**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 SAMUEL-001. THE CHILD PROPHET by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli. And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no open vision. 2. And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place, and his eyes began to wax dim, that he could not see; 8. And ere the lamp of God went out in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was, and Samuel was laid down to sleep; 4. That the Lord called Samuel: and he answered, Here am I. 5. And he ran onto Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou calledst me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. And he went and lay down. 6. And the Lord called yet again, Samuel. And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And he answered, I called not, my son; lie down again. 7. Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him. 8. And the Lord called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And Eli perceived that the Lord had called the child. 9. Therefore Eli said unto Samuel, Go, lie down: and it shall be, if He call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, Lord; for Thy servant heareth. So Samuel went and lay down in his place. 10. And the Lord came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for Thy servant heareth. 11. And the Lord said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. 12. 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. 13. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. 14. And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever."*

*1 Samuel 3:1-14*

The opening words of this passage are substantially repeated from 1 Samuel 2:11, 18. They come as a kind of refrain, contrasting the quiet, continuous growth and holy service of the child Samuel with the black narrative of Eli's riotous sons. While the hereditary priests were plunging into debauchery, and making men turn away from the Tabernacle services, Hannah's son was ministering unto the Lord, and, though no priest, was girt with an ephod. This white flower blossomed on a dunghill. The continuous growth of a character, from a child serving God, and to old age walking in the same path, is the great lesson which the story of Samuel teaches us. The child is father of the man, and all his long days are bound each to each by true religion. There are two types of experience among God's greatest servants. Paul, made an Apostle from a persecutor, heads the one class. Timothy in the New Testament and Samuel in the Old, represent the other. An Augustine or a Bunyan is made the more earnest, humble, and whole-hearted by the remembrance of a wasted youth and of God's arresting mercy. But there are a serenity and continuity about a life which has grown up in the fear of God that have their own charm and blessing. It is well to have much transgression forgiven, but it may be better to have always been innocent and ignorant of it. Pardon cleanses sin, and even turns the memory of it into an ally of holiness; but traces are left on character, and, at the best, years have been squandered which do not return. Samuel is the pattern of child religion and service, to which teachers should aim that their children may be conformed. How beautifully his double obedience is expressed in the simple words! His service was unto the Lord, and it was before Eli; that is to say, he learned his work from the old man, and in obeying him he served God. The child's religion is largely obedience to human guides, and he serves God best by doing what he is bid,--a lesson needed in our days by both parents and children.

Samuel's peaceful service is contrasted, in the second half of the first verse, with the sad cessation of divine revelations in that dreary time of national laxity. A demoralised priesthood, an alienated people, a silent God,--these are the outstanding features of the period when this fair life of continuous worship unfolded itself. This flower grew in a desert. The voice of God had become a tradition of the past, not an experience of the present. Rare conveys the idea better than precious. The intention is not to tell the estimate in which the word was held, but the infrequency of its utterance, as appears from the following parallel clause. The fact is mentioned in order to complete the picture of Samuel's environment to fling into relief against that background his service, and to prepare the way for the narrative of the beginning of an epoch of divine speech. When priests are faithless and people careless, God's voice will often sound from lowly childlike lips. The man who is to be His instrument in carrying on His work will often come from the very centre of the old order, into which he is to breathe new life, and on which he is to impress a new stamp.

The artless description of the night in the Tabernacle is broken by the more general notice of Eli's dim sight, which the Revised Version rightly throws into a parenthesis. It is somewhat marred, too, by the transposition which the Authorised Version, following some more ancient ones, has made, in order to avoid saying, as the Hebrew plainly does, that Samuel slept in the Temple of the Lord, where the ark was. The picture is much more vivid and tender, if we conceive of the dim-eyed old man, lying somewhat apart; of the glimmering light, nearly extinct but still faintly burning; and of the child laid to sleep in the Tabernacle. Surely the picturesque contrast between the sanctity of the ark and the innocent sleep of childhood is meant to strike us, and to serve as connecting the place with the subsequent revelation. Childlike hearts, which thus quietly rest in the secret place of the Most High, and day and night are near His ark, will not fail of hearing His voice. He sleeps secure who sleeps beneath the shadow of the Almighty. May not these particulars, too, be meant to have some symbolic significance? Night hung over the nation. The spiritual eye of the priest was dim, and the order seemed growing old and decrepit, but the lamp of God had not altogether gone out; and if Eli was growing blind, Samuel was full of fresh young life. The darkest hour is that before the dawn; and that silent sanctuary, with the slumbering old half-blind priest and the expiring lamp, may stand for an emblem of the state of Israel.

The thrice-repeated and misunderstood call may yield lessons of value. We note the familiar form of the call. There is no vision, no symbol of the divine glory, such as other prophets had, but an articulate voice, so human-like that it is thought to be Eli's. Such a kind of call fitted the child's stature best. We note the swift, cheery obedience to what he supposes to be Eli's voice. He sprang up at once, and ran to Eli,--a pretty picture of cheerful service, grudging not his broken sleep, which, no doubt, had often been similarly broken by similar calls. Perhaps it was in order to wait on Eli, quite as much as to tend the lamp or open the gates, that the singular arrangement was made of his sleeping in the Temple; and the reason for the previous parenthesis about Eli's blindness may have been to explain why Samuel slept near him. Where were Eli's sons? They should have been their father's attendants, and the watchers by night ... in the house of the Lord; but they were away rioting, and the care of both Temple and priest was left to a child.

The old man's heart evidently went out to the boy. How tenderly he bids him lie down again! How affectionately he calls him my son, as if he was already beginning to feel that this was his true successor, and not the blackguards that were breaking his heart! The two were a pair of friends: on the one side were sedulous care and swift obedience by night and by day; on the other were affection and a discernment of coming greatness, made the clearer by the bitter contrast with his own children's lives. The old and the young are good companions for one another, and often understand each other better and help each other more than either does his contemporaries.

Samuel mistook God's voice for Eli's, as we all often do. And not less often we make the converse blunder, and mistake Eli's voice for God's. It needs a very attentive ear, and a heart purged from selfishness and self-will, and ready for obedience, to know when God speaks, though men may be His mouthpieces, and when men speak, though they may call themselves His messengers. The child's mistake was venial. It is less pardonable and more dangerous when repeated by us. If we would be guarded against it, we must be continually where Samuel was, and we must not sleep in the Temple, but watch and be sober.

Eli's perception that it was God who spoke must have had a pang in it. It is not easy for the old to recognise that the young hear God's voice more clearly than they, nor for the superior to be glad when he is passed over and new truth dawns on the inferior. But, if there were any such feeling, it is silenced with beautiful self-abnegation, and he tells the wondering child the meaning of the voice and the answer he must make. What higher service can any man do to his fellows, old or young, than to help them to discern God's call and to obey it? What nobler conception of a teacher's work is there than that? Eli heard no voice, from which we may probably conclude that, however real the voice, it was not audible to sense; but he taught Samuel to interpret and answer the voice which he heard, and thus won some share of a prophet's reward.

With what expectation in his young heart Samuel lay down again in his place! This time there is an advance in the form of the call, for only now do we read that the Lord came, and stood, and called as before. A manifestation, addressed to the inward eye, accompanied that to the ear. There is no attempt at describing, nor at softening down, the frank anthropomorphism of the representation, which is the less likely to mislead the more complete it is. Samuel had heard Him before; he sees Him now, and mistake is impossible. But there is no terror nor recoil from the presence. The child's simplicity saves from that, and the child's purity; for his little life had been a growing in service and in favour with God and man.

The answer that came from the child's lips meant far more than the child knew. It is the answer which we are all bound to make. Let us see how deep and wide its scope is. It expresses the entire surrender of the will to the will of God. That is the secret of all peace and nobleness. There is nothing happy or great for man in this world but to love and do God's will. All else is nought. This is solid. The world passeth away, ... but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. Everything besides is show and delusion, and a life directed to it is fleeting as the cloud-wrack that sweeps across the sky, and, whether it is shone on or is black, is equally melting away. Happy the child who begins with such surrender of self to be God's instrument, and who, like Samuel, can stand up at the end and challenge men's judgment on his course!

The answer vows prompt obedience to yet undisclosed duty. God ever calls His servants to tasks which only by degrees are made known. So Paul in his conversion was bid to go into Damascus, and there learn what more he was to do. We must first put ourselves in God's hands, and then He will lead us round the turn in the road, and show us our work. We get it set for us bit by bit, but the surrender must be entire. The details of His will are revealed as we need them for the moment's guidance. Let us accept them in bulk, and stand to the acceptance in each single case! That is no obedience at all which says, Tell me first what you are going to bid me do, and then I will see whether I will do it. The true spirit of filial submission says, I delight to do Thy will; now show me what it is. It was a strange, long road on which Samuel put his foot when he answered this call, and he little knew where it was to lead him. But the blessing of submission is that we do not need to know. It is enough to see where to put our lifted foot. What comes next we can let God settle.

The answer supplicated further light because of present obedience. Speak! for Thy servant heareth, is a plea never urged in vain. The servant's open ear is a reason for the Lord's open lips. We may be quite sure that, if we are willing to hear, He is more than willing to speak; and anything is possible rather than that His children shall be left, like ill-commanded soldiers on a battlefield, waiting for orders which never come. If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know.

The sad prophecy which is committed to such apparently incongruous lips reiterates a former message by a man of God. Eli was a kindly, and, in his way, good man, but wanting in firmness, and acquiescent in evil, partly, perhaps, from lack of moral courage and partly from lack of fervent religion. He is not charged with faults in his own administration of his office, but with not curbing his disreputable sons. The threatenings are directed, not against himself, but against his house, who are to be removed from the high priestly office. Nothing less than a revolution is foretold. The deposition of Eli's family would shake the whole framework of society. It is to be utterly destroyed, and no sacrifice nor offering can purge it. The ulcer must have eaten deep which required such stern measures for its excision. The sin was mainly the sons; but the guilt was largely the father's. We may learn how cruel paternal laxity is, and how fatal mischief may be done, by neglect of the plain duty of restraining children. He who tolerates evil which it is his province to suppress, is an accomplice, and the blood of the doers is red on his hands.

It was a terrible message to give to a child; but Samuel's calling was to be the guide of Israel in a period of transition, and he had to be broken early into the work, which needed severity as well as tenderness. Perhaps, too, the stern message was somewhat softened, for the poor old man, by the lips through which it came to him. All that reverent love could do, we may be sure, the young prophet would do, to lighten the heavy tidings. Secrecy would be secured, too; for Samuel, who was so unwilling to tell even Eli what the Lord had said, would tell none besides.

God calls each child in our homes as truly as He did Samuel. From each the same obedience is asked. Each may, like the boy in the Tabernacle, grow up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and so escape the many scars and sorrows of a life wrongly begun. Let parents see to it that they think rightly of their work, and do not content themselves with conveying information, but aim at nothing short of helping all their children to hear and lovingly to yield to the gentle call of the incarnate God!