

Samuel the Prophet

1 Samuel 1 - 7.

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Historically the first book of Samuel is the continuation of the book of Judges. There we have the history of a people whose course was ever downward, in spite of occasional revivals. It closes with the solemn statement that, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Israel had lost all true sense of God as their King, with the result they ceased to be a united people. They broke up into mere units acting independently of one another, each doing his own will and walking according to the sight of his eyes rather than by faith in God.

Nor is it otherwise with the people of God today. The same cause produces the same result. Failing to hold the Head in heaven, the people of God fail to maintain unity and fellowship among themselves on earth. Fellowship being lost, they drop into mere individualism in which each walks according to his own will independently of others.

In the opening chapters of the first book of Samuel (1-7) we have depicted one of the darkest periods of Israel's history. The downgrade movement of the book of Judges was continued until the condition of the nation was not only evil but desperate. Such was their iniquity that it became impossible for God to continue His outward links with Israel without sanctioning their sin or sully His glory. Thus the people enter that solemn period in their history in which God withdraws the symbol of His presence, and all outward relations with God are ended.

There is, however, another side to this dark picture; for, if we are permitted to see the utter failure of God's people in responsibility, we are also privileged to see the grace of God in sovereignty. If the story probes the depths of man's sin, it carries us also to the height of God's grace. We are thus taught, once again, that where sin abounds grace does much more abound.

As the story opens, there are not wanting ominous signs of the coming storm; as it proceeds the shadows lengthen and the darkness deepens, but amidst the increasing gloom we learn the truth of that sure word which says, "It shall come to pass, when I bring a cloud over the earth, that the bow shall be seen in the cloud."

Briefly, then, we may say that the first seven chapters of the first book of Samuel present the total failure of the people of God in responsibility, and the ultimate triumph of the grace of God in sovereignty.

This section of the book may be divided as follows: —

(1) 1 Sam. 1 to 2: 10. The sovereign grace of God working, in spite of nature's weakness and man's failure, for the fulfilment of God's settled purpose to maintain His own glory, and secure His people's blessing, under the reign of Christ as King.

(2) 1 Sam. 2: 11-36. The failure of God's people in responsibility, through the breakdown of the priest, with warnings of coming judgment.

(3) 1 Sam. 3. The climax of evil with the consequent setting aside of the priest, and establishment of the prophet.

(4) 1 Sam. 4. The governmental judgment that falls upon the people of God, whereby they come into bondage to their enemies, and the outward sign of God's presence is withdrawn.

(5) 1 Sam. 5. and 6. God acting to vindicate His holiness and maintain the majesty of His Name in a day when the people of God have ceased to be a public witness for God.

(6) 1 Sam. 7. God in sovereign grace restoring His people, and renewing His relations with them through the prophet.

1. THE PURPOSE OF GOD (1 Sam. 1-2: 10).

In this opening section of the first book of Samuel we have a very blessed anticipation of the word which speaks of "the power of God; who hath saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1: 8, 9). In the end of Hannah's song we reach the ultimate purpose of God to establish blessing under Christ as King. In the story of the birth of Samuel we see the grace of God at work to bring about His purpose, in spite of the weakness and failure of man, and hence not according to our works.

We learn, moreover, that grace foresees every crisis that arises among the people of God, and, not only overcomes the crisis, but quietly works to make provision for the crisis before it comes.

The commencement of the story presents a God-fearing Levite with two wives; one fruitful and the other barren. The barren woman mourns her condition before the Lord and is persecuted by the fruitful wife. Elkanah goes up yearly to worship and to sacrifice before the Lord at Shiloh. There we find Hophni and Phinehas, two wicked men, as we know from 1 Samuel 2: 12, officiating as priests of the Lord. Eli, the high priest, with much personal piety, comes before us as an enfeebled old man sitting by a post of the temple (verse 9) and mistaking the exercises of a godly soul for the vagaries of a drunken woman (13). Sitting where God had provided no seat would indicate a lack of spiritual energy; his mistake in regard to Hannah, a lack of spiritual discernment.

There is thus brought before us the barren wife, the persecuting woman, two worthless men as priests, and a feeble and failing old man as high priest. In such circumstances we are permitted to see the sovereign grace of God passing by the strength of nature in the fruitful woman, working through the weakness of nature in the barren woman, and abounding over the sin of man in the priests. In the son given to Hannah we see the foresight of the grace of God making provision to renew His relations with His people in the day of their coming breakdown.

The three great offices by which relationships between God and man are maintained are those of Priest, Prophet and King. THE PRIEST maintains relations with God by drawing near to God on behalf

of the people, and for this, in association with the priest, there must of necessity be the Ark of the Covenant and sacrifice — the Ark signifying the presence of Jehovah, and sacrifice the way of approach. THE PROPHET renews relations with God by appealing to the conscience and heart of the people with a message from God. When the priest fails and the people cease to draw nigh to God by means of priesthood, then God, in His sovereign grace, draws nigh to the people by the prophet. THE KING: maintains relations between the people and God by ruling and leading the people under the authority of God; When the king is established God no longer rules and leads directly, but acts through the king, and the blessing of the people depends upon the personal faithfulness of the king to God.

The first book of Samuel records the failure of the priest, the prophet, and 'he king of man's choice, making way for the sovereign grace of God to bring man into blessing by establishing His anointed Man — the Christ — as King, of whom David is a type. Thus at last it will be made manifest to the whole universe that all blessing for Israel, and the nations, will depend upon the faithfulness of Christ as King. Man will be blessed, but all the glory of the blessing will rest upon Christ. The glory of Christ is the end of the purpose of God.

Furthermore the story of Hannah not only sets forth the great principles by which God is carrying out His purposes of grace, but it gives rich moral instruction to every tried and sorrowing child of God. How striking the contrast between Hannah unable to eat, and weeping sore in bitterness of soul, as stated in verse 7, and Hannah when she "went her way and did eat and her countenance was no more sad," as recorded in verse 18. How came this difference? Was it change of circumstances or the removal of that which caused the sorrow? Not at all; the circumstances had not altered; she was still the barren woman. The secret of the change is found in the fact that she had poured out her soul before the Lord. The persecution of her adversary, the fretting of spirit, the bitterness of soul — she had poured it all out with weeping before the Lord. Having poured out her sorrow, the word came to her, "Go in peace." Her sorrow is poured out and God's peace is poured in. A striking illustration of the exhortation which bids us "Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4: 6, 7).

How often we carry our sorrows instead of pouring them out before the One who came into this world of weeping, to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. Have we a secret sorrow; have we an adversary that sore provokes (verse 6); anything or anyone that causes our spirits to fret (verse 6); anything that grieves our hearts (verse 8); anything that fills the soul with bitterness, and the eyes with tears (verse 10)? Then let us pour out our souls before the Lord and He will pour in His peace. And a glad heart will make a glad face, as we read, "Her countenance was no more sad." The heart at peace, and filled with the gladness of the Lord, is the heart that worships; thus with Hannah, we read, she "worshipped before the Lord" (verse 19).

Then having learned that the Lord is able to sustain in the circumstances, and make her a worshipper in spite of them, the mercy of the Lord alters the circumstances by granting her request. She had prayed, "O Lord of hosts . . . remember me" (11); now we read, "the Lord remembered her" (19). She obtains a son — the man-child she had asked for. The child that she receives from the Lord she gives back to the Lord. "For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him; therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord."

The gift of the child very naturally calls forth the thanksgiving of Hannah (1 Sam. 2: 1-10). Hannah had poured out her soul in prayer for a son, and now that her request is granted she does not forget to pour out her heart in praise, for thus she commences this second prayer, "My heart rejoiceth in

the Lord" (1).

Recognizing that all blessing depends on God, she rightly begins by celebrating His glories. God is holy — "There is none holy as the Lord." God is omnipotent — "There is none beside Thee." God is eternal — "Neither is there any rock like our God." God is omniscient — "The Lord is a God of knowledge" (2, 3).

Then she celebrates the sovereign grace of God that picks up, for blessing, the weak, the needy, and the unfruitful. Those who have "stumbled," and are "hungry," and "barren." God passes by the wise, the mighty, and the noble, and takes up the base, and the despised of the world, that no flesh should glory in His presence (4, 5).

Moreover, God has His own way of dealing with us to make us conscious of our need. He rolls in death upon the soul in order to make alive. He brings us nigh to the grave that we may learn our utter weakness. He strips us of all that wherein we trust, thus making us poor to make us rich. He brings us low in our thoughts of self, in order to lift us up (6, 7).

Having shown us our nothingness' He unfolds to us His fulness — the purpose of His heart. Not only does He meet our need but He changes our condition — the beggar becomes a prince. Further He gives us a new position suited to the new condition. From "the dust" and "the dunghill" we pass to "the throne of glory." In all these blessed ways He acts as sovereign. The One to whom the pillars of the earth belong, and who has set the world upon them, can set a poor and needy soul among princes on a throne of glory (8).

Moreover, not only is there a glorious inheritance before the people of God, but they are kept by the power of God for the inheritance. "He will keep the feet of His saints." In their own power they cannot stand against "the wicked" and "the adversaries of the Lord," for "by strength shall no man prevail." In the Lord's safe keeping they need not fear, for He will silence the wicked and brake in pieces His adversaries (9, 10; cf. 1 Peter 1: 3-5).

Finally the prayer of Hannah discloses to us the ultimate purpose of God to establish Christ as King and glorify His Anointed. Thus in the revealed purpose of God we are carried on to a glorious time when the people of God will be blest, every enemy destroyed, and the ends of the earth brought under the beneficent sway of Christ as King.

From the closing verse of the book of Judges we learn there was no king in Israel. Now, through the revelation made to a woman, we learn the settled purpose of God's heart to establish His King, and in sovereign grace to call the weak and needy to share the throne of glory with His King.

In the wisdom and perfection of God's ways, this glorious revelation precedes the darkest period in Israel's history. Thus we are assured, ere ever the storm bursts, that in the end grace will triumph, for God is sovereign. The storm may come, but truly the bow is in the cloud. Our way may lie through a dark valley, but our faith is sustained by a glimpse of the sunlight that shines on the hills beyond.

2. The Failure of the Priest (1 Sam. 2: 11-36)

The song of Hannah assures us of the ultimate triumph of grace Under the reign of Christ. In the light of this assurance we are prepared to face the complete breakdown of man in responsibility.

The evil condition of the professing people of God under the priesthood of Eli is manifested by three fearful evils. The priesthood was defiled (12); the offering of the Lord was despised (17); and the tabernacle was desecrated (22). We have already learned from 1 Samuel 1: 3, that the sons of Eli were

priests of the Lord, now we are told that they "were sons of Belial," and that "they knew not the Lord." The very men whose office was to represent the people before the Lord, were themselves ignorant of the Lord and using their position to enrich themselves at the expense of the people (12-16) The greatness of their sin before the Lord is seen in that their conduct led to the offering of the Lord being despised by the people. They became instruments for the corruption of the professing people of God (17). Finally through their evil conduct the house of God, at Shiloh, became the scene of wickedness that shocks the natural conscience (22).

Alas! is not this an exact picture of what is taking place in Christendom in our day? This condition has, indeed, been found in Christendom throughout the centuries though becoming more painfully evident in these last days when many, who publicly avow they are priests of the Lord, are strangers to the Lord. Like Hophni and Phineas of old, such use religion to serve themselves and their own ends, at the expense of the people of God. Through such the atoning sacrifice of Christ is being despised, and wickedness and worldliness of such a gross character are being introduced into that which professes to be the house of God, that the natural mind is shocked and turns with righteous disgust from that which is a mere travesty of religion. Thus leaders of Christian profession, like the priests of old, become the main instruments of corruption and apostasy.

Such was the terrible condition of Israel; and yet, as we see the storm gathering, we are again reminded of God's own words, "*When I bring a cloud over the earth . . . the bow shall be seen in the cloud.*" In the midst of the gathering gloom the Spirit of God again and again sustains faith by giving us the vision of the bow. Thus we read, "the child did minister unto the Lord" (11). Then the sky darkens as we have the awful disclosures concerning the sin of the priests (12-17); but again we catch sight of the bow, for we read, "But Samuel ministered before the Lord, being a child . . . and the child Samuel grew before the Lord" (18-21). Nevertheless the darkness grows yet deeper as we read of the desecration of the house of God (22-25); but once again the bow is seen in its beauty, for we read, "The child Samuel grew on, and was in favour with the Lord, and also with men" (26).

Does this not assure our hearts that, however dark the day, God will maintain a testimony for Himself, and sustain the faith of His true people? Moreover the constant mention of "the child" would indicate the way God takes to maintain His testimony in a day of ruin. He passes by the self-accredited religious officials and takes up "the child" to be a witness to Himself.

Thus when the priests break down in Eli's day the child comes into prominence, and always in association with the Lord, "The child did minister *unto the Lord*"; "Samuel ministered *before the Lord*, being a child"; "the child Samuel grew *before the Lord*"; "The child Samuel . . . was in favour, . . . *with the Lord*"; "the child ministered *unto the Lord*" (1 Sam. 2: 12, 18, 21, 26; 1 Sam. 3: 1)

{*It appears to be an unvarying principle of the ways of God, again and again illustrated in Scripture, that in a day of ruin God passes by those who assume to be His official representatives and uses, as witnesses for Himself, those who are little and of no account in the eyes of the world.

Again, at a later day, amidst the desolations of Israel Isaiah could say, "Behold I and THE CHILDREN whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and wonders in Israel from the Lord of Hosts" (Isa. 8: 18). Seven centuries later, when the nation was "in darkness and in the shadow of death," and God visited His people to tell them of the coming King, it was through THE CHILD of She barren woman — a child that was called the prophet of the Highest" — that this witness came.

Again, a little later, when at last the "Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" came into the midst of the guilty nation, it was in the lowliness of a child that He entered the world for, said the angel, "this shall be a sign unto you, Ye shall find THE BABE wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger,"

and the godly could say, "Unto us A CHILD is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Luke 2: 11, 12; Isa. 9: 6).

Thus, too, in that yet darker day in Israel's history, when the Lord, a despised and rejected Man, stood in the midst of a corrupt nation fast hastening to apostasy, He could say, "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them UNTO BABES" (Matt. 11: 25).

Furthermore, in the day of Christ's exaltation, those who maintained a bright witness for the Lord in the presence of the religious officials of corrupt Judaism, were "unlearned and ignorant" fishermen — those whom the world would esteem as children of no account (Acts 4: 13).

Nor is it otherwise in the midst of corrupt Christendom, for, in the midst of the ruin of the church, those who are marked out for the Lord's special approval, like the little child, have but "a little strength" (Rev. 3: 8). }

Thus we have God's disclosure of the terrible condition of Israel — a solemn forecast of the condition of Christendom — and the gracious way God maintains a testimony for Himself in the day of ruin.

Moreover we see a further great and encouraging principle of the ways of God, that at the very moment when the people of God are entering upon evil times, through their own folly, God in secret is preparing a vessel for their ultimate deliverance. As one has said, "In all the seasons of man's destruction of himself, there has been another thing going on in the plans of the blessed God.... While his brethren are filling up their sins and sorrows in Canaan, Joseph, unknown to them, is growing up in Egypt for their help. While Israel is in the heat of the furnace, Moses is preparing to be their deliverer in the distant solitudes of Midian.... When the priesthood was defiled, and the glory gone into the enemy's land, Samuel the child is brought forth to raise the stone of help.... When Saul and the kingdom are bringing ruin on themselves, David, 'the secret of God,' is under preparation to set the throne in honour, and the kingdom 'in order and strength.'"

A further truth comes before us in the closing verses of the chapter — that God will not allow the evil condition of His professing people to go unjudged though, as ever, He warns before He judges. Thus a man of God is sent with a solemn testimony, and warning, to the aged Eli. He is first reminded of the high privileges of his office. He was chosen, says the Lord, to be "My priest to offer upon Mine altar . . before Me." His offence is then plainly stated. "Wherefore," says the Lord, "do ye trample upon My sacrifice and upon Mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honourest thy sons above Me" (N. Tr.). Actually the sons were the guilty persons, but, inasmuch as Eli took no action against them, he is charged with their offence. It is true he had raised protest, but the evil was of such a character that to protest and yet continue with those against whom the protest was made was to sanction their evil. The secret motive that governed Eli is disclosed in the words, thou "honourest thy sons above Me." The relationships of nature, and the friendships of life, were set above the claims of the Lord. He was chosen to walk before the Lord, but having honoured his sons above the Lord, he has to hear the solemn word, "Them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed."

Has not the solemn failure of this pious old man a warning voice for God's people in all ages? In very different circumstances, and in varying degrees we can easily slip into the snare of honouring our brethren, our friends, our kindred, above the Lord. Again and again has the truth of the Lord's words been proved, "Them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed."

If God in His grace has chosen us to walk before Him, we shall only be kept in safety as we act upon the word of the Psalmist, "I have set the Lord always before me" (cf. 1 Sam. 2: 30, and Ps. 16: 8).

Having been reminded of his privileges, and charged with his offence, Eli has to hear of the judgment that is about to fall. Eli had sinned through his family, and upon his family the judgment would come. The increase of his house would die in the flower of their age; Hophni and Phinehas would meet their death in one day. Every one left of his house would be thrust out of the priest's office to beg their bread. The after history gives the solemn fulfilment of these predictions. Hophni and Phinehas are slain in the conflict with the Philistines (1 Sam. 4: 11); sixty years later the increase of Eli's house was cut off by King Saul (1 Sam. 22: 18); and one hundred years after the prediction the last of Eli's house was thrust out from being priest by King Solomon (1 Kings 2: 27).

Moreover the failure of the priest becomes the occasion for indicating the great change about to take place in the ways of God. Because of the unfaithfulness of Eli, his house would be cut off, and a faithful priest would be raised up that would act according to the heart and mind of God. His house would be established; nevertheless henceforward the priest would no longer occupy the first place before the Lord, but would walk before the Lord's anointed. Already we have learned from Hannah's song that the Anointed is the King. The high priest is thus set aside, as the immediate link between the Lord and His people. He falls into a secondary place, there being another anointed greater than he. Thus through the failure of the priest the way is being prepared to fulfil God's purpose to establish Christ as King with a faithful priest walking before Him for ever.

We may note that in a day of official failure God uses a woman to declare His purpose; a child to bear testimony to Himself, and a nameless man of God to warn of coming judgment, and tell of final blessing.

3. The Establishment of the Prophet.

The nameless man of God, having rendered his testimony, and pronounced the doom of Eli's house, passes from the narrative. Henceforth the Lord will speak more directly through Samuel who is "established to be a prophet of the Lord" (20).

The opening verses of 1 Samuel 3 indicate the low condition of the people of God. Ignorance of the mind of the Lord prevailed, for the word of the Lord was rare; the eyes of the priest were dim, and the lamp of God was going out (1-3)

Solemn indeed for the people of God as a whole, or for any company of His people, when there is little ministry from the Lord to feed their souls; when they themselves lack spiritual discernment, and when the testimony to God amongst them is dying out. Such was the condition of Israel in the days of Eli. However, God is not unmindful of His people whatever their condition. Hence we find the Lord begins to act from Himself in sovereign grace, "to give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death." We might have thought that, in such a low condition, the people — or the priest on behalf of the people — would have called upon the Lord. It was the Lord, however, who "called Samuel" (4-10).

This is deeply significant, for in the end of the chapter we read "that Samuel was established to be a *prophet* of the Lord." This emphasized the difference between the priest and the prophet. This office of the priest is to draw near to the Lord on behalf of the people, and thus maintain relations with the Lord. The prophet is one through whom the Lord draws near to the people when relations with the Lord have broken down through the failure of the people. For this reason the prophet comes to the front in a day of ruin.

It is also significant to notice the character of the one that the Lord uses for the prophetic office. He is one who had been devoted to the Lord as a Nazarite (1 Sam. 1: 11), and who, again and again, is spoken of as the child. He is separate from the evil against which he testifies, devoted to the interests of the Lord, and, like a child, conscious of his own weakness and lack of wisdom. Thus he is dependent upon the Lord and drawing all his resources from the Lord. Such is the one the Lord uses to reach the consciences of His people.

His call becomes the occasion of emphasizing the lack of spiritual discernment on the part of the priest, for not until the Lord had spoken for the third time does Eli discern the voice of the Lord.

The first message of the Lord (10-14) to Samuel is of intense solemnity. Already Eli had heard the sentence passed upon his house. Now Samuel is prepared for his prophetic office by being definitely told of the judgment coming upon the priest, and the reason of that judgment. All Israel is to be concerned in the judgment that comes upon the priestly family, for what the Lord was about to do will take place "in Israel," and make both the ears of everyone that heareth it tingle. The Lord Himself is about to act. He says, "In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house; when I begin I will also make an end."

Moreover we are explicitly told the reason that leads to the Lord's direct dealings with His people. It is solely because they themselves refuse to deal with existing evils. Very evil things had been done amongst the people of God: yet the evil in itself did not call forth the governmental dealing of God. No amount of evil would call forth God's government if the evil is dealt with and judged by the people of God. The Lord intervenes in judgment because the evil was known and not dealt with.

Solemn indeed is the condition of the people of God, if evil arises in their midst, whether against the person of Christ, or disobedience to the principles of God's house, or lapses from the path of moral rectitude, and the evil is known and not restrained.

It may indeed be truly said that Eli did raise some protest; that he judged the course of his sons to be evil; but evidently he took no steps to restrain them. So to-day people may indeed protest that they do not agree with erroneous doctrines, that they regret the course some are taking; but what avail is such feeble protest if no steps are taken to restrain the evil and those who protest associate, as if all were well, with the wrong-doers?

Samuel exhibits a natural and proper shrinking from imparting this solemn word to the aged Eli, and at the same time faithfulness to the Lord in telling "every whit" of the Lord's message. It is ever right for the younger to show respect to the elder, but neither youth nor age are to stand in the way of faithfulness to the Lord (15-18).

Having answered to the call of the Lord, and faithfully delivered his first message, we learn "the Lord was with him." The solemn word concerning the priest was, "I will perform *against Eli* all things which I have spoken" (12). The Lord was against the priest, He was with the prophet. The Lord being with him none of his words were allowed to "fall to the ground." Inasmuch as his words did not fall to the ground it is made manifest from Dan to Beer-sheba that he is "established to be a prophet of the Lord." To him the Lord appeared, and to him the Lord revealed Himself by the word of the Lord.

4. The Judgment of the People.

In 1 Samuel 4 we have the solemn record of the complete failure and ruin of God's people. Israel is smitten before the Philistines, the ark is taken, the priests are slain, and the high priest is removed by death. Thus every outward link with God is broken.

The nation enters upon a period of bondage to their enemies which lasts for twenty years (1 Samuel 7: 2). During this period it is significant that the name of Samuel is not once mentioned. For twenty years the people neglect the man the Lord is with.

The Spirit of God has given us His commentary on this solemn time in Ps. 78: 56-64. From this passage we learn that the secret of their low condition, and consequent defeat at the hands of their enemies, is found in their disobedience and idolatry. They "kept not His testimonies." "They provoked Him to anger with their high places, and moved Him to jealousy with their graven images." Then follows the solemn statement, "When God heard this, He was wrath and greatly abhorred Israel." From 1 Samuel 2: 17 we learn that "man abhorred the offering of the Lord"; now we learn that the Lord abhorred idolatrous Israel.

The low condition of the people of God becomes the occasion for their enemies to acquire power over them. The particular enemy at this juncture was the Philistine within the land. The people of Israel were indeed surrounded by enemies without — the Egyptians, Syrians and others; but they also had enemies within their borders, and of these the most inveterate were the Philistines. It is the enemy within the circle of God's people that will ever be to the front when the people of God are in a low condition. Opposition from without may be the result of a bright testimony; but in every age corruption from within has always been the result of a low spiritual condition.

Degraded by idolatry, and without reference to the Lord, or the man the Lord is with, Israel attempts, in their own strength, to join battle with their enemies, only to suffer a serious defeat (1, 2). Following upon their defeat they hold a council to enquire "Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us to-day before the Philistines?" The elders, who should have known the mind of the Lord, reveal their low spiritual condition by the counsel they give. They say, "Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies." They could have said much in favour of this counsel. They could appeal to their history and plead that precedent was on their side. Did not the ark lead them to victory in the days of Joshua when the city of Jericho fell before Israel? One thing, however, they forgot, and it was their undoing; they overlooked the majesty and holiness of God that will not, and cannot, brook iniquity in His enemies, still less among His people. It is true that in the day of Joshua the ark had led them to victory, but not without the leading of the Captain of the Lord's host. Moreover the capture of Jericho was preceded by circumcision at Gilgal. The people who used the ark in Joshua's day were a people in whom the flesh was judged, and who were under the leadership of the Captain of the Lord's host. When the condition of God's people is right the ark of the Lord, speaking of the presence of the Lord, must be a centre of blessing for His people. To invoke the presence of the Lord without the judgment of their condition is to call down the governmental judgment of the Lord.

In any age the opposition that arises from corrupting influences working within the circle of God's people can only be met by first dealing with the low condition amongst the people of God that has given occasion for the existence of the opposition.

Following the advice of their leaders, and without any judgment of their condition, the people send to Shiloh, and bring thence the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts. We are solemnly reminded that the Lord "dwelleth between the cherubims," and then that "Hophni and Phinehas were there with the ark." The Lord of hosts is there and the sons of Belial are there (1 Sam. 2: 12), a sure presage of coming judgment, for "what concord hath Christ with Belial?" (2 Cor. 6: 15). The people of God may show themselves indifferent to the glory of Christ and the holiness due to His name, but God will be no party to man's indifference. He cannot deny Himself. He will ever vindicate His own glory

even though it involves defeat and disgrace for His people.

The ark is brought into the camp and received "with a great shout, so that the earth rang again." The great shout has a triumphant sound and the appearance of power, but in reality only manifests their lack of faith on the one hand, and their carnal confidence on the other. Faith moves quietly and moral power makes no noise.

However, nature is easily moved by a great shout, and thus the Philistines, when they "heard the noise of the shout," and understood that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, "were afraid." Their fear was rightly based upon a sense of the true significance of the ark for they said, "God is come into the camp." Such was the terrible effect upon the people of God of having allowed unholiness to be linked with the ark of God, and so hardened were they by sin, that they had become less sensitive to the presence of God than their enemies. They had said of the ark, "When it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies" (3). When the ark did come into their midst, their enemies rightly said, "God is come" (7).

Under such circumstances the fear of the Philistines is as vain as the shout of Israel. The Philistine need have no fear of the ark when polluted Israel brings it into camp, as a sanction for their iniquity. The condition of Israel was such that God could not defend them, and, in such circumstances, to fall back on the symbol of His presence was to call down judgment upon themselves. So it came to pass; the people of God are slain, the ark passes into the hands of the enemy and the two sons of Eli are killed. "He delivered His strength into captivity, and His glory into the enemies' hands. He gave His people over also unto the sword; and was wroth with His inheritance."

The last touching scene in the chapter makes manifest the personal piety of Eli, in spite of his failure to deal with the evil in his sons; and also shows that God had a godly remnant in Israel, represented by the wife of Phinehas, who set the glory of God above the claims of nature.

Israel was in combat with the enemy, Hophni and Phinehas are in the battle; nevertheless the heart of Eli trembled for the ark of God (13). His first thought was the ark. When the news of Israel's defeat reaches the aged priest, he hears in silence of the great slaughter among the people, and of the death of his two sons, but at the mention of the taking of the ark of God he fell back a stricken man.

So with the wife of Phinehas; her first thought was not for her husband, herself, or her child, but for the glory of God. They seek to arouse the dying woman by speaking of the son that is born, "But she did not answer, neither did she take it to heart" (N. Tr.). She is fully aware that a son has been born, for she gives the child a name, but the name shows that her thoughts centre in the ark of God. Her last words are, "The glory is departed from Israel: for the ark of God is taken."

5. The Maintenance of God's Glory (1 Sam. 5 and 6).

The section of the Book of Samuel covered by chapters 5 and 6 deals with the solemn period of Israel's history during which all outward links with God are broken. We are permitted to see that in this sad time God Himself maintains the majesty of His great name.

The people of God had entirely failed to maintain the honour of God; nay, worse, they had attempted to identify the symbol of God's presence with their own sinful condition, and hence God, acting in judgment, had withdrawn His presence from their midst. In these circumstances, while the godly may well be humbled because of the unfaithfulness of God's people, they need not fear for the honour of God. Quite apart from His people, God is able to vindicate His holiness and maintain His majesty.

The Philistines had trembled when they heard that the ark had come into the camp of Israel. Now that the ark has been delivered into their hands, with bold daring they place it in the house of their idol, as if to celebrate its capture as a victory for their god Dagon over the God of Israel. Their former trembling was as needless as their present daring is misplaced.

God has shown, by the withdrawal of His presence, that He will not sanction the guilt of His people. Now He will make manifest that He will not suffer the eclipse of His glory by His enemies. The enemies of God's people have to learn that if, in His governmental ways, He may permit a triumph over His people, yet He Himself will suffer no defeat.

The ark of God having been placed in the house of Dagon, it becomes no longer a question between the Philistines and Israel, but an issue between Dagon and the God of Israel. There can be but one end to this contest. Dagon is flung to the earth before the ark. To prove this is no mere coincidence, Dagon is set in his place again only to make more manifest the majesty of God and the futility of an idol. Dagon not only falls to the ground but is broken to pieces, so that henceforth the house of Dagon becomes a place of reproach amongst men.

Nor is this the only means whereby God maintains His majesty. He has poured contempt on the idol; He will now deal in judgment with the idolaters. "The hand of the Lord was heavy upon them of Ashdod." Many are destroyed and others are smitten with disease. In their distress the Philistines of Ashdod seek the counsel of their lords, who advise them to send the ark to Gath.

The city of Gath was famous as the dwelling place of the last of the Anakims — a race of giants (Joshua 11: 21, 22; 1 Sam. 17: 4). However, the might of man proves to be of no avail against the power of God, for we read, "The hand of the Lord was against the city with a very great destruction: and He smote the men of the city, both small and great" (1 Sam. 5: 9).

Finally the ark is sent to Ekron, the seat of their idol Baalzebub — a god that was credited with the power to heal diseases — in the hope, it may be, that their god can bring relief from the scourge. Vain hope, for here again God's judgment falls with increased severity, for we read, "There was a deadly destruction throughout all the city: the hand of God was very heavy there." Thus God maintains His glory and manifests the impotency of demons to relieve men of chastisements.

How solemn the divine commentary of Psalm 78 on the events of this chapter. Having said of Israel, "Their priests fell by the sword; and their widows made no lamentation," the Psalmist states, "Then the Lord awakened as one out of sleep, and like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine. And he smote His enemies in the hinder parts: He put them to perpetual reproach." If man, in his folly, seeks to identify the glory of God with idols, God will maintain His glory by judgment. Nevertheless, in judgment God remembers mercy, God is the Creator, and though His creatures may be sunk in darkness and idolatry, yet when they cry to Him in their distress, their cry will reach "up to heaven." Yet how often man takes occasion, by the providential character of God's dealings in judgment, to harden his heart against God. It was thus with the Philistines. Seven months are allowed to pass until, compelled by their desperate straits, they seek for some deliverance. Not only are the people smitten with disease but their land is marred with a plague of mice.

They turn for advice to their diviners, for which the Philistines were famed (Isa. 2: 6). The diviners, apparently, discern that in these judgments Jehovah is maintaining His own glory, and they counsel the Philistines to give glory to the God of Israel; to return the ark to Israel accompanied by a trespass offering. Moreover, they suggest that the ark should be returned in a way that would clearly demonstrate that what had happened was from the hand of God, and no mere coincidence.

Accordingly the ark is placed upon a new cart drawn by two milch kine, their calves being taken from them. Contrary to nature the kine leave their calves and, without any promptings from man, take the ark to Beth-shemesh, lowing as they go, thus giving proof that they acted by some power above the instincts of nature. Thus God stoops to meet these heathen in their distress, and at the same time vindicates His glory in the sight of His enemies. God makes manifest that the victory of the Philistines over transgressing Israel was no victory over Him. Their trespass offering, however ignorantly made, is a recognition that the capture of the ark has only brought judgment from a God whom they now seek to propitiate.

The scene now changes, and the ark is once again found amongst the people of God at Beth-shemesh. They receive it with joy and offer sacrifices unto the Lord. It appears, however, to be the carnal joy of hearts unbroken by a sense of sin. They were glad to have the ark back, in anticipation of the blessing that they rightly associated with it, but, apparently, there is no sense of their sin which had involved the loss of the ark. They had yet to learn the glory due to God and the humbleness that becomes those whose condition was so low.

The levity of their hearts is made manifest by some of their number looking into the ark of the Lord. In a moment the Lord resents this wickedness, and maintains His glory by a judgment that smites seventy of their number. The men of Beth-shemesh immediately say, "Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?" With great certainty we can answer, No one of all Adam's sinful race can stand before the holy Lord God, apart from the blood of Christ. To look into the ark these men, of necessity, had to remove the mercy seat, on which was the sprinkled blood. At once they stood as naked sinners before a holy God. Judgment must be the result. From Genesis to Revelation — from the moment the Lord God clothed our fallen parents with coats of skin ere they were driven out of Paradise, to that last great passage in Revelation that declares that only those who have washed their robes have right to the tree of life, and can enter in through the gates of the city — the Book teaches one great lesson, that without the shedding of blood there is no remission.

Alas! the modernists of our day are once again, like the men of Beth-shemesh, with daring effrontery, trampling under foot the blood of Christ, and attempting to stand before the holy Lord God on the ground of their own works and apart from the work of Christ. Corrupt Christendom has gone in the way of Cain, and to such God says, "Woe unto them."

6. The Restoration of the People (1 Sam. 7).

The seventh chapter presents the Lord in sovereign grace re-establishing relations with His people through Samuel the prophet; and the people drawing near to the Lord through Samuel as priest.

Before, however, the Lord renews His relations with His people they have to learn by bitter experience their need of the Lord. In the past they valued His presence so lightly that they turned aside to idols. His presence being withdrawn they begin to realize that without the Lord there can be no deliverance from their enemies. For twenty years they have been in bondage to an enemy within their borders. At length the time comes when "All the house of Israel lamented after the Lord."

A sense of need having been awakened, the Lord, who had not been indifferent to the cry of the heathen (1 Sam. 7: 2), at once answers to the lamentation of His people. Samuel, of whom there has been no mention for a period of twenty years, again comes upon the scene. The Lord was thus drawing nigh to the people through the prophet. Samuel's last utterance had warned the people of coming disaster, and "what Samuel had said happened to all Israel" (1 Sam. 4: 1). Then for twenty years no

word comes from the Lord through the prophet. Faith can wait the Lord's time. At length that time has come: there is a movement of God among the people awakening a sense of need, and again Samuel speaks "unto all the house of Israel." It is significant that it is not the people who appeal to Samuel; it is Samuel — the man that the Lord is with — who draws nigh to the people. This emphasizes the fact that all true restoration is dependent upon the sovereign grace of the Lord. Restoration, whether for the individual or the people of God as a whole, commences with the Lord. Only the Lord can restore His wandering people.

In this fresh message to the people Samuel clearly shows that, in turning to the Lord, all depends upon the way in which they take this great step. He says, as it were, "If you are to be restored to blessing, 'return unto the Lord *with all your hearts.*'" A half-hearted return will not avail. It is useless for the people of God to turn to the Lord with a partial condemnation of themselves accompanied by excuses. If we turn to the Lord there can be no compromise as to our sin and failure. If, however, the people return unto the Lord with all their hearts, three things will mark them: —

First, *Separation*. There must be separation from the evil that led to their departure from the Lord. Idolatry must be judged and "*put away.*" This is more than a protest against evil; it involves dealing with the evil. We are often willing to protest against evil, while shrinking from dealing with it. We may plead the difficulty of dealing with it; we may fear the result of dealing with it; we shrink from any odium that may attach to dealing with it; and thus, under one plea and another, shirk our plain responsibility. Nevertheless, the Word plainly declares it must be "put away."

Second, *Preparation*. It is not enough to separate from evil. Separation from evil must be accompanied with preparation of heart. The Word through Samuel is, "Prepare your hearts unto the Lord." The preparation of the heart implies a moral condition brought about by self-judgment, producing a lowly and contrite spirit — the true accompaniment of separation from evil. Without such preparation of the heart, separation would only minister to the pride of the flesh. On the other hand, to aim at preparation of the heart without separation from evil will lead finally to indifference to the evil.

Third, *Devotedness*. The true end of separation from evil, and preparation of heart, is devoted service to the Lord. It is that we may "serve Him only" (verse 3). Thus it is in our own day; for the separation from vessels to dishonour, enjoined upon us in 2 Timothy 2: 21, is, as the same passage tells us, in order that we may be "meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work." Particular circumstances may change with the changing years, but the great principles of God remain the same through all time. Thus it is still true in our day that "separation" and "preparation" are in view of the Master's service.

If, then, there is this true-hearted return, it will be marked by separation, preparation, and devotedness. And where there is a movement among God's people having these marks we may look for the Lord's deliverance of His people out of the hands of their enemies. If, says Samuel, "Ye do return unto the Lord," and "put away the strange gods," "and prepare your hearts," and "serve Him only," "He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines."

The result of this appeal shows that God was evidently working with His people, for they not only listen to Samuel but they obey his words. They first clear themselves from their evil associations (verse 4). They do not content themselves with protesting against evil, but they deal with the evil. They "put away" Baalim and Ashtaroth. Without this first step all else would have been in vain. God's order is, "Cease to do evil" before learning to do well.

Having taken this first step, Samuel again speaks in order to lead them on to the second step — the preparation of heart. He urges them to gather all Israel to Mizpeh and, says he, "I will pray for you

unto the Lord." The place at which they are to gather is significant for the meaning of Mizpeh is "watch-tower." It suggests that through lack of watchfulness the enemy had gained a footing amongst the people of God and brought them into bondage. Nor has it been otherwise in the church of God. The apostle warned the early church that "grievous wolves" would enter in, not sparing the flock, and that men would arise within the Christian circle speaking perverse things. In view of this two-fold danger, he says, "therefore *watch*" (Acts 20: 19-31). The leaders in the church, like the leaders in Israel of old, should have kept upon the watch-tower. Alas! both failed to watch. Instead of watching men slept, and the enemy took occasion to do his work.

In any revival it is of the first necessity to get back to the place of departure. We must get back to the watch-tower. Thus we find with Israel, "they gathered together to Mizpeh." Being gathered in the right place, they own their utter weakness and helplessness, and they confess their sin. They "drew water, and poured it out before the Lord." There could be no greater expression of weakness than water poured out. Not all the wisdom and power of man combined could gather up water spilt upon the ground (2 Sam. 14: 14). This action was a true confession of their condition before the Lord. By their own folly they were utterly weak and helpless to deliver themselves from their enemies. Further, they own that their weakness was the result of their own sin. They said, "We have sinned against the Lord."

Having separated themselves from evil and prepared their hearts, the Lord intervenes for their deliverance. They have cleared themselves from evil, they have mounted the watch-tower, they have owned their utter helplessness, they have confessed their sin. Having thus taken their true place "before the Lord," they are in a position and condition in which the Lord delights to act for His people.

Having heard that the children of Israel are "gathered together at Mizpeh," the opposition of the Philistines is at once aroused. Nothing will so stir the enmity of the devil as the sight of the people of God on their watch against the enemy, and in prayer and confession before the Lord.

Having learnt something of their own weakness, the children of Israel are rightly "afraid of the Philistines" (verse 7). In their last encounter with the Philistines, twenty years before, Israel, away from God in the confidence of the flesh, took the offensive and "went out against the Philistines to battle" (1 Sam. 4: 1). Now that Israel is restored to the Lord, we read, "The Philistines went up against Israel." On the former occasion Israel, with confidence in themselves, "shouted with a great shout" and "the Philistines were afraid" (1 Sam. 4: 5, 7). Now Israel, distrustful of themselves, are "afraid," and the fleshly confidence is with the lords of the Philistines. In the day of their self-confidence they had neglected Samuel, the man that God was with. In the day of their felt weakness they gladly turn to Samuel and say, "Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, that He will save us out of the hand of the Philistines" (verse 8). They recognize that the man through whom the Lord had approached His people is the one through whom the people can approach the Lord. They own that Jehovah is their God, and that He alone can save them from their enemies. No longer do they trust in the ark of God, but rather in the God of the ark of the covenant.

At once Samuel responds to their cry. The one through whom God had re-established relations with His people as prophet, now turns to God on behalf of the people as priest. Having the mind of God he takes a "lamb, and offered it for a burnt offering wholly unto the Lord." He approaches God on the ground of sacrifice. Separation from evil, preparation of heart, repentance, however deep, confession of sin, however real, though necessary and right, do not form the righteous ground upon which God can bless His people. The solid and unchanging ground of all God's actings in grace must ever be Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. Samuel's "sucking lamb" speaks of an innocent victim; the "burnt offering wholly unto the Lord" speaks of the sacrifice which meets the glory of God. On the ground of

the burnt offering "Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel," and on the ground of sacrifice "the Lord heard him."

Here, then, we have a people humbled, broken-hearted, trembling before their enemies, pleading the sacrifice, and crying to God. With such God has no controversy, and for such God can act. It is no longer a question between Israel and the Philistines, the issue is between Jehovah and the Philistines. Thus we read, "As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel." Samuel's sacrifice was followed by Samuel's cry to the Lord, but God's intervention was on the ground of sacrifice, and commenced during the sacrifice, and before the cry. The cry was right, and we are told the cry was heard, nevertheless the ground of intervention was the sacrifice. God delights to honour Christ. What will not God do in blessing His people for Christ's sake? "He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things."

The Lord has intervened for His people in delivering them from their enemies, and Samuel, who had prayed to the Lord in their distress, does not forget to praise the Lord in their deliverance. He raises a stone and calls it Ebenezer, saying, "Hitherto has the Lord helped us." This was in reality an act of praise — an acknowledgment of the goodness of the Lord.

The Philistines were subdued, and the ground that had been lost to them was recovered. All the days of Samuel the hand of the Lord was against the Philistines. The Lord had re-established relations with Israel, and now through one man the enemy is kept at bay during that man's life. How often, since the days of Samuel, has God used one man to stand in the breach and hold back the enemies of God's people (verses 13, 14).

The chapter closes with an account of the circuit that Samuel took from year to year. If we seize its spiritual significance we must admit that it will be good for us all to take this circuit.

First, Samuel went to Bethel, meaning the house of God. Here it was that God revealed Himself in sovereign grace to Jacob, the wanderer. There God revealed His settled purpose to bless Jacob; and there God promises that, in all Jacob's wanderings, he will be kept and brought back to the place of blessing. God will be true to His own word, as He says to Jacob, "I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of." Well for us to visit Bethel, and remind ourselves of the sovereign grace that has secured our ultimate blessing, according to God's faithfulness to His own Word. (Gen. 28: 16-22)

Second, Samuel went from Bethel to Gilgal. This we know was the place of circumcision. It means "rolling away," for at Gilgal, when circumcised, the reproach of Egypt was rolled away from Israel. If at Bethel we have learnt what God is for us in sovereign grace, and according to His own faithfulness, at Gilgal we recognize that God cannot sanction the flesh in His people. Accepting God's judgment upon the flesh, the reproach of Egypt would be rolled away (Joshua 5: 2, 9).

Third, from Gilgal Samuel journeyed to Mizpeh. If Gilgal speaks of the judgment of the flesh within, Mizpeh indicates the need for watchfulness against the enemy without for the meaning of the word is watch-tower.

Lastly, Samuel's return was to Ramah. The meaning of this name is "height." The man of God lives above this world on the heights. For the Christian, his blessings are spiritual, in heavenly places. The home of his affections is above. Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpeh, are but stages on the road to the heights at Ramah. The sure purpose of God, the judgment of the flesh, and watchfulness against the

enemy, will prepare us for heavenly ground.

Samuel may visit Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpeh, but of Ramah we read, "*There* was his house; and *there* he judged Israel; and *there* he built an altar unto the Lord." Good, too, if we, having made this circuit, return to the height of our calling. If we accept our portion as a heavenly people, outside this present evil world, and in spirit and affection in another world, then, indeed, we shall find our dwelling *there*; and *there* from the top of the rocks we shall form a true estimate of God's people; and *there* we shall have our hearts drawn out in worship.