniquities of a lifetime seem marshalled before the soul, and the enormity of its guilt overwhelms it? Did they feel the anguish of men caught in their own iniquities, every hope perished, death inevitable, and after death the judgment? There is not one word, either in this chapter or in what precedes it, from which the slightest inference in their favour can be drawn. They died apparently as they had lived, in the very act of dishonouring God. With the weapons of rebellion

in their hands, and the stains of guilt on their hearts, they were hurried into the presence of the Judge. Now comes the right estimate of their reckless, guilty life. All the arts of sophistry, all the refuges of lies, all their daring contempt of the very idea of a retribution on sin, are swept away in a moment. They are confronted with the awful reality of their doom. They see more vividly than even Eli or Samuel the truth of one part, certainly, of the Divine rule – “Them that honour Me I will honour; but they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed.”

The time of guilty pleasure has passed for ever away; the time of endless retribution has begun. Oh, how short, how miserable, how abominable appears to them now the revelry of their evil life! what infatuation it was to forswear all the principles in which they had been reared, to laugh at the puritanic strictness of their father, to sit in the seat of the scorner, and pour contempt on the law of God’s house! How they must have cursed the folly that led them into such awful ways of sin, how sighed in vain that they had not in their youth chosen the better part, how wished they had never been born!

3. But we must leave the field of battle and hasten back to Shiloh. Since the ark was carried off Eli must have had a miserable time of it, reproaching himself for his weakness if he gave even a reluctant assent to the plan, and feeling that uncertainty of conscience which keeps one even from prayer, because it makes one doubtful if God will listen. Poor old man of ninety-eight years, he could but tremble for the ark! His

official seat had been placed somewhere on the wayside, where he would be near to get tidings from the field of any one who might come with them, and quite probably a retinue of attendants was around him. At last a great shout of horror is heard, for a man of Benjamin has come in sight with his clothes rent and earth upon his head. It is but too certain a sign of calamity. But who could have thought of the extent of the calamity which with such awful precision he crowded into his answer? Israel is fled before the Philistines – calamity the first; there hath been a great slaughter among the people – calamity the second; thy two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are slain – calamity the third; and last, and most terrible of all, the ark of God is taken! The ark of God is taken! The Divine symbol, with its overshadowing cherubim and its sacred light, into which year by year Eli had gone alone to sprinkle the blood of atonement on the mercy-seat, and where he had solemnly transacted with God on behalf of the people, was in an enemy's hands! The ark, that no Canaanite or Amalekite had ever touched, on which no Midianite or Ammonite had ever laid his polluted finger, which had remained safe and sure in Israel's custody through all the perils of their journeys and all the storms of battle, was now torn from their grasp! And there perishes with it all the hope of Israel, and all the sacred service which was associated with it; and Israel is a widowed, desolate, godless people, without hope and without God in the world; and all this has come because they dragged it away from its place, and these two sons of mine, now gone to their account, encouraged

the profanation!

“And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck brake, and he died; for he was an old man and heavy. And he had judged Israel forty years.”

This was calamity the fifth; but even yet the list was not exhausted. “His daughter-in-law, Phinehas’ wife, was with child, near to be delivered; and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed herself and travailed, for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women that stood by her said unto her, Fear not, for thou hast born a son. But she answered not, neither did she regard it. And she named the child Ichabod, saying, The glory is departed from Israel; because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, The glory is departed from Israel; for the ark of God is taken.”

Poor, good woman! with such a husband she had no doubt had a troubled life. The spring of her spirit had probably been broken long ago; and what little of elasticity yet remained was all too little to bear up under such an overwhelming load. But it may have been her comfort to live so near to the house of God as she did, and to be thus reminded of Him who had commanded the sons of Aaron to bless the people saying, “The Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord make His face shine upon thee and be gracious to thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and

give thee peace.” But now the ark of God is taken, its services are at an end, and the blessing is gone. The tribes may come up to the feasts as before, but not with the bright eye or the merry shouts of former days; the bullock may smoke on the altar, but where is the sanctuary in which Jehovah dwelt, and where the mercy-seat for the priest to sprinkle the blood, and where the door by which he can come out to bless the people? Oh, my hapless child, what shall I call thee, who hast been ushered on this day of midnight gloom into a God-forsaken and dishonoured place? I will call thee Ichabod, for the glory is departed. The glory is departed from Israel, for the ark of God is taken.

What an awful impression these scenes convey to us of the overpowering desolation that comes to believing souls with the feeling that God has taken His departure. Tell us that the sun is no longer to shine; tell us that neither dew nor rain shall ever fall again to refresh the earth; tell us that a cruel and savage nation is to reign unchecked and unchallenged over all the families of a people once free and happy; you convey no such image of desolation as when you tell to pious hearts that God has departed from their community. Let us learn the obvious lesson, to do nothing to provoke such a calamity. It is only when resisted and dishonoured that the Spirit of God departs – only when He is driven away. Oh, beware of everything that grieves Him – everything that interferes with His gracious action on your souls. Beware of all that would lead God to say, “I will go and return to My place, till they acknowledge their offence and seek My face.”

Let our prayer be the cry of David: – “Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARK AMONG THE PHILISTINES

1 Samuel v., vi

Although the history in Samuel is silent as to the doings of the Philistines immediately after their great victory over Israel, yet we learn from other parts of the Bible (Psalm lxxviii. 60–64; Jeremiah vii. 12, xxvi. 9) that they proceeded to Shiloh, massacred the priests, wrecked the city, and left it a monument of desolation, as it continued to be ever after. Probably this was considered an appropriate sequel to the capture of the ark – a fitting mode of completing and commemorating their victory over the national God of the Hebrews. For we may well believe that it was this unprecedented feature of their success that was uppermost in the Philistines' mind. The prevalent idea among the surrounding nations regarding the God of the Hebrews was that He was a God of exceeding power. The wonders done by Him in Egypt still filled the popular imagination (ch. vi. 6); the strong hand and the outstretched arm with which He had driven out the seven nations of Canaan and prepared the way for His people were not forgotten. Neither in more recent conflicts had any of the surrounding nations obtained the slightest advantage

over Him. It was in His name that Barak and Deborah had defeated the Canaanites; it was the sword of the Lord and of Gideon that had thrown such consternation into the hearts of the Midianites. But now the tide was completely turned; not only had the Hebrew God failed to protect His people, but ruin had come on both Him and them, and His very sanctuary was in Philistine hands. No wonder the Philistines were marvellously elated. Let us sweep from the face of the earth every trace and memorial of His worship, was their cry. Let us inflict such humiliation on the spot sacred to His name that never again shall His worshippers be able to regain their courage and lift up their heads, and neither we nor our children shall tremble any more at the mention of His terrible deeds.

We have not one word about Samuel in connection with all this. The news from the battlefield, followed by the death of Eli and of the wife of Phinehas, must have been a terrible blow to him. But besides being calm of nature (as his bearing showed after he got the message about Eli's house), he was habitually in fellowship with God, and in this habit enjoyed a great help towards self-possession and promptitude of action in sudden emergencies and perplexities. That the ill-advised scheme for carrying the ark into battle implied any real humiliation of the God of Israel, or would have any evil effect on the covenant sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he could not for a moment suppose. But the confusion and trouble that would arise, especially if the Philistines advanced upon Shiloh, was a

very serious consideration. There was much left at Shiloh which needed to be cared for. There were sacred vessels, and possibly national records, which must not be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy. By what means Samuel was able to secure the safety of these; by what means he secured his own personal safety when “the priests fell by the sword” (Psalm lxxviii. 64), we cannot say. But the Lord was with Samuel, and even in this hour of national horror He directed his proceedings, and established upon him the work of his hands.

The fact to which we have drawn attention, that it was over the God of Israel that the Philistines had triumphed, is the key to the transactions recorded so minutely in the fifth and sixth chapters. The great object of these chapters is to show how God undeceived the Philistines on this all-important point. He undeceived them in a very quiet, undemonstrative manner. On certain occasions God impresses men by His great agencies, – by fire and earthquake and tempest, by “stormy wind fulfilling His word.” But these are not needed on this occasion. Agencies much less striking will do the work. God will recover His name and fame among the nations by much humbler forces. By the most trifling exertion of His power, these Philistines will be brought to their wit’s end, and all the wisdom of their wisest men and all the craft of their most cunning priests will be needed to devise some propitiation for One who is infinitely too strong for them, and to prevent their country from being brought to ruin by the silent working of His resistless power.

1. First of all, the ark is carried to Ashdod, where stood the great temple of their God, Dagon. It is placed within the precincts of the temple, in some place of subordination, doubtless, to the place of the idol. Perhaps the expectation of the Philistines was that in the exercise of his supernatural might their god would bring about the mutilation or destruction of the Hebrew symbol. The morning showed another sight. It was Dagon that was humiliated before the ark – fallen to the ground upon his face. Next day a worse humiliation had befallen him. Besides having fallen, his head and hands were severed from the image, and only the stump remained. And besides this, the people were suffering extensively from a painful disease, emerods or hemorrhoids, and this too was ascribed to the influence of the God of the Hebrews. The people of Ashdod had no desire to prolong the contest. They gathered the lords of the Philistines and asked what was to be done. The lords probably concluded that it was a case of mere local ill-luck. But what had happened at Ashdod would not happen elsewhere. Let the ark be carried to Gath.

2. To Gath, accordingly, the ark is brought. But no sooner is it there than the disease that had broken out at Ashdod falls upon the Gittites, and the mortality is terrible. The people of Gath are in too great haste to call again on the lords of the Philistines to say what is to be done. They simply carry the ark to Ekron.

3. And little welcome it gets from the Ekronites. It is now recognised as the symbol of an angry God, whose power to

punish and to destroy is unlimited. The Ekronites are indignant at the people of Gath. "They have brought about the ark of the God of Israel to us, to slay us and our people." The destruction at Ekron seems to have been more awful than at the other places – "The cry of the city went up to heaven." The lords of the Philistines are again convened, to deliberate over the failure of their last advice. There is no use trying any other place in the country. The idea of local ill-luck is preposterous. Let it go again to its own place! is the cry. Alas that we have destroyed Shiloh, for where can we send it now? We can risk no further mistakes. Let us convene the priests and the diviners to determine how it is to be got quit of, and with what gifts or offerings it is to be accompanied. Would only we had never touched it!

The priests and the diviners give a full answer on all the points submitted to them. First, the ark when sent away must contain an offering, in order to propitiate the Hebrew God for the insults heaped on Him. The offering was to be in the form of golden emerods and golden mice. It would appear that in addition to the disease that had broken out on the bodies of the people they had had in their fields the plague of mice. These field-mice bred with amazing rapidity, and sometimes consumed the whole produce of the field. There is a slight difficulty about numbers here. There are to be five golden emerods and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines (vi. 3); but it is said after (ver. 18) that the number of the golden mice was according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines

belonging to the five lords, both of fenced cities and country villages. It is surmised, however, that (as in the Septuagint) the number *five* should not be repeated in the middle of the first passage (vi. 4, 5), but that it should run, “five golden emerods, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, and golden mice, images of the mice that destroy the land.” The idea of presenting offerings to the gods corresponding with the object in connection with which they were presented was often given effect to by heathen nations. “Those saved from shipwreck offered pictures of the shipwreck, or of the clothes which they had on at the time, in the Temple of Isis; slaves and captives, in gratitude for the recovery of their liberty, offered chains to the Lares; retired gladiators, their arms to Hercules; and in the fifth century a custom prevailed among Christians of offering in their churches gold or silver hands, feet, eyes, etc., in return for cures effected in those members respectively in answer to prayer. This was probably a heathen custom transferred into the Christian Church; for a similar usage is still found among the heathen in India” (*Speaker’s Commentary*).

4. Next, as to the manner in which the ark was to be sent away. A new cart was to be made, and two milch cows which had never been in harness before were to be fastened to the cart. This was to be out of respect to the God of Israel; new things were counted more honourable, as our Lord rode on a colt “whereon never man had yet sat,” and His body was laid in a new sepulchre. The cows were to be left without guidance to determine their path; if they

took the road to Judea, the road up the valley to Bethshemesh, that would be a token that all their trouble had come from the God of the Hebrews; but if they took any other road, the road to any place in the Philistine country, that would prove that there had only been a coincidence, and no relation of cause and effect between the capture of the ark and the evils that had befallen them. It was the principle of the lot applied to determine a grave moral question. It was a method which, in the absence of better light, men were ready enough to resort to in those times, and which on one memorable occasion was resorted to in the early Christian Church (Acts i.). The much fuller light which God has given men on moral and religious questions greatly restricts, if it does not indeed abolish, the lawful occasions of resorting to such a method. If it be ever lawful, it can only be so in the exercise of a devout and solemn spirit, for the apostles did not make use of it by itself, but only after earnest prayer that God would make the lot the instrument of making known His will.

At last the ark leaves the land of the Philistines. For seven terrible months it had spread among them anxiety, terror, and death. Nothing but utter ruin seemed likely to spring from a longer residence of the ark in their territories. Glad were they to get rid of it, golden emerods, golden mice, new cart, milch kine, and all. We are reminded of a scene in Gospel history, that took place at Gadara after the devils drove the herd of swine over the cliff into the lake. The people of the place besought Jesus to depart out of their coasts. It is a solemn truth that there are

aspects of God's character, aspects of the Saviour's character, in which He is only a terror and a trouble. These are the aspects in which God is seen opposed to what men love and prize, tearing their treasures away from them, or tearing them away from their treasures. It is an awful thing to know God in these aspects alone. Yet it is the aspect in which God usually appears to the sinner. It is the aspect in which our consciences present Him when we are conscious of having incurred His displeasure. And while man remains a sinner and in love with his sin, he may try to disguise the solemn fact to his own mind, but it is nevertheless true that his secret desire is to get rid of God. As the apostle puts it, he does not like to retain God in his knowledge (Rom. i. 28). He says to God, "Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways" (Job xxi. 14). Nay, he goes a step further – "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. xiv. 1). Where he still makes some acknowledgment of Him, he may try to propitiate Him by offerings, and to make up for the transgressions he commits in some things by acts of will-worship, or voluntary humiliation in other things. But alas! of how large a portion even of men in Christian lands is it true that they do not love God. Their hearts have no yearning for Him. The thought of Him is a disturbing, uncomfortable element. Heart communion with Him is a difficulty not to be overcome. Forms of worship that leave the heart unexercised are a great relief. *Worship performed* by choirs and instruments and æsthetic rules comes welcome as a substitute for the intercourse and homage of the soul. Could

anything demonstrate more clearly the need of a great spiritual change? What but the vision of God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself can effect it? And even the glorious truths of redemption are not in themselves efficacious. The seed needs to fall on good soil. He that commanded the light to shine out of darkness must shine in our minds to give the light of the glory of God in the face of His Anointed. But surely it is a great step towards this change to feel the need of it. The heart that is honest with God, and that says, “O God Almighty, I do not love Thee, I am not happy in Thy presence, I like life better without Thee; but I am convinced that this is a most wretched condition, and most sinful. Wilt Thou, in infinite mercy, have compassion on me? Wilt Thou so change me that I may come to love Thee, to love Thy company, to welcome the thought of Thee, and to worship Thee in spirit and in truth?” – such a heart, expressing itself thus, will surely not be forsaken. How long it may be ere its quest is granted we cannot tell; but surely the day will come when the new song shall be put in its mouth – “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits. Who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction, who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy mouth with good things, so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

5. And now the ark has reached Bethshemesh, in the tribe of Judah. The lords of the Philistines have followed it, watching it, as Miriam watched her infant brother on the Nile, to see what

would become of it. Nor do they turn back till they have seen the men of Bethshemesh welcome it, till they have seen the Levites take it down from the cart, till they have seen the cart cleft, and the cows offered as a trespass offering, and till they have seen their own golden jewels, along with the burnt-offerings and sacrifices of the people of Bethshemesh, presented in due form to the Lord.

Thus far all goes well at Bethshemesh. The ark is on Hebrew soil. The people there have no fear either of the emerods or of the mice that so terribly distressed their Philistine neighbours. After a time of great depression the sun is beginning to smile on Israel again. The men of Bethshemesh are reaping their barley-harvest – that is one mercy from God. And here most unexpectedly appears the sight that of all possible sights was the most welcome to their eyes; here, unhurt and unrifled, is the ark of the covenant that had been given up for lost, despaired of probably, even by its most ardent friends. How could Israel hope to gain possession of that apparently insignificant box except by an invasion of the Philistines in overwhelming force – in such force as a nation that had but lately lost thirty thousand men was not able to command? And even if such an overwhelming expedition were to be arranged, how easy would it not be for the Philistines to burn the ark, and thus annihilate the very thing to recover which the war was undertaken? Yet here is the ark back without the intervention of a single soldier. No ransom has been given for it, no blow struck, nothing promised, nothing

threatened. Here it comes, as if unseen angels had fetched it, with its precious treasures and still more precious memories just as before! It was like a foreshadow of the return from the captivity – an experience that might have found expression in the words, “When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream.”

Happy men of Bethshemesh, for whom God prepared so delightful a surprise. Truly He is able to do in us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! Never let us despair of God, or of any cause with which He is identified. “Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him;” “The Lord bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought; He maketh the devices of the people of none effect. The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever, and the thoughts of His heart to all generations.”

But alas! the men of Bethshemesh did not act according to the benefit received. Their curiosity prevailed above their reverence: they looked into the ark of the Lord. As if the sacred vessel had not had enough of indignity in the din of battle, in the temples of the uncircumcised Philistines, and in the cart drawn by the kine, they must expose it to a yet further profanation! Alas for them! their curiosity prevailed over their reverence. And for this they had to pay a terrible penalty. “The Lord smote of the men of Bethshemesh fifty thousand and three score and ten men.” It is the general opinion, however, that an error has slipped into the text that makes the deaths amount to fifty thousand threescore

and ten. Bethshemesh was never more than a village or little town, and could not have had anything like so great a population. Probably the threescore and ten, without the fifty thousand, is all that was originally in the text. Even that would be “a great slaughter” in the population of a little town. It was a very sad thing that an event so joyous should be clouded by such a judgment. But how often are times and scenes which God has made very bright marred by the folly and recklessness of men!

The prying men of Bethshemesh have had their counterparts many a time in more recent days. Many men, with strong theological proclivities, have evinced a strong desire to pry into the “secret things which belong to the Lord our God.” Foreknowledge, election, free will, sin’s punishment – men have often forgot that there is much in such subjects that exceeds the capacity of the human mind, and that as God has shown reserve in what He has revealed about them, so men ought to show a holy modesty in their manner of treating them. And even in the handling of sacred things generally, in the way of theological discussion, a want of reverence has very often been shown. It becomes us all most carefully to beware of abusing the gracious condescension which God has shown in His revelation, and in the use which He designs us to make of it. It was an excellent rule a foreign theologian laid down for himself, to keep up the spirit of reverence – never to speak of God without speaking to God.

God has drawn very near to us in Christ, and given to all that accept of Him the place and privileges of children. He

allows us to come very near to Him in prayer. “In everything,” He says, “by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving make your requests known unto God.” But while we gratefully accept these privileges, and while in the enjoyment of them we become very intimate with God, never let us forget the infinite distance between us, and the infinite condescension manifested in His allowing us to enter into the holiest of all. Never let us forget that in His sight we are “as dust and ashes,” unworthy to lift up our eyes to the place where His honour dwelleth. To combine reverence and intimacy in our dealings with God, – the profoundest reverence with the closest intimacy, is to realise the highest ideal of worship. God Himself would have us remember, in our approaches to Him, that He is in heaven and we on the earth. “Thus saith the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth Eternity and whose name is holy, I dwell in the high and holy place, but with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the hearts of the contrite ones.”

CHAPTER VIII.

REPENTANCE AND REVIVAL

1 Samuel vii. 1–9

With the men of Bethshemesh the presence of the ark had become the same terror as it had been successively at Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron. Instead of the savour of life to life, it had proved a savour of death to death. Instead of a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, it had become a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence. They sent therefore to their neighbours at Kirjath-jearim, and begged them to come down and remove the ark. This they readily did. More timid men might have said, The ark has brought nothing but disaster in its train; we will have nothing to do with it. There was faith and loyalty to God shown in their readiness to give accommodation to it within their bounds. Deeming a high place to be the kind of situation where it should rest, they selected the house of Abinadab in the hill, he being probably a Levite. To keep the ark they set apart his son Eleazar, whose name seems to indicate that he was of the house of Aaron. They seem to have done all they could, and with due regard to the requirements of the law, for the custody of the sacred symbol. But Kirjath-jearim was not turned into the seat of the national

worship. There is no word of sacrificial or other services being performed there. There is nothing to indicate that the annual feasts were held at this place. The ark had a resting-place there – nothing more.

And this lasted for twenty years. It was a long and dreary time. A rude shock had been given to the sacred customs of the people, and the comely order of the Divine service among them. The ark and the other sacred vessels were separated from each other. If, as seems likely (1 Sam. xxi.), the daily offerings and other sacred services ordained by Moses were offered at this time at Nob, a sense of imperfection could not but belong to them, for the ark of the covenant was not there. Incompleteness would attach to any public rites that might now be celebrated. The service of Baal and Ashtaroth would have a less powerful rival than when the service of Jehovah was conducted in all due form and regularity at Shiloh. During these years the nation seems to have been somewhat listless on the subject, and to have made no effort to remove the ark to a more suitable place. Kirjath-jearim was not in the centre, but on the very edge of the country, looking down into the territory of the Philistines, not far from the very cities where the ark had been in captivity, a constant reminder to the Israelites of its degradation. That Samuel was profoundly concerned about all this we cannot doubt. But he seems to have made no effort to remedy it, most probably because he knew it to be God's order first to make the people sensible of their wickedness, and only thereafter to restore to them free access to

Himself.

What then was Samuel doing during the twenty years that the ark was at Kirjath-jearim? We can answer that question only conjecturally, only from what we know of his general character. It cannot be doubted that in some way or other he was trying to make the nation sensible of their sins against God; to show them that it was to these sins that their subjection to the Philistines was due; and to urge them to abandon their idolatrous practices if they desired a return to independence and peace. Perhaps he began at this period to move about from place to place, urging those views, as he moved about afterwards when he held the office of Judge (vii. 16). And perhaps he was laying the foundations of those schools of the prophets that afterwards were associated with his name. Whenever he found young men disposed to his views he would doubtless cultivate their acquaintance, and urge them to steadfastness and progress in the way of the Lord. There is nothing said to indicate that Samuel was connected with the priestly establishment at Nob.

There are two great services for God and for Israel in which we find Samuel engaged in the first nine verses of this chapter: 1. In exhorting and directing them with a view to bring them into a right state before God. 2. This being accomplished, in praying for them in their time of trouble, and obtaining Divine help when the Philistines drew near in battle.

1. In the course of time the people appear to have come to feel how sad and desolate their national life was without any tokens

of God's presence and grace. "All the house of Israel lamented after the Lord." The expression is a peculiar one, and some critics, not understanding its spiritual import, have proposed to give it a different meaning. But for this there is no cause. It seems to denote that the people, missing God, under the severe oppression of the Philistines, had begun to grieve over the sins that had driven Him away, and to long after Him, to long for His return. These symptoms of repentance, however, had not shown themselves in a very definite or practical form. Samuel was not satisfied with the amount of earnestness evinced as yet. He must have more decided evidence of sincerity and repentance. He insisted on it that they must "put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among them, and prepare their hearts unto the Lord and serve Him only."

Now the putting away of the strange gods and Ashtaroth was a harder condition than we at first should suppose. Some are inclined to fancy that it was a mere senseless and ridiculous obstinacy that drew the Israelites so much to the worship of the idolatrous gods of their neighbours. In reality the temptation was of a much more subtle kind. Their religious worship as prescribed by Moses had little to attract the natural feelings of the human heart. It was simple, it was severe, it was self-denying. The worship of the pagan nations was more lively and attractive. Fashionable entertainments and free-and-easy revelries were superadded to please the carnal mind. Between Hebrew and heathen worship, there was something of the contrast that you

find between the severe simplicity of a Puritan meeting and the gorgeous and fashionable splendour of a great Romish ceremonial. To put away Baalim and Ashtaroth was to abjure what was fashionable and agreeable, and fall back on what was unattractive and sombre. Was it not, too, an illiberal demand? Was it not a sign of narrowness to be so exclusively devoted to their own religion that they could view that of their neighbours with no sort of pleasure? Why not acknowledge that in other religions there was an element of good, that the services in them were the expression of a profound religious sentiment, and were therefore entitled to a measure of praise and approval? It is very certain that with this favourite view of modern liberalism neither Samuel nor any of the prophets had the slightest sympathy. No. If the people were in earnest now, they must show it by putting away every image and every object and ornament that was connected with the worship of other gods. Jehovah would have their homage on no other terms. If they chose to divide it between Him and other gods, they might call on them for help and blessing; for it was most certain that the God of Israel would receive no worship that was not rendered to Him alone.

But the people were in earnest; and this first demand of Samuel was complied with. We are to remember that the people of Israel, in their typical significance, stand for those who are by grace in covenant with God, and that their times of degeneracy represent, in the case of Christians, seasons of spiritual backsliding, when the things of this world are too keenly

sought, when the fellowship of the world is habitually resorted to, when the soul loses its spiritual appetite, and religious services become formal and cold. Does there begin to dawn on such a soul a sense of spiritual poverty and loneliness? Does the spirit of the hymn begin to breathe from it —

“Return, O holy Dove, return,
Sweet Messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn
And drove Thee from my breast.”

Then the first steps towards revival and communion must be the forsaking of these sins, and of ways of life that prepare the way for them. The sorrow for sin that is working in the conscience is the work of the Holy Ghost; and if the Holy Ghost be resisted in this His first operation – if the sins, or ways toward sin, against which He has given His warning be persisted in, the Spirit is grieved and His work is stopped. The Spirit calls us to set our hearts against these sins, and “prepare them unto the Lord.”

Let us mark carefully this last expression. It is not enough that in church, or at some meeting, or in our closet, we experience a painful conviction how much we have offended God, and a desire not to offend Him in like manner any more. We must “prepare our hearts” for this end. We must remember that in the world with which we mingle we are exposed to many influences that remove God from our thoughts, that stimulate our infirmities, that give force to temptation, that lessen our power of resistance,

that tend to draw us back into our old sins. One who has a tendency to intemperance may have a sincere conviction that his acts of drunkenness have displeased God, and a sincere wish never to be drunk again. But besides this he must “prepare his heart” against his sin. He must resolve to turn away from everything that leads to drinking, that gives strength to the temptation, that weakens his power of resistance, that draws him, as it were, within the vortex. He must fortify himself, by joining a society or otherwise, against the insidious approaches of the vice. And in regard to all that displeases God he must order his life so that it shall be abandoned, it shall be parted with for ever. You may say this is asking him to do more than he can do. No doubt it is. But is not the Holy Spirit working in him? Is it not the Holy Spirit that is urging him to do these things? Whoever is urged by the Holy Spirit may surely rely on the power of the Spirit when he endeavours to comply with His suggestions. When God works in us to will and to do of His good pleasure, we may surely work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.

Having found the people so far obedient to his requirements, Samuel’s next step was to call an assembly of all Israel to Mizpeh. He desired to unite all who were like-minded in a purpose of repentance and reformation, and to rouse them to a higher pitch of intensity by contact with a great multitude animated by the same spirit. When the assembly met, it was in a most proper spirit. They began the proceedings by drawing water and pouring it out before the Lord, and by fasting. These two acts being

joined in the narrative, it is probable they were acts of the same character. Now as fasting was evidently an expression of contrition, so the pouring out of the water must have been so too. It is necessary to remark this, because an expression not unlike to our text, in Isa. xii., denotes an act of a joyful character, "With joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation." But what was done on this occasion was to draw water and *pour it out before the Lord*. And this seems to have been done as a symbol of pouring out before God confessions of sin drawn from the depths of the heart. What they said in connection with these acts was, "We have sinned against the Lord." They were no longer in the mood in which the Psalmist was when he kept silence, and his bones waxed old through his roaring all the day. They were in the mood into which he came when he said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." They humbled themselves before God in deep convictions of their unworthiness, and being thus emptied of self they were in a better state to receive the gracious visitation of love and mercy.

It is important to mark the stress which is laid here on the *public assembly* of the people. Some might say would it not have answered the same end if the people had humbled themselves apart – the family of the house of Levi apart, and their wives apart, every family apart, and their wives apart, as in the great mourning of Zechariah (Zech. xii. 12–14)? We answer, the one way did not exclude the other; we do not need to ask which is best, for both are best. But when Samuel convened the people to

a public assembly, he evidently did it on the principle on which in the New Testament we are required not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. It is in order that the presence of people like-minded, and with the same earnest feelings and purposes, may have a rousing and warming influence upon us. No doubt there are other purposes connected with public worship. We need constant instruction and constant reminding of the will of God. But the public assembly and the social prayer-meeting are intended to have another effect. They are intended to increase our spiritual earnestness by the sight and presence of so many persons in earnest. Alas! what a difference there often is between the ideal and the real. Those cold and passionless meetings that our churches and halls often present – how little are they fitted, by the earnestness and warmth of their tone, to give those who attend them a great impulse heavenward! Never let us be satisfied with our public religious services until they are manifestly adapted to this great end.

Thus did Samuel seek to promote repentance and revival among his people, and to prepare the way for a return of God's favour. And it is in this very way that if we would have a revival of earnest religion, we must set about obtaining it.

2. The next scene in the panorama of the text is – the Philistines invading Israel. Here Samuel's service is that of an intercessor, praying for his people, and obtaining God's blessing. It is to be observed that the alleged occasion for this event is said to have been the meeting held at Mizpeh. "When

the Philistines heard that the children of Israel were gathered together to Mizpeh, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel.” Was not this most strange and distressing? The blessed assembly which Samuel had convened only gives occasion for a new Philistine invasion! Trying to do his people good, Samuel would appear only to have done them harm. With the assembly at Mizpeh, called as it was for spiritual ends, the Philistines could have no real cause for complaint. Either they mistook its purpose and thought it a meeting to devise measures to throw off their yoke, or they had an instinctive apprehension that the spirit which the people of Israel were now showing would be accompanied by some remarkable interposition on their behalf. It is not rare for steps taken with the best of intentions to become for a time the occasion of a great increase of evil, – just as the remonstrances of Moses with Pharaoh led at first to the increase of the people’s burdens; or just as the coming of Christ into the world caused the massacre of the babes of Bethlehem. So here, the first public step taken by Samuel for the people’s welfare was the occasion of an alarming invasion by their cruel enemies. But God’s word on such occasions is, “Be still and know that I am God.” Such events are suffered only to stimulate faith and patience. They are not so very overwhelming events to those who know that God is with them, and that “none of them that trust in Him shall be desolate.” Though the Israelites at this time were not far advanced in spiritual life, they betrayed no consternation when they heard of the invasion of the Philistines. They knew

where their help was to be found, and recognizing Samuel as their mediator, they said to him, "Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, that He will save us out of the hand of the Philistines."

With this request Samuel most readily complies. But first he offers a sucking lamb as a whole burnt-offering to the Lord, and only after this are we told that "Samuel cried unto the Lord, and the Lord heard him."

The lesson is supremely important. When sinners approach God to entreat His favour, it must be by the new and living way, sprinkled with atoning blood. All other ways of access will fail. How often has this been exemplified in the history of the Church! How many anxious sinners have sought unto God by other ways, but have been driven back, sometimes farther from Him than before. Luther humbles himself in the dust and implores God's favour, and struggles with might and main to reform his heart; but Luther cannot find peace until he sees how it is in the righteousness of another he is to draw nigh and find the blessing, – in the righteousness of the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world. Dr. Chalmers, profoundly impressed with the sinfulness of his past life, strives, with the energy of a giant, to attain conformity to the will of God; but he too is only tossed about in weary disappointment until he finds rest in the atoning mercy of God in Christ. We may be well assured that no sense of peace can come into the guilty soul till it accepts Jesus Christ as its Saviour in all the fulness of His saving power.

Another lesson comes to us from Samuel's intercession. It is well to try to get God's servants to pray for us. But little real progress can be made till we can pray for ourselves. Whoever really desires to enjoy God's favour, be it for the first time after he has come to the sense of his sins; or be it at other times, after God's face has been hid from him for a time through his backsliding, can never come as he ought to come without earnest prayer. For prayer is the great medium that God has appointed to us for communion with Himself. "Ask and ye shall receive, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you." If there be any lesson written with a sunbeam alike in the Old Testament and in the New, it is that God is the Hearer of prayer. Only let us take heed to the quality and tone of our prayer. Before God can listen to it, it must be from the heart. To gabble over a form of prayer is not to pray. Saul of Tarsus had said many a prayer before his conversion; but after that for the first time it was said of him, "Behold, he prayeth." To pray is to ask an interview with God, and when we are alone with Him, to unburden our souls to Him. Those only who have learned to pray thus in secret can pray to any purpose in the public assembly. It is in this spirit, surely, that the highest gifts of Divine grace are to be sought. Emphatically it is in this way that we are to pray for our nation or for our Church. Let us come with large and glowing hearts when we come to pray for a whole community. Let us plead with God for Church and for nation in the very spirit of the prophet: "For Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's

sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth.”

CHAPTER IX.

NATIONAL DELIVERANCE – THE PHILISTINES SUBDUED

1 Samuel vii. 10–17

It must have been with feelings very different from those of their last encounter, when the ark of God was carried into the battle, that the host of Israel now faced the Philistine army near Mizpeh. Then they had only the symbol of God's gracious presence, now they had the reality. Then their spiritual guides were the wicked Hophni and Phinehas; now their guide was holy Samuel. Then they had rushed into the fight in thoughtless unconcern about their sins; now they had confessed them, and through the blood of sprinkling they had obtained a sense of forgiveness. Then they were puffed up by a vain presumption; now they were animated by a calm but confident hope. Then their advance was hallowed by no prayer; now the cry of needy children had gone up from God's faithful servant. In fact, the battle with the Philistines had already been fought by Samuel on his knees. There can be no more sure token of success than this. Are we engaged in conflict with our own besetting sins? Or

are we contending against scandalous transgression in the world around us? Let us first fight the battle on our knees. If we are victorious there we need have little fear of victory in the other battle.

It was as Samuel was offering up the burnt-offering that the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. There was an unseen ladder that day between earth and heaven, on which the angels of God ascended and descended as in Jacob's vision at Bethel. The smoke of the burnt-offering carried up to God the confession and contrition of the people, their reliance on God's method of atonement, and their prayer for His pardon and His blessing. The great thunder with which God thundered on the Philistines carried down from God the answer and the needed help. There is no need for supposing that the thunder was supernatural. It was an instance of what is so common, a natural force adapted to the purpose of an answer to prayer. What seems to have occurred is this: a vehement thunderstorm had gathered a little to the east, and now broke, probably with violent wind, in the faces of the Philistines, who were advancing up the heights against Mizpeh. Unable to face such a terrific war of the elements, the Philistines would turn round, placing their backs to the storm. The men of Israel, but little embarrassed by it, since it came from behind them, and gave the greater momentum to their force, rushed on the embarrassed enemy, and drove them before them like smoke before the wind. It was just as in former days – God arose, and His enemies were scattered, and they also that hated Him fled

before Him. The storm before which the Philistines cowered was like the pillar of fire which had guided Israel through the desert. Jehovah was still the God of Israel; the God of Jacob was once more his refuge.

We have said that this thunderstorm may have been quite a natural phenomenon. Natural, but not casual. Though natural, it was God's answer to Samuel's prayer. But how could this have been? If it was a natural storm, if it was the result of natural law, of atmospheric conditions the operation of which was fixed and certain, it must have taken place whether Samuel prayed or not. Undoubtedly. But the very fact that the laws of nature are fixed and certain, that their operation is definite and regular, enables the great Lord of Providence to make use of them in the natural course of things, for the purpose of answering prayer. For this fact, the uniformity of natural law, enables the Almighty, who sees and plans the end from the beginning, to frame a comprehensive scheme of Providence, that shall not only work out the final result in His time and way, but that shall also work out every intermediate result precisely as He designs and desires. "Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world." Now if God has so adjusted the scheme of Providence that the final result of the whole shall wonderfully accomplish His grand design, may He not, must He not, have so adjusted it that every intermediate part shall work out some intermediate design? It is only those who have an unworthy conception of omniscience and omnipotence that can doubt this. Surely if there

is a general Providence, there must be a special Providence. If God guides the whole, He must also guide the parts. Every part of the scheme must fall out according to His plan, and may thus be the means of fulfilling some of His promises.

Let us apply this view to the matter of prayer. All true prayer is the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in the human soul. All the prayer that God answers is prayer that God has inspired. The prayer of Samuel was prayer which God had inspired. What more reasonable than that in the great plan of providence there should have been included a provision for the fulfilment of Samuel's prayer at the appropriate moment? The thunderstorm, we may be sure, was a natural phenomenon. But its occurrence at the time was part of that great scheme of Providence which God planned at the beginning, and it was planned to fall out then in order that it might serve as an answer to Samuel's prayer. It was thus an answer to prayer brought about by natural causes. The only thing miraculous about it was its forming a part of that most marvellous scheme – the scheme of Divine providence – a part of the scheme that was to be carried into effect after Samuel had prayed. If the term supernatural may be fitly applied to that scheme which is the sum and substance of all the laws of nature, of all the providence of God, and of all the works and thoughts of man, then it was a miracle; but if not, it was a natural effect.

It is important to bear these truths in mind, because many have the impression that prayer for outward results cannot be answered without a miracle, and that it is unreasonable to

suppose that such a multitude of miracles as prayer involves would be wrought every day. If a sick man prays for health, is the answer necessarily a miracle? No; for the answer may come about by purely natural causes. He has been directed to a skilful physician; he has used the right medicine; he has been treated in the way to give full scope to the recuperative power of nature. God, who led him to pray, foresaw the prayer, and in the original scheme of Providence planned that by natural causes the answer should come. We do not deny that prayer may be answered in a supernatural way. We would not affirm that such a thing as supernatural healing is unknown. But it is most useful that the idea should be entertained that such prayer is usually answered by natural means. By not attending to this men often fail to perceive that prayer has been answered. You pray, before you set out on a journey, for protection and safe arrival at the end. You get what you asked – you perform the journey in safety. But perhaps you say, “It would have been all the same whether I had prayed for it or not. I have gone on journeys that I forgot to pray about, and no evil befell me. Some of my fellow-passengers, I am sure, did not pray for safety, yet they were taken care of as much as I was.” But these are sophistical arguments. You should feel that your safety in the journey about which you prayed was as much due to God, though only through the operation of natural causes, as if you had had a hairbreadth escape. You should be thankful that in cases where you did not pray for safety God had regard to the habitual set of your mind, your habitual trust in Him, though you

did not specially exercise it at these times. Let the means be as natural as they may – to those who have eyes to see the finger of God is in them all the same.

But to return to the Israelites and the Philistines. The defeat of the Philistines was a very thorough one. Not only did they make no attempt to rally after the storm had passed and Israel had fallen on them, but they came no more into the coast of Israel, and the hand of the Lord was against them all the days of Samuel. And besides this, all the cities and tracts of land belonging to Israel which the Philistines had taken were now restored. Another mercy that came to Israel was that “there was peace between Israel and the Amorites” – the Amorites being put here, most likely, for the remains of all the original inhabitants living among or around Israel. Those promises were now fulfilled in which God had said to Moses, “This day will I begin to put the dread of thee and the fear of thee upon the nations that are under the whole heaven, who shall hear report of thee, and shall tremble and be in anguish because of thee” (Deut. ii. 25). “There shall no man be able to stand before you; for the Lord your God shall lay the fear of you and the dread of you upon all the land ye shall tread upon, as He hath said to thee.” It was so apparent that God was among them, and that the power of God was irresistible and overwhelming, that their enemies were frightened to assail them.

The impression thus made on the enemies of Israel corresponds in some degree to the moral influence which God-fearing men sometimes have on an otherwise godless

community. The picture in the Song of Solomon – “Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and *terrible as an army with banners?*” – ascribes even to the fair young bride a terrifying power, a power not appropriate to such a picture in the literal sense, but quite suitable in the figurative. Wherever the life and character of a godly man is such as to recall God, wherever God’s image is plainly visible, wherever the results of God’s presence are plainly seen, there the idea of a supernatural Power is conveyed, and a certain overawing influence is felt. In the great awakening at Northampton in Jonathan Edwards’ days, there was a complete arrest laid on open forms of vice. And whensoever in a community God’s presence has been powerfully realized, the taverns have been emptied, the gambling-table deserted, under the sense of His august majesty. Would only that the character and life of all God’s servants were so truly godlike that their very presence in a community would have a subduing and restraining influence on the wicked!

Two points yet remain to be noticed: the step taken by Samuel to commemorate this wonderful Divine interposition; and the account given of the prophet and his occupations in his capacity of Judge of Israel.

“Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Ebenezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.”

The position of Shen is not known. But it must have been very near the scene of the defeat of the Philistines – perhaps it was the

very spot where that defeat occurred. In that case, Samuel's stone would stand midway between the two scenes of battle: the battle gained by him on his knees at Mizpeh, and the battle gained by the Israelites when they fell on the Philistines demoralised by the thunderstorm.

“Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” The characteristic feature of the inscription lies in the word “hitherto.” It was no doubt a testimony to special help obtained in that time of trouble; it was a grateful recognition of that help; and it was an enduring monument to perpetuate the memory of it. But it was more, much more. The word “hitherto” denotes a series, a chain of similar mercies, an unbroken succession of Divine interpositions and Divine deliverances. The special purpose of this inscription was to link on the present deliverance to all the past, and to form a testimony to the enduring faithfulness and mercy of a covenant-keeping God. But was there not something strange in this inscription, considering the circumstances? Could Samuel have forgot that tragic day at Shiloh – the bewildered, terrified look of the messenger that came from the army to bring the news, the consternation caused by his message, the ghastly horror of Eli and his tragic death, the touching death of the wife of Phinehas, and the sad name which she had with such seeming propriety given to her babe? Was *that* like God remembering them? or had Samuel forgot how the victorious Philistines soon after dashed upon Shiloh like beasts of prey, plundering, destroying, massacreing, till nothing more remained to be done to justify

the name of “Ichabod”? How can Samuel blot that chapter out of the history? or how can he say, with that chapter fresh in his recollection, “*Hitherto* hath the Lord helped us”?

All that Samuel has considered well. Even amid the desolations of Shiloh the Lord was helping them. He was helping them to know themselves, helping them to know their sins, and helping them to know the bitter fruit and woful punishment of sin. He was helping them to achieve the great end for which he had called them – to keep alive the knowledge of the true God and the practice of His worship, onward to the time when the great promise should be realised, – when He should come in whom all the families of the earth were to be blessed. Samuel’s idea of what constituted the nation’s glory was large and spiritual. The true glory of the nation was to fulfil the function for which God had taken it into covenant with Himself. Whatever helped them to do this was a blessing, was a token of the Lord’s remembrance of them. The links of the long chain denoted by Samuel’s “hitherto” were not all of one kind. Some were in the form of mercies, many were in the form of chastenings. For the higher the function for which Israel was called, the more need was there of chastening. The higher the destination of a silver vessel, the greater is the need that the silver be pure, and therefore that it be frequently passed through the furnace. The destination of Israel was the highest that could have been. So Samuel does not merely give thanks for seasons of prosperity, but for checks and chastenings too.

Happy they who, full of faith in the faithfulness and love of God, can take a similar view of His dealings! Happy they who, when special mercies come, deem the occasion worthy to be commemorated by some special memorial, but who can embrace their whole life in the grateful commemoration, and bracket joys and sorrows alike under their “hitherto”! It is not that sorrows are less sorrows to them than to others; it is not that losses of substance entail less inconvenience, or bereavements penetrate less deeply; but that all are seen to be embraced in that gracious plan of which the final consummation is, as the apostle puts it, “to present her to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing.” And well is it for us, both in individual life and in Church and national life, to think of that plan of God in which mercies and chastenings are united, but all with a gracious purpose! It is remarkable how often in Scripture tears are wiped away with this thought. Zion saying, “The Lord hath forsaken me, and my God hath forgotten me,” is assured, “Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of My hands, thy walls are continually before Me.” Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing to be comforted, is thus addressed, “Refrain thy voice from weeping and thine eyes from tears; for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the Lord, and thy children shall come again from the land of the enemy.” “Weep not,” said our Lord to the woman of Nain; and His first words after His resurrection were, “Woman, why weepest thou?” Vale of tears though this world is, there comes from above a gracious

influence to wipe them away; and the march Zionward has in it something of the tread and air of a triumphant procession, for “the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy on their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

We have yet to notice the concluding verses of the chapter (15–17), which give a little picture of the public life of Samuel. He judged Israel all the days of his life. The office of judge had a twofold sphere, external and internal. Externally, it bore on the oppression of the people by foreign enemies, and the judge became the deliverer of the people. But in this sense there was now nothing for Samuel to do, especially after the accession of Saul to the kingdom. The judge seems to have likewise had to do with the administration of justice, and the preservation of the peace and general welfare of the nation. It is very natural to suppose that Samuel would be profoundly concerned to imbue the people with just views of the purpose for which God had called them, and of the law and covenant which He had given them. The three places among which he is said to have made his circuit, Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpeh, were not far from each other, all being situated in the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, – in that part of the land which afterwards constituted the kingdom of the two tribes. To these three places falls to be added Ramah, also in the same neighbourhood, where was his house. In this place he built an altar to the Lord. Whether this was in connection with the tabernacle or not, we cannot say. We know that in the time

of David's wanderings "the house of God" was at Nob (Compare 1 Sam. xxi. 1 and Matt. xii. 4), but we have nothing to show us when it was carried thither. All we can say is, that Samuel's altar must have been a visible memorial of the worship of God, and a solemn protest against any idolatrous rites to which any of the people might at any time be attracted.

In this way Samuel spent his life like Him whose type he was, "always about his Father's business." An unselfish man, having no interests of his own, full of zeal for the service of God and the public welfare; possibly too little at home, taking too little charge of his children, and thus at last in the painful position of one, "whose sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment" (ch. viii. 1). That Samuel attained the highest reputation for sanctity, intercourse with God and holy influence, is plain from various passages of Scripture. In Psalm xcix. 6, he is coupled with Moses and Aaron, as having influence with God, – "they called upon the Lord and He answered them." In Jeremiah xv. 1, his name is coupled with that of Moses alone as a powerful intercessor, "Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be toward this people." His mother's act of consecration was wonderfully fulfilled. Samuel stands out as one of the best and purest of the Hebrew worthies. His name became a perpetual symbol of all that was upright, pure and Godlike. The silent influence of his character was a great power in Israel, inspiring many a young heart with holy awe, and silencing the flippant arrogance of the

scoffer. Mothers, did not Hannah do well, do nobly, in dedicating her son to the Lord? Sons and daughters, was it not a noble and honourable life? Then go ye and do likewise. And God be pleased to incline many a heart to the service; a service, which with all its drawbacks, is the highest and the noblest; and which bequeaths so blessed a welcome into the next stage of existence: “Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”

CHAPTER X.

THE PEOPLE DEMAND A KING

1 Samuel viii

Whatever impression the “Ebenezer” of Samuel may have produced at the time, it passed away with the lapse of years. The feeling that, in sympathy with Samuel, had recognized so cordially at that time the unbroken help of Jehovah from the very beginning, waxed old and vanished away. The help of Jehovah was no longer regarded as the palladium of the nation. A new generation had risen up that had only heard from their fathers of the deliverance from the Philistines, and what men only hear from their fathers does not make the same impression as what they see with their own eyes. The privilege of having God for their king ceased to be felt, when the occasions passed away that made His interposition so pressing and so precious. Other things began to press upon them, other cravings began to be felt, that the theocracy did not meet. This double process went on – the evils from which God did deliver becoming more faint, and the benefits which God did not bestow becoming more conspicuous by their absence – till a climax was reached. Samuel was getting old, and his sons were not like himself; therefore they afforded

no materials for continuing the system of judges. None of them could ever fill their father's place. The people forgot that God's policy had been to raise up judges from time to time as they were needed. But would it not be better to discontinue this hand-to-mouth system of government and have a regular succession of kings? Why should Israel contrast disadvantageously in this respect with the surrounding nations? This seems to have been the unanimous feeling of the nation. "All the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and said to Samuel, Make us a king to judge us like all the nations."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.