

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

F. B. Meyer, B.A

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE CAUSE OF SAUL'S DOWNFALL

(I Samuel 13:13, 14)

“Bide thou thy time!
Watch with meek eyes the race of pride and crime,
Sit in the gate, and be the heathen's jest,
Smiling and self-possesst,
O thou to whom is pledged a victor's sway
Bide thou the victor's day.”

- N. H. J.

THIS chapter is the story of a great tragedy, since it contains the history of the incident which revealed Saul's unfitness to be the founder of a line of kings. Had he stood this test, there is no doubt that he would have been, not only the first monarch of Israel, but the father of a royal race, and the whole after-history of the chosen people might have been different.

But, as we shall see though, at first, his kingdom augured prosperity to his fatherland it evidently lacked the elements of permanence and continuity, and of becoming Israel's permanent bulwark against the invasions of the enemy from without, and the cancer of disintegration or corruption within.

Let us gather around this story, not only because it has so much to do with the history of God's people, but because it is full of instruction for ourselves. Turning from Saul to David, Samuel said, “**The Lord hath sought Him a man after his own heart.**” It is, therefore, clear that, in some way, Saul had ceased to be “**a man after God's own heart,**” and it becomes us carefully to inquire the reason, that we may avoid the rocks on which this good ship split and foundered.

You will remark that the chapter which tells the history of this tragedy - the overcasting of a bright morning, the spoiling of a fair and beautiful promise also contains the story of the unutterable distress to which the chosen people had been reduced by another invasion of the Philistines.

We are told, for instance, in ver. 6, that the people of Israel were in a strait, that they were distressed, that they hid themselves in caves and thickets, in rocks and in pits; indeed, some of them even crossed the Jordan, and forsook their fatherland in the hour of its extremity; while those who were yet associated with Saul and Jonathan, as the nucleus of the royal army, followed him trembling (ver. 7).

A spirit of fearfulness had settled down upon the whole people; the old national spirit had decayed; it seemed as though they could never again be induced to stand against the Philistines, any more than a flock of sheep against a pack of wolves.

We are also informed of the numbers of the vast host of Philistines, which had been gathered from all parts, in order to crush out the movement towards a national existence, of which the coronation of Saul and the exploits of Jonathan were symptoms (ver. 3). We can overhear the tidings brought to Saul (ver. 5) by some panic-stricken messenger, who, with the exaggeration of abject fear, described the Philistines as the sand which is on the sea shore in multitude.

A further proof of the hapless misery of the people is adduced in verse 19; there was no smith found throughout the whole land of Israel, and the Hebrews had to take their implements of agriculture down to the smithies of the Philistines in order that they might be sharpened for their use. Never in the history of the chosen people were there more dire calamity, more absolute hopelessness and despair, than reigned around Saul and throughout the entire country at this hour.

At this juncture Saul seems to have withdrawn his troops, such as they were, from Michmash, and to have taken up his position on the ancient site of Gilgal, where the act of circumcision was performed after Israel had crossed the Jordan under Joshua. There upon the level land, and therefore exposed to the assault of the Philistine hosts at any moment, Saul seems to have pitched his camps; whilst his heroic son, Jonathan, kept up a post of observation in the vicinity of the Philistine hosts.

Whilst Saul with his soldiers remained at Gilgal, every day marked the diminution of his host. This man and that stole away, either across the Jordan as a fugitive, or to hide in some hole and corner of the hills.

It may be asked why, at such a time, Saul did not make one desperate effort against the Philistines. Why did he wait there day after day, whilst his army evaporated before his eyes?

Ah! thereby hangs a story to understand which we must turn back a page or two in the inspired record. In chap. 10:8, in that early morning interview, when Samuel designated Saul for the crown, he told him that the crisis of his life would overtake him at Gilgal a prophecy the fulfillment of which had now arrived.

“Thou shall go down before me to Gilgal; and, behold, I will come down unto thee, to offer burnt-offerings, and to sacrifice sacrifices of peace-offerings; seven days shalt thou tarry, till I come unto thee, and show thee what thou shalt do.”

I. SAUL'S MISTAKE

This command, uttered three years before to Saul, as he stood on the threshold of his vast opportunities, involved two things, and each of them constituted a supreme test.

First, whether he was prepared to act as God's vice-regent; not as absolute monarch determining his own policy, and acting on his own initiative, but as God's servant, receiving the marching orders of his life through the prophet's lips; not acting as an autocrat, but as one to whom there had been a delegation of Divine authority.

Second, whether he could control his impetuous nature, put the curb upon his impulse, and hold himself well in hand.

It was this embargo which Samuel had laid upon him that made him wait day after day. Can you not imagine how his chosen advisers and warriors would come around him and urge him to do something?

- Might they not have pointed to the Philistine hosts encamped at Michmash, gathering like a cloud of storm?

- Might they not have told him how, unless he acted quickly, his paternal estate would be wiped out before the invasion?

- Might they not have pointed to the dwindling hosts, and said, Rise up and do something; it were better to die beneath the Philistines hand than allow them to pounce down on you, as the bird of prey on the trembling dove!

But he waited day after day. **“He tarried seven days, according to the set time that Samuel had appointed; but Samuel came not to Gilgal, and the people were scattered from him.”**

Then it would seem that within a brief space of the expiry of the allotted time he could wait no more. He thought that Samuel must have forgotten the appointment, or had been intercepted in making his way from Ramah through the Philistine lines. He had waited till within half an hour (because to offer a burnt-offering and a peace-offering could not take much longer), and then spoiled the whole, by his inability to delay further; and he said to the priest, who still lingered by the ancient site where God had been worshipped and the Tabernacle posted, **“Bring hither the burnt offering to me, and the peace offerings.” “And it came to pass that as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt-offering, behold, Samuel came.”**

Ah, if only some sentry standing on a pinnacle of rock could have looked over into the adjacent valley and seen the form of the old man drawing nearer to the camp, he might have warned the king, crying, “Samuel is coming!” But there was no one to arrest him nothing but the monition and remonstrance of his own heart. It was shown that he could not wait for God in absolute faith that He would not fail nor deceive. He was careful to maintain an outward rite, but the spirit of devotion and faith was altogether wanting. As he was, his successors would become, to the undoing of Israel; therefore his kingdom could not continue.

The one lesson that comes back to us with almost overwhelming force is, that the man who is after God's heart is the man who will obey God to the letter, who will wait for God to the last moment, who will dare to stand amid a diminishing and dwindling army, and even see disaster imminent, but, because he has not received the marching orders of God, will stand still, until presently God sets him free.

How many religious people there are who, as they review their past life, can recall moments when they did not know what to do. An inner voice still, sweet, but commanding bade them wait and trust; but many other voices, loud and strident, summoned them to act; so that the still, small voice of faith, of resignation, of absolute obedience, was silenced, the one rash word spoken, the one irrevocable act performed, betraying the weakness of the heart, the ineffectiveness of the resolve.

When all was over, Samuel has come, and we have reproached ourselves, saying, "Oh, if I had only thought that God was so near, I would not have acted as I did; woe is me; why could not I wait?" Samuel always comes just at the last moment; but it is so hard to wait till he does come.

"Master, Master, we perish! And He arose, and rebuked the storm, and said, Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?"

God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but the spirit of power, of love, of self-discipline and self-restraint.

Man becomes so weary of waiting, and it seems as though God were so slow. God's mighty processes sweep around so wide an orbit. One day is as a thousand years, but He is coming as the morning, as the spring, as the millennium.

"His going forth is sure as the morning, and He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter rain that watereth the earth."

II. SAUL'S DISINGENUOUS PLEA

Notice Saul's explanation to Samuel. He said; **"I said to myself, the Philistines will come down upon me to Gilgal, and I have not intreated the favour of the Lord. I forced myself therefore, and offered the burnt-offering."**

That surely was insincere. He laid the blame on circumstances; he said practically:

"The circumstances of my lot forced my hand; I did not want to do it, I was most reluctant, but I could not help myself; the Philistines were coming. I tell you the sceptre was wrested from my grasp, and I had to obey the imperious voice of the misfortunes that fell thick and fast upon me."

His speech reminds us of Aaron's, who stripped the people naked before God and their enemies, and sought to excuse himself by saying, **"They gave me their earrings; I cast them into the fire, and there came out this calf."**

We are all prone to speak in the same tone.

When the rash word has been uttered, and the proud act done; when we have refused to obey, and have seen the house of our life toppling down upon us, or consuming in the flames of our folly, we have said, "Circumstances compelled me; I had to do it, and I did it; I forced myself; my hand was forced."

O soul of man, thou art greater than circumstances; greater than things; greater than the mob of evil counsellors. Thou art meant to be God's crowned and enthroned king; to rule and not to be ruled; to obey God only, and to resist all other attempts to bring thee under the yoke. Rouse thee, lest it should be said of thee also, that thy kingdom shall not continue.

III. MARK THE ALTERNATIVE TO THIS

In answer to all this, Samuel, speaking in the name of God, said; **"I have chosen a man after my own heart, who shall perform all my will."**

In Jesse's home the lad was being prepared who could believe, and not make haste. Listen to the manner in which this man after God's own heart spake in after years: **"I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, and out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock and established my goings"** (Psalm 40:1, 2).

Wait, wait thou thy Lord's leisure. Let thine heart stop its feverish beating, and thy pulse register no more its tumultuous waves of emotion!

To act now would only disappoint the highest hopes, mar the Divine purposes, and set stones rolling that shall never be stopped. Wait for God; stand still, and see his salvation. His servant is coming up the pass; his steps may not be quite so speedy as we would have them, but he will arrive to the moment not a moment too soon, but not a moment too late. God's messenger is timed to come when the heart has almost failed, the steps almost gone, and hope almost vanished. **"The Lord is at hand!"**

Oh wait, my soul, wait, wait upon God; for God cannot be behind, as He will not be before, the allotted and appointed moment.

And when He comes, there will be laughter for tears, harvest for sowing, blue skies for clouds, and long days of rapturous bliss, that shall make thee forget the shame and reproach of the past!

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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