

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER TWO

A WOMAN'S ANGUISH OF HEART

(I Samuel 1:15)

“Unanswered yet? Faith cannot be unanswered,
Her feet were firmly planted on the Rock;
Amid the wildest storms she stands undaunted,
Nor quails before the loudest thunder shock.
She knows Omnipotence has heard her prayer,
And cries It shall be done sometime, somewhere.”

- Browning

WE may infer that Hannah's barrenness, and the provocation of her rival, were not the only reasons for Hannah's sorrow.

As her noble song proves, she was saturated with the most splendid traditions and hopes of her people; her soul was thrilling with the conceptions that inspired the songs of Moses. Stricken with an agony of grief for the anarchy and confusion around her, she longed with passionate desire to enshrine her noblest self in a son, who should resuscitate the ebbing prosperity of the nation, and set it on an enduring foundation.

Frail woman that she was, she might not even hope to emulate a Jael or a Deborah, but she might save her people if she could only breathe her ardent nature into a child.

What if she were to be deprived of his presence and support from his earliest years, would she not be compensated a thousandfold if only the Lord would accept him as his own, and use him to be the channel through which his redemptive schemes might be achieved?

Levites ordinarily were consecrated to the Lord's service between the ages of thirty and fifty, but her son, if only she might have one, should be given to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor should ever come upon his flowing locks.

On one occasion, while the feast was proceeding at Shiloh, it seemed as though Hannah could restrain herself no longer, and after her people had eaten and drunk - she fasting, save from tears - she rose up and returned to the outer court of the Tabernacle.

Most of its ancient glory had departed. Probably only a few curtains were draped around the Ark and the other sacred furniture, which had escaped the wreck of the previous two or three hundred years; and this simple structure was, if we may credit rabbinical tradition, surrounded by a low stone wall, at the gate of which was a seat or throne for the High Priest.

“And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore.”

Others went with burnt-offerings, but she with the broken heart, which God will not despise. She did not chide God, but she held out her cup of trial, that it might become a cup of salvation.

We are told that **“she prayed,”** and it becomes us to study her prayer and its issue.

It was heart-prayer.

It is the custom of Orientals to pray audibly, but as she stood beside Eli’s seat (ver. 26) she spake in her heart; her lips moved, but her voice was not heard. This indicates that she had made many advances in the Divine life, and had come to know the secret of heart-fellowship with God. Hers were not vain repetitions, but such an interchange of spirit with spirit, of need with supply, of hunger with satisfaction, of the human with the Divine, as requires no speech, for speech could not convey those **“groanings which cannot be uttered.”**

It was based on a new name for God. She appealed to the Lord under a new title, **“the Lord of Hosts,”** as though it were nothing to Him to summon into existence an infant spirit, whom she might call child. She asked Him to look down from the myriads of holy spirits who circled round his throne, to her dire affliction and anguish. She vowed in words which Elkanah by his silence or consent afterwards ratified (Numbers 30:6-15), that she did not want this inestimable boon for herself merely, but for the glory of God; and that her son should be a Nazarite from his birth, abstaining from intoxicating drink, his locks unshorn, his body undefiled by contact with the dead.

It was definite prayer.

- **“Give unto thine handmaid a man-child.”**

- **“For this child I prayed.”**

So many of our prayers miscarry because they are aimed at no special goal. We launch them aimlessly in the air, and wonder that they achieve nothing. How many of God’s professing children would be nonplussed if, on leaving God’s audience chamber on any morning, they were questioned as to what precious gift they had gone thither to obtain?

We are too often contented with asking generally that God would bless those with whom we are connected, without entering specifically into the case of any. Experienced saints who are versed in the art of intercessory prayer tell us of the marvellous results which have accrued, when they have set themselves to pray definitely for the salvation of individuals, or for some good and perfect gift on their behalf.

There is a notable instance of this in the life of Hannington, of Uganda. It is recorded in the diary of a fellow-clergyman, who had known him at the University, that on a certain day he was led to pray definitely for his friend; and almost simultaneously Hannington notes that he was conscious of unusual drawings towards God.

It was prayer without reserve.

“I have poured out my soul before the Lord.”

Ah, how good it would be if we could more often follow Hannah’s example. We pour out our secrets to confidential friends, and often have reason bitterly to repent; or, if we commit our cause to God, we tell Him our side of the case, seeking to hide from Him the other. Often the matter would be ended, if we dared to pour out all our soul, not defending ourselves, not apologizing, not glossing over what demanded clear and unequivocal confession.

When the heart is breaking, when its frail machinery seems unable to sustain the weight of its anxiety, when its cords are strained to the point of snapping, then, as you remember these things, pour out your soul in you (Psalm 17:4).

It was persevering prayer.

“It came to pass, as she continued praying before the Lord.”

Not that either she or we can claim to be heard for our much speaking, but when the Lord lays some burden on us we cannot do other than wait before Him.

It was prayer that received its coveted boon.

Eli was seated in his place at the entrance to the sanctuary. His notice was attracted by Hannah, though she was indifferent to all around. At first his attention was probably arrested by the signs of her excessive sorrow, and he expected that she would pour out her prayers in an audible voice, as so many other burdened souls were wont to do. But since her lips moved, while her voice was not heard, the high priest thought she had been drunken, and rather rudely and coarsely broke in on her with the rebuke, **“How long wilt thou be drunken? Put away thy wine from thee.”**

Therein another proof was given of the inability of the priesthood to understand and sympathize with the best spirit and temper of the time. Eli judged after the sight of his eyes, and clearly the mind of God had not been revealed to Him. He had degenerated into the mere official, from whom the Divine purposes were concealed.

Hannah answered the unjust reproach with great meekness.

“No,” she said, “it is not as you think. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my spirit unto the Lord.”

She had already suffered so much that this last misapprehension could not seriously add to her burden. She was content to cast it, with all the rest, on God; and she realized, even before Eli replied, that the merciful Burden-bearer had heard and answered her prayer.

She had entered into the spirit of the prayer, which not only asks, but takes.

She anticipated those wonderful words, which, more than any others, disclose the secret of prevailing supplication, **“What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them”** (Mark 11:24).

Before ever the words of Eli, **“Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant thy petition that thou hast asked of Him,”** had fallen like a summer shower on a parched land, she knew that she had prevailed, and the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, filled and kept her mind and heart. And she said, **“Let thy servant find grace in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad.”**

Too often we return from prayer with sad faces and burdened hearts. We have not cast our burden on the Lord, or if we have done so, we have taken it back again. There has been no interchange, and no exchange. We have failed to abandon our weights, anxieties, and sins; have failed to leave them in the hands of our Almighty Friend, that we might receive instead beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

Could we but kneel, and cast our load,
E'en while we pray, upon our God,
Then rise with lightened cheer.

The next day was fixed for their return home.

“And they rose up in the morning early, and worshipped before the Lord, and returned, and came to their house in Ramah.”

But what an altered woman she was! How differently she had borne herself in that last brief visit to the holy shrine! And with what a glad face she entered the home which had been associated with such sorrow.

Peninnah must have wondered what had happened to make so great a change; but Elkanah was the confidant of her secret, and his faith was made stronger by her unquestioning trust (ver. 23).

The workings of sorrow.

In this prayer we can trace the harvest sown in years of suffering. Only one who had greatly suffered could have poured out such a prayer. The notes of resignation, of chastened submission to the will of God, of appeal as from the dust, of the abandonment of all hope save in God, of the simple desire for his kingdom and righteousness, are touched with infinite delicacy and tenderness by this sorrowful woman's hand.

Sorrow gives an indefinable beauty to the soul. The blue of heaven does not seem so beautiful in rainless Egypt as in countries where the atmosphere is saturated with moisture.

“What do you think of her singing?” asked the trainer of a soprano vocalist.

“She sings superbly,” was his friend’s reply, “but if I had to do with her, I would break her heart.”

It may be that the long sharp pain, which has been your lot for these many years, the heart-hunger, the disappointed hopes, the silent waiting, the holding your peace, even from good, have been necessary, to teach you how to pray, to lead you into the secret of a childlike faith, and to fit you to be the parent of some priceless gift to the world.

It fell out to Hannah according to her faith. Blessed was she that had believed, for there was a performance unto her of the promises which God had made to her secret soul. **“The Lord remembered her, and . . . when the time had come about, that she bare a son, and she called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the Lord.”**

The good Elkanah had a new joy in his heart as he went up to offer unto the Lord his yearly sacrifice; and it would seem that he added to it some special expression of a vow that he had made **“the yearly sacrifice, and his vow.”** But Hannah abode at Ramah until the child was weaned, which would probably be on his completion of his third year, when Levite children were permitted to be enrolled and to enter the house of the Lord (II Chronicles 31:16).

At last the time arrived when the child should be openly presented to the Lord. The parents set out on their solemn journey with their child. The mother’s heart was now as full of praise as it had formerly been of sorrow. Her heart rejoiced in the Lord; her spirit was exalted in her God. The beggar was lifted from the dunghill to inherit the throne of glory. She had learnt that there was no Rock like her God, and she rejoiced in his salvation. Her song, on which the mother of our Lord modeled the Magnificat, is the outburst of a soul whose cup was simply overflowing with the loving-kindness of the Lord.

Presently the memorable journey from Ramah was finished. The sanctuary was again in sight, where she had suffered so poignantly and prayed so fervently. How it all rushed on her memory! **“I am the woman that stood by thee here,”** she said to Eli; **“for this child I prayed, and the Lord hath given me my petition.”**

Notice those words, **“I stood by thee here.”** How closely we associate certain experiences with certain spots. Here we suffered; here we resolved to live a new life; here we heard God speak. It was thus with Hannah. And was it not befitting that she should rejoice where she had sorrow; that the harvest of joy should wave over the furrows, where her tears had fallen so lavishly; that the blue skies should overarch the very spot where the dark clouds had loomed?

Take heart, thou man or woman of a sorrowful spirit! Only suffer according to the will of God, and for no wrong or sinful cause! Suffer for his Church, for a lost world, for dying men! Travail in birth for souls! Exercise thyself as thou wilt for the coming of his kingdom!

Bear the weight of some other soul, dear to thee as life! And if thou dost abide thy Lord's time,
He will bring thee again to tread in garments of joy, where thou hast stood in the drapery of woe.
Thou shalt come again from the land of the enemy. They that go forth and weep, bearing
precious seed, shall doubtless, doubtless, DOUBTLESS come again with rejoicing, bringing
their sheaves with them.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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