

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

“AN EVIL SPIRIT FROM THE LORD”

(I Samuel 16:13, 14)

“Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas’d,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?”

- Shakespeare

ALL great painters and poets whose works are of the first order have availed themselves of the force of contrast that there should be a dark background to set forth some beautiful and radiant object.

The Bible excels in its use of this striking method of laying emphasis. In the very first chapter the world is described as without form, and void, whilst darkness was over the face of the deep; and against that, as the background, is the creation of light, leaping across the void; and upon the background of chaos arises the cosmos of order and beauty. Also, at the end of this great Book, great even as a literary production, we have again the force of contrast, as, from all the storm and tumult of the world, we are borne upwards to those heavenly spaces where a white-robed multitude, with crowns on their brows and palms of victory in their hands, in perfect peace chant the everlasting song. In contrast with the apostate Church of Babylon, there is the Bride of the Lamb, Jerusalem from above, prepared as for her marriage. All through the Bible you are constantly brought face to face with the greatest possible contrasts, and much of its interest may be attributed to this source.

The same feature is stamped on this division of the Book.

In the opening chapters, against the wild license and unbridled indulgence of the Book of the Judges, and especially against the dissolute and abominable behavior of Eli’s sons as the background, is the kneeling figure of the young Samuel, with clasped hands, engaged in prayer beneath the open sky.

The beauty of the child’s piety is the more exquisite because of the dark wildness, license, and passion, amid which it unfolds.

And here, at the end of the Book, where it is evident that Saul is drifting as a wreck to the rocks, whilst from the lurid sky the thunderbolts fall and the lightning flashes on the earth, the curtain is uplifted from God's own king - the man after his own heart - the young and beautiful boy called from following the sheep to be the shepherd of Israel. Against the contrast of Eli's sons you have Samuel, and against the contrast of Saul's rejection you have David's anointing. This law of contrast pervades this Book great from the artistic and human standpoint altogether apart from its lofty, its transcendent, its Divine, origin.

We will notice the dawn of fair promise; the darkened afternoon; and, finally, the lurid gleams of a false zeal.

I. THE DAWN OF A FAIR PROMISE

“**Samuel cried unto the Lord**” for Saul, if haply he might arrest the terrible and imminent consequences of his sin. But he was made aware that prayer would not avail. It seemed as though Saul had already made the fatal choice, and had committed the sin which is unto death, and concerning which we have no encouragement to pray.

The summons of the hour was, therefore, not to prayer, but to action.

The Spirit of God bade Samuel go to Bethlehem, and among the sons of Jesse discover and anoint the new king. Samuel was stunned by the request, and suggested that if Saul heard a whisper of such a proceeding, he would at once take measures to avenge himself by inflicting the death penalty. But the Spirit of God bade him go, taking his long horn of oil in one hand, and leading a heifer with the other.

Thus he made his way across the broken hill-country of Judea, until he came to the village of Bethlehem lying along the slope of the hill, at the foot of which, not long before, Boaz had courted Ruth. The halo of the immortal story of their love was still fresh as dew.

When he entered the little town the elders were filled with consternation; it was so unusual to see the great prophet visiting them without previous announcement. They asked if he had come peaceably.

“**Peaceably!**” was the laconic reply. A sacrificial feast was at once prepared - the victim offered; but as some time must elapse between the offering of the sacrifice and the preparation of the food, Samuel adjourned to spend the interim in the house of the village chieftain, Jesse the Bethlehemite, a mighty man of valor and of wealth; and thus, in the privacy of the home, in a manner unlikely to attract the notice of the Court, David's career as king began.

One after another the stalwart sons of Jesse passed before the prophet, and as he looked upon them in their towering stature and manly frame, he supposed that any one of them might be God's designated monarch. But his Almighty Counsellor told him that outward appearance was not this time to weigh in the scales of choice, but that the royal qualities of the heart were alone to determine his selection.

And so, son after son passed; all had come but one, and he was with the sheep. Samuel felt that probably, because he was the youngest and the least, he might be God's accepted king. He could not proceed with the holy exercises until the boy was summoned; and, anon, coming quickly from the hills, the color mounting to his ruddy cheeks, his hair waving in the wind, his beautiful blue eyes flashing with purity and truth, David stood before the old man, the dawn of a new age, the inauguration of a better time, the keystone of the great fabric of Hebrew monarchy above all, the man whom God loved.

As his brethren stood around, the old man took the horn of oil, broke the capsule, poured it on the bright young locks, drenching them with the holy unction, as the boy bent beneath. As he anointed him, it seemed as though God Almighty accompanied the outward sign and seal by the inward grace, for we are told that the Spirit of God came upon that young life from that day forward, bathing it, permeating and filling it, so that he went in the power of the Holy Spirit to meet his great life-work, to be the sweet singer of Israel, the shepherd of God's people, and the inaugurator of Solomon's temple.

You may have nothing in the outward semblance, nothing in your surroundings or circumstances to indicate the true royalty within; but if you bare your heart to God, you shall stand revealed as his son, as a priest and king unto Himself. Oh, that at this moment the Holy Ghost might descend upon you! Would that you might seek and receive an unction from the Holy One Himself! Oh, that the Holy Spirit of God, who is the true anointing oil of the soul, might be shed upon you, so that you might go forth, saying, "**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and He hath anointed me.**"

II. AN OVERCAST AFTERNOON

We have morning with David; afternoon with Saul. Here youth; there manhood, which has passed into prime. Here the promise; and there the overcast meridian of a wrecked life.

You will notice that, whereas it is said that the Spirit of God descended upon David, we are told that "**The Spirit of the Lord had departed from Saul.**"

That does not necessarily mean that all the religious life of Saul had become extinct, but that the special faculty and power by which he had been prepared for his kingly work was withdrawn from him.

It is abundantly sure that the work which a man does in this world is not wrought only by the force of his genius, the brilliance of his intellect, or by those natural gifts with which God may have endowed him, but by a something beyond and behind all these a spiritual endowment which is communicated by the Spirit of God for special office, and which is retained so long as the character is maintained; but when the character begins to deteriorate and decline; when there is a divorce between religion and morality; when a soul turns definitely from the will and way of God to the paths of disobedience then that mystic power, which our forefathers called unction, and which the Bible calls the Spirit of God, seems to be dissipated, and to pass away as the aroma when scent has been long exposed to common air. So Saul lost the special endowment of power which had enabled him to subdue his enemies and to order his kingdom.

Secondly, we have the mysterious power of opening our nature to the Holy Spirit of God, who is the medium of communicating all the virtue, the energy, and the life of God; filling spirit, soul, and body; quickening the mind, warming the heart, elevating and purifying the whole moral life.

We have also the awful alternative power of yielding ourselves to the evil spirits, or demon spirits, of which the spiritual sphere is full. When we are first born into the world, the inner shrine of our being is not, as yet, occupied - it is a holy of holies not yet tenanted; but as years go on it is left for each to choose by which spirit he will be inhabited. Some, by the grace of God, are led to open their natures to receive the most blessed gift that God can bestow, since it is Himself; whilst others resemble Judas, of whom it is affirmed "**Satan entered into him**"; or Saul, of whom it is said; "**Then the Spirit of God departed from him, and an evil spirit troubled him.**"

In many cases men appear to be tenanted, occupied, and filled by the spirit of evil; and possibly even some of the worse forms of drunkenness, of lustful passion, and of jealous temper, are to be attributed to possession by some demon spirit. In the treatment of the insane, it would be wise perhaps to bear this in mind, and to deal with the tormented nature as our Lord did, as palaces occupied by legions of unclean tenants, whom He commanded to go forth.

It is affirmed that "**an evil spirit from the Lord**" troubled Saul.

To interpret this aright we must remember that, in the strong, terse Hebrew speech, the Almighty is sometimes said to do what He permits to be done. And surely such is the interpretation here. God cannot be tempted of evil, neither tempteth He any man, but He allows us to be tempted of Satan (Job 1:6-12; Luke 22:31).

Our Lord was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, to be tempted of the devil; and He taught us to ask that we should not be led along that dreaded path, but that the necessary discipline of life should come in some other way.

When, therefore, we read that an evil spirit "**from the Lord**" troubled Saul, we must believe that, as Saul had refused the good and gracious influences of the Holy Spirit, and definitely chosen the path of disobedience, there was nothing for it but to leave him to the working of his own evil heart. The guard of spiritual help was removed, and there was nothing to prevent Satan entering him, as in after days he entered Judas.

In the solemn words, thrice repeated in the first chapter of Romans, God "**gave him up**" to a reprobate mind (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).

III. THE LURID GLEAMS OF AN OVERCAST SKY

In II Samuel 21:2, you have this; "**The king**" that is, David "**called the Gibeonites (now the Gibeonites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them; and Saul sought to slay them in his zeal to the children of Israel and Judah).**"

Saul was smarting under Samuel's words, writhing under the sentence of deposition, and his soul was stirred to neutralize, if possible, the divine verdict, so as to still keep the favour of God.

It was true, and Saul knew it well, that he had failed in one distinct call to obedience; he had kept the choice of the spoil for himself but why should he not, by excessive zeal in other directions, win back his lost inheritance? Allowing that he had failed in what God told him to do, why should he not succeed in something that God had not told him to do? Why should he not resuscitate some old command, and give it unexpected obedience?

Now there were two such commandments which seem to have occurred to him.

The one enacted that when the children of Israel entered the Land of Promise, they should destroy all the people of the land. The Gibeonites, however, succeeded in securing that they should be excepted, because they had made a covenant with Joshua, and Joshua had sworn to them (Joshua 9). The Gibeonites, therefore, had lived amongst the children of Israel for many centuries, and had become almost an integral part of the nation. But in his false zeal for God Saul seems to have laid ruthless hands upon these peaceable people; and, in spite of the old covenant which bound Israel to respect their liberty and life, he exterminated them - an act that brought righteous retribution in after days on his house, for you remember how, as a set-off to this ruthless act, Rizpah's sons, and his own five grandsons, were hanged upon a tree, and left there until the rain rotted them (II Samuel 21:8).

Secondly, there was on the statute-book a very drastic law against necromancers and witches, and it was commanded that these should be exterminated from the land (Exodus 22:18).

Therefore Saul turned his hand against them. In his heart he still believed in them for at the end of his life, when a man generally casts aside his pretences and appears as he is, Saul sought out one of these very women, and availed himself of her help. In order, however, to show his zeal for God, and to extort the reversal of his sentence, he began to exterminate them.

But as his edicts went forth, there was rottenness in his heart.

His royal state was greatly increased; he wore from this time a gorgeous turban, like other kings, which was brought from the field of Gilboa to David. There was a great increase of luxury in his court, for he arrayed the daughters of Israel in scarlet and gold (II Samuel 1:24).

A subtle admixture of Baal worship with the recognition of the Lord appears from his naming his sons, partly from the name of the Lord, and partly by the name of Baal. He took to himself concubines in imitation of his neighbours. While on the one hand, therefore, there was this outburst of lurid zeal for God, his own heart was becoming more and more enervated and evil.

Saul's is not an isolated case.

Take, for instance, two examples from the New Testament, which are almost parallel.

The one in which the Apostle says, of Israel, that **“they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.”**

And the other, the case of that still more famous Benjamite, Saul’s namesake, who tells us that, while he was kicking against the pricks, he had a zeal for God in the persecution of the Church (Romans 10:2, 3; Acts 22:3, 4).

Do not we know this in our own experience? When one has fallen under the condemnation of conscience, the heart has endeavored to whisper comfort to itself by saying, “I will endeavor to redeem my cause by an extravagance of zeal.”

We have plunged into some compensating work to neutralize the result of failure.

- It is zeal, but it is false;
- It is zeal, but it is strange fire;
- It is zeal, but it is self-originated;
- It is zeal, but it is only for self and not for God;
- It is zeal, but it is zeal for the letter, for the tradition, for the external form it is not the zeal of the man who is eaten up and devoured by a passionate love for the Son of God, and for the souls He has made.

This is the story of ourselves. No man can get away from it.

Here is the mirror in which we behold our own faces. The Bible is the Book of God, because it is the Book of man; it is the timeless Book; it is the Book that is the mirror of the soul, because man is always seeing himself in the experience of those that have preceded him.

Let us turn from Saul for a moment to that dear face that bends over us to-day; to that heart that yearns over us; to the Christ of God that loves us.

We, too, have disobeyed; have come short; have failed to fulfil his commands; but there is forgiveness in those flowing wounds; there is pardon in that loving heart. Seek it! Ask Him to blot out the past. Let the dead bury its dead. And may the Holy Ghost kindle upon our heart-altars a fire of zeal which shall never be put out, and which shall always burn for his glory, purifying our nature, and making us living sacrifices unto Him.

~ end of chapter 19 ~

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