

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A REMARKABLE COLLOQUY

(I Samuel 15:12-35)

“Thy choice was earth! Thou didst attest
Twas fitter spirit should subserve
The flesh, than flesh refuse to nerve
Beneath the spirit’s play! Thou art shut
Out of the Heaven of Spirit! Glut
Thy sense upon the world; ‘tis thine
For ever! take it!”

- R. B.

AN intimation of Saul’s lapsed obedience was made in the secret ear of Samuel in the dead of night, when God came near to him and said, **“It repenteth Me that I have set up Saul to be king, for he hath turned back from following Me, and hath not performed my commandments.”**

God requires literal obedience; and when that fails the results are as though He had changed his purpose or repented but this is in appearance only. As a matter of fact, God cannot repent or change his purpose. Man may frustrate the working out of His plan, but the Almighty Workman will achieve it by some other method.

The wind may be blowing steadily in the same direction, and as long as we yield to it, it will waft us to the desired haven; but it is always possible for us to reverse our course and go against it, and then our life is so powerfully affected that it would seem as though God had changed His purpose the change being due to ourselves, because, whereas formerly we moved with his purpose, now, by disobedience or unbelief, we are steadily resisting it.

Does God ever come to you at night, or when the world is quiet, and tell you his secrets? Happy are they whom God can trust with his own profound sorrow over the failure of his chosen servants, honoring them with his confidence, and appealing to them to watch with Him. **“Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do?”**

The faithful soul of Samuel was deeply moved. We are told he was **“angry”** - a righteous indignation that one who had been appointed with such solemn sanctions, and had bidden fair to achieve such glorious deliverances for his people, had so seriously missed his mark.

Those who are true to God cannot but feel indignant when his purposes are frustrated and his grace outraged; when the door of usefulness which He had set wide in front of a chosen servant is shut and barred by some act of careless or willful disobedience.

“He cried unto the Lord all night.”

Ah, how much we owe to the Divine Friend, and to human friends, who, when they see deterioration at work within us, take no rest and give God no rest. This is the most priceless service that one soul can afford another. There is hope so long as lover and friend bear up our case before God, and plead that rather they should be accursed than that we should perish. How many a son now leading a reckless and profligate life, in his still hours, or when his evil courses have cast him on a bed of sickness, and debarred him from the active pursuits of life, comforts himself with the thought, that in some lone cottage his mother does not cease to pray for him, and he secretly hopes that her prayers may avail against the vehemence of the fiery passions by which his soul is driven.

Samuel travelled some fifteen miles to find Saul, following him from Carmel, where, as we have seen, Saul set up a monument, which was either shaped in the form of a hand, or on which the figure of a hand was graven, to Gilgal, the site of the ancient shrine, where, we are informed, the king was engaged in offering sacrifices to the Lord; and there this most remarkable colloquy took place.

SAUL

It was commenced by the king, who, seeing the prophet coming towards him, advanced to meet him with an unctuous phrase upon his lips, **“Blessed be thou of the Lord”**; and, with great complacency in his demeanor, added, **“I have performed the commandment of the Lord.”**

Whether Saul was blinded and did not really know how far he had deteriorated - for it is certain that disobedience puts out our eyes, as Hubert did young Arthur's, blinding us to the enormity of our sin - or whether he desired to gloss over his failure, and to appear as a truly obedient son, so as to deceive the prophet, we cannot tell; but that **“Blessed be thou of the Lord,”** from his lips, and at such a moment, has an ugly sound.

It reminds one of certain who interlard their business life with references to religion, which are intended to put the unwary off their guard, and enable their user to take a mean advantage, under the appearance of a high code of morals. Nothing is more damnable than this. It is the sin of Judas, who betrayed his Master with a kiss. Better the open foe than the secret assassin. Better, a dozen times, the arrow that flieth by day than the pestilence that walketh in darkness.

SAMUEL

At that moment the sheep began to bleat and the oxen to low. A breath of wind, laden with the unmistakable indication of the near presence of a great multitude of flocks and herds, was wafted to the prophet's ear.

It is an unfortunate occurrence when, just as a man is becoming loud in his protestations of goodness, some such untoward incident suddenly takes place, so that the lowing of the oxen and the bleating of the sheep belie his words.

I remember once a professor of religion who desired to impress me with his entire sanctification, and deliverance from every kind of idol, giving unmistakable evidence, by the taint of tobacco on his breath whilst he spoke, that he had been smoking a rather rank kind of tobacco. I had not said a single word about smoking. I have never felt it my business to denounce indulgences concerning which God may not convict men universally. It is our business, on matters not clearly forbidden, and concerning which Christian people are not agreed, to lay down general principles, and to leave our hearers to apply them for themselves. But when this man went out of his way to assert his entire deliverance, I naturally was more on the alert, and in the taint on his breath I detected the presence of the choice oxen and sheep which had been reserved.

With sad irony the prophet said, **“What meaneth this bleating of sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of oxen which I hear?”**

SAUL

The king excused himself by laying emphasis on the word **“they”** – **“They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God.”**

Notice the subtle effort to conciliate the prophet by the emphasis laid upon the word **“thy”** – **“thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.”**

It was unroyal and contemptible to lay the blame upon the people, and it was an excuse which could not be allowed.

SAMUEL

The royal backslider would probably have gone on speaking, but Samuel interrupted him, saying, **“Stay, and I will tell thee what the Lord hath said to me this night.”**

Then the faithful old prophet went back to the past.

He reminded Saul how insignificant had been his origin, and how he had shrunk from undertaking the great responsibility of the station to which God had summoned him. He reminded him how he had been raised up to the throne, and how the Almighty King of Israel had delegated to him his authority, requiring that he should act as his designated vicegerent. He reminded him also that a distinct charge had been given him, and that the responsibility of determining his line of action had been transferred from himself, as the agent, to the Divine Being, who had issued his mandate of destruction. In spite of all, Saul had allowed his greed to hurry him into an act of disobedience. He had flown upon the spoil as a hungry lion upon his prey, and had done evil in the sight of the Lord.

SAUL

The king reiterated his poor excuse;

“Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and have gone the way that the Lord sent me, and have brought Agag, the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the devoted things, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in Gilgal.”

It was as though he had said, “You have judged me wrongfully. If you would wait for a little while, you would see the issue of my act of apparent disobedience.”

He may even have cajoled himself into thinking that he meant to sacrifice these spoils now that he had reached Gilgal; or he might have mentally resolved there and then that he would sacrifice them, and so relieve himself of the complicated position into which he found himself drifting.

SAMUEL

In answer to this last remark, God’s messenger uttered one of the greatest sentences in the earlier books of the Bible, a sentence which is the seed-germ of much to the same purpose in the prophets, which in subsequent centuries was repeated in different forms, and to which our blessed Lord gave his assent.

“Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.”

Whatever Saul might be wishful for him to infer, as to his intention to offer the sacrifice, there could be no doubt that up to that moment, at least, he had disobeyed God’s positive command; and, unmistakably, the whole attitude of his soul was towards disobedience and rebellion, which, in fact, were the assertion of his own will and way against God’s.

Then, tearing the veil aside, the old man showed the enormity of the sin which had been committed by saying;

“Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity [idolatry] and idolatry [the teraphim].”

These sins were universally reprobated and held up to the contempt of good men; but in God’s sight there was nothing to choose between them and the sin of which the king had been guilty. Then, facing the monarch, and looking at him with his searching eyes, the prophet, in the majesty of his authority as God’s representative, pronounced the final sentence of deposition, saying,

“Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king.”

SAUL

In a moment the king realized the brink of the precipice on which he stood; and with the cry not of a penitent, but of a fugitive from justice; not hating his sin, but dreading its result; eager at any cost to keep the crown on his brow and the empire in his hand; afraid of the consequences which might ensue if his leading men detected any break or coolness between himself and the prophet he cringed before Samuel, saying,

“I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and thy words; because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray thee, pardon my sin, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord.”

There is a great difference in the accent with which men utter those words, **“I have sinned.”**

The prodigal said them with a faltering voice not because he feared the consequences of sin, but that he saw its heinousness in the expression of his father’s face, and the tears that stood in the beloved eyes. Saul, however, feared the consequences rather than the sin; and that he might avert the sentence, he said, as though Samuel had the power of the keys to open and unloose, to pardon or to refuse forgiveness, **“Pardon my sin.”**

SAMUEL

The prophet saw through the subterfuge. He knew that his penitence was not genuine, but that the king was deceiving him with his words, and he turned about to go away. Then Saul, in the extremity of his anguish, in fear that in losing him he might lose at once his best friend and the respect of the nation, seems to have sprung forward and seized the skirt of Samuel’s cloak, and as he did so with a strong masterful grasp, as if to restrain and draw back to himself the retreating figure of the prophet, it rent.

When Samuel felt and heard the tear, he said, **“The Lord hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine that is better than thou.”**

And then, referring to Saul’s effort to turn him back, as though he would reverse the sentence which he had pronounced, he said, **“And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor repent: for he is not a man, that he should repent.”**

“His sentence is irrevocable. The word is gone out of his lips and cannot be called back. There is no opportunity of changing his mind, though thou shalt seek it bitterly and with tears.”

Even at that moment had Saul thrown himself at God’s feet and asked for pardon, he would have been accepted and forgiven. Even though as a monarch his kingdom might have passed from him, as a man he would have received pardon. But there are moments in our lives, irrevocable moments, when we take steps that cannot be retraced; when we assume positions from which we cannot retreat; when results are settled, never to be reversed.

SAUL

Again the king repeated the sentence, “**I have sinned**”; but his real meaning was disclosed in the following words: “**Yet honour me now before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord thy God.**”

His inner thought was still to stand well with the people, and he was prepared to make any confession of wrong-doing as a price of Samuel’s apparent friendship.

Finally Samuel stayed with him, that the elders might not become disaffected, and that the people generally might have no idea of the deposition of the king, lest the kingdom itself might totter to its fall before his successor was prepared to take his place. He stayed therefore. The two knelt side by side before God; but what a contrast! Here was darkest night; there the brightness of the day. Here was the rejected; there the chosen faithful servant.

At last the old man summoned Agag, the king of the Amalekites, to his presence, and Agag came to him “**cheerfully**,” hoping without doubt that he would be spared; and saying, as he advanced, “**Surely the bitterness of death is passed.**”

Then Samuel, strengthened with some paroxysm of righteous indignation, seized a sword that lay within his reach, and hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord - emblem this of the holy zeal that will give no quarter to the flesh; and we are reminded of the words of the Apostle, “**Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.**”

To Amalek we must give no quarter.

May God help us to read deeply into this tragic story.

Whensoever God our Father puts a supreme test into our lives, let us at any cost obey Him. Everything hinges upon absolute obedience. If you cannot obey, you cannot command. If you do not obey, you are not fit to be an instrument in God’s hand. If the chisel is not true, the sculptor dare not keep it still in use.

Let us walk circumspectly and wisely, redeeming each opportunity, that God may make the most possible of us, and that, above all, we may not become castaways.

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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