

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NOT CEASING IN PRAYER

(I Samuel 12:16-25)

“O, who can tell how many hearts are altars to his praise,
From which the silent prayer ascends through patient nights and days!
The sacrifice is offered still in secret and alone;
O world, ye do not know them, but He can help his own.”

- A. Procter

IN all Samuel's career there is nothing finer than the closing scene of his public action as the judge and leader of the Hebrew nation. Had he died young, his place in the annals of his country, and indeed in history, would have been much lower, and our appreciation of his character much less.

Naturally he found it difficult to step down from his premiership, and inaugurate a regime with which he had no sympathy, since it seemed to be a setting aside of Israel's greatest glory in having God for King. But he suppressed his strong personal antipathies, and did his very best to start the nation on the new path it had chosen, selecting a king with the utmost care, and, regardless of personal suffering, bridging over the gulf between the old order and the new.

We cannot turn from the record of the great convocation, assembled before the Lord at Gilgal, to ratify Saul's election, without noticing the repeated allusions to Samuel's power in prayer. He appears to have been the John Knox of his age, as mighty in prayer as in statesmanship. His whole career seems to have been bathed in the spirit of supplication.

As a boy, with hands meekly clasped, as Sir Joshua Reynolds has depicted him, he asked God to speak, whilst his ear was quick and alert to catch his lowest whispers.

In the Book of the Psalms he is mentioned as chief among those that call on God's name, and as having been answered (99:6). The prophet Jeremiah alludes to the wonderful power which he exercised in intercessory prayer when he pleaded for his people (15:1). All Israel knew the long, piercing cry of the prophet of the Lord. In their perils his intercessions had been their deliverance, and in their battles his prayers had secured them victory (I Samuel 7:8; 8:6).

There was “an open road” between God and him, so that thoughts of God's thinking were able to come into his heart; and he reflected them back again with intense and burning desire.

I. SAMUEL'S PRAYER FOR THUNDER AND RAIN

The heart of man cries out for Divine authentication. In every age a crooked and perverse generation seeks a sign, and in seeking it proves how far it has wandered from the source of light, and become blinded in spiritual vision. If our nature realized its divine ideal, it would discern God in the ordinary and common incidents of providence, in the morning light and the summer air, in dews that noiselessly alight, and zephyrs that gently kiss the slumbering woods, in the garniture of spring, and the carpeting of flowers (Acts 14:17). But the eyes of the soul are blinded, and men do not see the traces of the Divine footprints across the world day by day. **"Lord,"** said the prophet, **"when thy hand is lifted up, they will not see"** (Isaiah 26:11).

In default of the faculty of detecting God's presence in the noiseless and ordinary providence of life, man asks for some startling phenomena to prove that God is speaking. "Bring," he cries to the Heaven-sent messenger, "credentials so startling and extraordinary that I may know without doubt that thou art properly accredited. The still, small voice is not enough. We must have the hurricane, the fire, and the bolt from the blue. Then we shall know that God speaks by thee, and that the word from thy lips is true."

Samuel knew this, and he perhaps longed for some Divine corroboration of his words. God's trusted servants are content to work through long years amid persistent resistance and apathy, if only they are assured that they are on the line of the Divine purpose.

"And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word"

Thus, in a supreme moment, one of the noblest of his successors appealed to God, and his words expressed what was in Samuel's heart at this great hour. He had surrendered his prerogatives, and introduced his successor; had confronted his people with their sins, and announced the heavy penalties that must follow on disobedience; now he yearned that they should hear another voice, asseverating his words, and pressing them home on conscience and on heart.

It was under the influence of these thoughts that he concluded his address and appeal with the announcement, **"Now, therefore, stand still, and see this great thing, which the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not wheat-harvest to-day? I will call unto the Lord, and He shall send thunder and rain, that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great which ye have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king."**

During the wheat-harvest, lasting from the middle of May to the middle of June, rain is almost unknown in Palestine, and the occurrence of a thunderstorm, coming as it did at the call of the aged prophet, was too startlingly unusual to be viewed as other than the Divine authentication of his claims. It may be supposed that this incident is altogether without parallel, belonging to the realms of Old Testament story; but I cannot think it to be so. Nature is much more sympathetic with man than we sometimes suppose, because her beauty or terror is but the veil beneath which the Almighty hides Himself.

How, save on the supposition that God answered the appeal of his servants, can we account for the fact of the terrific tempest that swept over our shores when the proud Armada of Spain menaced the liberties of Protestant England? And how, save on the supposition that Heaven itself protested against the blasphemous pretensions of the Papacy, can we account for the memorable fact that on the afternoon when the dogma of the Papal Infallibility was announced, the Vatican at midday was suddenly invested with a pall of blackest midnight?

But there are other methods of Divine authentication on which every true servant of God may rely.

When Paul and Barnabas abode for a long time in Iconium, speaking boldly in the Lord, “**He gave testimony unto the word of his grace**”; and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews generalizes the experience of the early heralds of the Gospel when he says that the message of God’s great salvation was confirmed by them that heard the word, “**God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will**” (Acts 14:3; Hebrews 2:3, 4).

We cannot be too thankful for the witness of the Holy Spirit, whose voice is to the faithful servant of God all, and more, than the thunder was to Samuel. It was this that armed the primitive saints with irresistible power.

“**We are his witnesses,**” cried the Apostles, “**and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey Him.**” “**Our Gospel,**” wrote the greatest Apostle of all, “**came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance**” (I Thessalonians 1:5).

May I ask if my fellow-servants realize this - that the Holy Spirit is in the Church to-day, that He is prepared to bear his witness to every true word which is spoken in the name of Jesus, and that He will convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment; so that the faith of our hearers should not stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God, God bearing them witness and giving them the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 2:1-4; Acts 15:8).

This is the fatal lack of our preaching. We speak earnestly and faithfully, but we do not sufficiently look for nor rely on the Divine Co-witness; we do not understand the communion and fellowship of the Comforter; and our hearers do not hear his voice thrilling their souls, as thunder in the natural world, with the conviction that the things which we speak are the truths of God. Only let the passionate longing of our heart be, “**Father, glorify thy name,**” and voices will come as from Heaven, saying, “**I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.**”

Whilst some that stand by may say that “**It thundered,**” others will say, “**An angel spake**” (John 12:28, 29).

Oh, our God, give us such power in prayer that when we pray Thou shalt answer “**in the secret place of thunder,**” and send thunder and rain.

II. SAMUEL'S UNCEASING INTERCESSIONS

Terrified by the loud thunder-peals and the torrents of rain, the people were urgent to secure Samuel's intercession on their behalf. They feared for their lives and their property, and entreated him to pray for them.

“Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God,” they said, **“that we die not”**; and the emphasis they laid on the word **“thy”** seemed to indicate that they felt no longer worthy of their ancient prerogative as the chosen people.

Touched with their appeal, and confident that the Lord only desired to corroborate his word, the aged seer calmed their fears, urged them never to turn aside to vain idols, which could neither profit nor deliver, assured them that the Lord would not forsake them, and ended with the striking words; **“Moreover, as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you.”**

Samuel realized that prayer was action in the spiritual plane. The energy which we exert in action in the physical sphere becomes prayer in the spiritual. It has often been said, *Laborare est orare* (To labour is to pray); but the converse is much truer, *Orare est laborare* (To pray is to labour).

“The fervent prayer of a righteous man,” says James, **“availeth much”** **“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God”** (Colossians 4:12).

Work shall be prayer, if all be wrought
As Thou wouldst have it done;
And prayer, by Thee inspired and taught,
Itself with work be one.

Samuel could no longer exert his energies for his people, as he had done. The limitations imposed by his advancing years, and by the substitution of the kingdom for his judgeship, made it impossible that he should make his yearly rounds as aforesaid; but he was able to translate all that energy into another method of helpfulness. The light became heat; the water became steam. The prayers of God's saints were equivalent, henceforward, to battalions of soldiers.

What the telescope is to the eye, the bicycle to the foot, the telephone to the voice, and the steam-driven machine to the hand, in enlarging and increasing human power, prayer is to the soul, because it links us with the mighty power of God; it touches springs that unloose spiritual forces which are eternal in their duration and universal in their scope. **“Mighty is he who is mighty in prayer; he has learned how to labour with the energies of God.”**

Why, O soul of man, wilt thou not lay thy fingers on the key-board of the eternal powers, which would respond instantly to thy touch! How great a mistake and loss it is for thee to be satisfied with the lower key-boards of the natural and intellectual, when the spiritual, the highest and furthest-reaching, awaits thee!

Samuel viewed prayer as a Divine instinct. For him to thwart the promptings towards prayer which arose within his soul would be nothing short of sin. **“God forbid,”** he said, **“that I should sin against Him in ceasing to pray.”**

Let us recognize, we may say with another, that, logic or no logic, men pray, and they want to pray. The instinct to do so seems to be part of ourselves. Probably it is not constant, and it is only the saint who remains in the spirit of prayer; but some time or other, and always when the spiritual nature stirs within us, we begin to pray. Prayer is therefore more than petition; it is the movement of the spirit God-ward. We recognize our own limitations, and attempt to reach beyond them into the infinite. Therefore, in every true prayer, there is much that cannot be put in words. **“The spirit maketh intercession with groanings that cannot be uttered.”**

To thwart this instinct, whether it prompts us to pray for ourselves, or for others, is to do violence to our noblest nature, to grieve the Holy Spirit of God, and to sin against the Divine order. Prayerlessness is not only an indication of a besotted and demoralized nature, but is in itself a sin, that requires confession and cleansing in the Blood of the Cross. And when, in answer to our lowly supplications, we are again brought nigh by the Blood of Christ, we shall find that prayer will rise as naturally and freely in our hearts as a fountain from unseen depths fed from the everlasting hills. Prayer is the response of the soul to God, the return tide from us to Him, the sending back in vapour what we receive in showers of heavenly rain.

Samuel viewed prayer as a trusteeship. He could no longer act as judge, but he felt that the interests of the nation had been entrusted to his hands for the highest ends, and it would be treachery to fail in conserving and extending them, at least by his intercessions. Often must he have gone aside, as Moses on the Mount, and as our Lord on the hills that engirdled the blue waters of Galilee, to pour out his soul in strong cryings and tears for his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh, who were Israelites, to whom pertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises. Often, like the Apostle Paul, he had great heaviness and continual sorrow in his heart. Often, when the Philistines overran the land, and oppressed the people with their tyranny, it must have seemed as though his heart would break. The failure of Saul to realize his ideal only elicited the more strenuous appeals to God to save both king and people, and the victory which we must record in our next chapter must have been due to his eager entreaties.

This is a model which we may all copy. The one question for the Church in the present day is whether she may reckon on a new manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit; and this is entirely contingent on another question, “Is it possible to bring the whole Church to her knees?” If these words are of weight with any, let me ask them to join in one persevering and Heaven-moving appeal to God that He would awake, as in the ancient days, in the generations of old, and do great things like those of which our fathers have told us.

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