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

**1 SAMUEL-003. REPENTANCE AND VICTORY by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1. And the men of Kirjath-jearim came, and fetched up the ark of the Lord, and brought it into the house of Abinadab in the hill, and sanctified Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord. 2. And it came to pans, while the ark abode in Kirjath-jearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years: and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. 3. And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Ashtaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve Him only: and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. 4. Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the Lord only. 5. And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the Lord. 6. And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord. And Samuel judged the children of Israel in Mizpeh. 7. And when the Philistines heard that the children of Israel were gathered together to Mizpeh, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Philistines. 8. And the children of Israel said to Samuel, Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, that He will save us out of the hand of the Philistines. 9. And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt-offering wholly unto the Lord: and Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel; and the Lord heard him. 10. And 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. 11. And the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh, and pursued the Philistines, and smote them, until they came under Beth-car. 12. Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."*

*1 Samuel 7:1-12*

The ark had spread disaster in Philistia and Beth-shemesh, and the willingness of the men of Kirjath-jearim to receive it was a token of their devotion. They must have been in some measure free from idolatry and penetrated with reverence. The name of the city (City of the Woods, like our Woodville) suggests the situation of the little town, bosomed high in tufted trees, where the ark lay for so long, apparently without sacrifices, and simply watched over by Eleazar, who was probably of the house of Aaron. Eli's family was exterminated; Shiloh seems to have been destroyed, or, at all events, forsaken; and for twenty years internal disorganisation and foreign oppression, relieved only by Samuel's growing influence, prevailed. But during these dark days a better mind was slowly appearing among the people. All ... Israel lamented after the Lord. Lost blessings are precious. God was more prized when withdrawn. Happy they to whom darkness brightens that Light which brightens all darkness! Our text gives us three main points,--the preparation for victory in repentance and return (verses 3-9); the victory (verses 10, 11); the thankful commemoration of victory (verse 12).

**I.** We have first the preparation for victory in repentance and return. At the time of the first fight at Eben-ezer, Israel was full of idolatry and immorality. Then their preparation for battle was the mere bringing the ark into the camp, as if it were a fetish or magic charm. That was pure heathenism, and they were idolaters in such worship of Jehovah, just as much as if they had been bowing to Baal. Many of us rely on our baptism or on churchgoing precisely in the same spirit, and are as truly pagans. Not the name of the Deity, but the spirit of the worshipper, makes the idolater.

How different this second preparation! Samuel, who had never been named in the narrative of defeat, now reappears as the acknowledged prophet and, in a sense, dictator. The first requirement is to come back to the Lord with the whole heart, and that return is to be practically exhibited in the complete forsaking of Baal and the Ashtoreths. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. It must be Him only, if it is Him at all. Real religion is exclusive, as real love is. In its very nature it is indivisible, and if given to two is accepted by neither. So there was some kind of general and perhaps public giving up of the idols, and some, though probably not the fully appointed, public service of Jehovah. If we are to have His strength infused for victory, we must cast away our idols, and come back to Him with all our hearts. The hands that would clasp Him, and be upheld by the clasp, must be emptied of trifles. To yield ourselves wholly to God is the secret of strength.

The next step was a solemn national assembly at Samuel's town of Mizpeh, situated on a conspicuous hill, north-west of Jerusalem, which still is called the prophet Samuel. Sacrifices were offered, which are no part of the Mosaic ritual. A significant part of these consisted in the pouring out of water before the Lord, probably as emblematic of the pouring out of soul in penitence; for it was accompanied by fasting and confession of sin. The surest way to the true victory, which is the conquest of our sins, is confessing them to God. When once we have seen any sin in its true character clearly enough to speak to Him about it, we have gone far to emancipate ourselves from it, and have quickened our consciences towards more complete intolerance of its hideousness. Confession breaks the entail of sin, and substitutes for the dreary expectation of its continuance the glad conviction of forgiveness and cleansing. It does not make a stiff fight unnecessary; for assured freedom from sin is not the easy prize of confession, but the hard-won issue of sturdy effort in God's strength. But it is like blowing the trumpet of revolt,--it gives the signal for, and itself begins, the conflict. The night before the battle should be spent, not in feasting, but in prayer and lowly shriving of our souls before the great Confessor.

The watchful Philistines seem to have had their attention attracted by the unusual stir among their turbulent subjects, and especially by this suspicious gathering at Mizpeh, and they come suddenly up the passes from their low-lying territory to disperse it. A whiff of the old terror blows across the spirits of the people, not unwholesomely; for it sets them, not to desire the outward presence of the ark, not to run from their post, but to beseech Samuel's intercession. They are afraid, but they mean to fight all the same, and, because they are afraid, they long for God's help. That is the right temper, which, if a man cherish, he will not be defeated, however many Philistines rush at him. Twenty years of slavery had naturally bred fear in them, but it is a wise fear which breeds reliance on God. Our enemy is strong, and no fault is more fatal than an underestimate of his power. If we go into battle singing, we shall probably come out of it weeping, or never come out at all. If we begin bragging, we shall end bleeding. It is only he who looks on the advancing foe, and feels They are too strong for me, who will have to say, as he watches them retreating, He delivered me from my strong enemy. We should think much of our foes and little of ourselves. Such a temper will lead to caution, watchfulness, wise suspicion, vigorous strain of all our little power, and, above all, it will send us to our knees to plead with our great Captain and Advocate.

Samuel acts as priest and intercessor, offering a burnt-offering, which, like the pouring out of water, is no part of the Mosaic sacrifices. The fact is plain, but it is neither unaccountable nor large enough to warrant the sweeping inferences which have been drawn from it and its like, as to the non-existence at this period of the developed ceremonial in Leviticus. We need only remember Samuel's special office, and the seclusion in which the ark lay, to have a sufficient explanation of the cessation of the appointed worship and the substitution of such irregular sacrifices. We are on surer ground when we see here the incident to which Psalm xcix. 6 refers (Samuel among them that call upon His name. They called upon the Lord, and He answered them), and when we learn the lesson that there is a power in intercession which we can use for one another, and which reaches its perfection in the prevailing prayer of our great High-priest, who, like Samuel and Moses, is on the mountain praying, while we fight in the plain.

**II.** We have next the victory on the field of the former defeat. The battle is joined on the old ground. Strategic considerations probably determined the choice as they did in the case of the many battles on the plain of Esdraelon, for instance, or on the fields of the Netherlands. Probably the armies met on some piece of level ground in one of the wadies, up which the Philistines marched to the attack. At all events, there they were, face to face once more on the old spot. On both sides might be men who had been in the former engagement. Depressing remembrances or burning eagerness to wipe out the shame would stir in those on the one side; contemptuous remembrance of the ease with which the last victory had been won would animate the other. God Himself helped them by the thunderstorm, the solemn roll of which was the voice of the Lord answering Samuel's prayer. The ark had brought only defeat to the impure host; the sacrifice brings victory to the penitent army. Observe that the defeat is accomplished before the men of Israel went out of Mizpeh. God scattered the enemy, and Israel had only to pursue flying foes, as they hurried in wild confusion down the pass, with the lightning flashing behind them. The same pregnant expression is used for the rout of the Philistines as for the previous one of Israel. They were smitten before, not by, the victors. The true victor was God.

The story gives boundless hope of victory, even on the fields of our former defeats. We can master rooted faults of character, and overcome temptations which have often conquered us. Let no man say: Ah! I have been beaten so often that I may as well give up the fight altogether. Years and years I have been a slave, and everywhere I tread on old battlefields, where I have come off second-best. It will never be different. I may as well cease struggling. However obstinate the fault, however often it has re-established its dominion and dragged us back to slavery, when we thought that we had made good our escape,-- that is no reason to bate one jot of heart or hope. We have every reason to hope bravely and boundlessly in the possibility of victory. True, we should rightly despair if we had only our own powers to depend on. But the grounds of our confidence lie in the inexhaustible fulness of God's Spirit, and the certain purpose of His will that we should be purified from all iniquity, as well as in the proved tendency of the principles and motives of the gospel to produce characters of perfect goodness, and, above all, in the sacrifice and intercession of our Captain on high. Since we have Christ to dwell in us, and be the seed of a new life, which will unfold into the likeness of that life from which it has sprung; since we have a perfect Example in Him who became like us in lowliness of flesh, that we might become like Him in purity of spirit; since we have a gospel which enjoins and supplies the mightiest motives for complete obedience; and since the most rooted and inveterate evils are no part of ourselves, but vipers which may be shaken from the hand into which they have struck their fangs, we commit faithless treason against God, His message, and ourselves, when we doubt that we shall overcome all our sins. We should not, then, go into the fight downhearted, with our banners drooping, as if defeat sat on them. The belief that we shall conquer has much to do with victory. That is true in all sorts of conflicts. So, though the whole field may be strewed with relics, eloquent of former disgrace, we may renew the struggle with confidence that the future will not always copy the past. We are saved by hope; by hope we are made strong. It is the very helmet on our heads. The warfare with our own evils should be waged in the assurance that every field of our defeat shall one day see set up on it the trophy of, not our victory, but God's in us.

**III.** We have here the grateful commemoration of victory. Where that gray stone stands no man knows to-day, but its name lives for ever. This trophy bore no vaunts of leader's skill or soldier's bravery. One name only is associated with it. It is the stone of help, and its message to succeeding generations is: Hitherto hath the Lord helped us. That Hitherto is the word of a mighty faith. It includes as parts of one whole the disaster no less than the victory. The Lord was helping Israel no less by sorrow and oppression than by joy and deliverance. The defeat which guided them back to Him was tender kindness and precious help. He helps us by griefs and losses, by disappointments and defeats; for whatever brings us closer to Him, and makes us feel that all our bliss and wellbeing lie in knowing and loving Him, is helpful beyond all other aid, and strength-giving above all other gifts.

Such remembrance has in it a half-uttered prayer and hope for the future. Hitherto means more than it says. It looks forward as well as backward, and sees the future in the past. Memory passes into hope, and the radiance in the sky behind throws light on to our forward path. God's hitherto carries henceforward wrapped up in it. His past reveals the eternal principles which will mould His future acts. He has helped, therefore he will help, is no good argument concerning men; but it is valid concerning God.

The devout man's gratitude is, and ought to be, a lively sense of favours to come. We should never doubt but that, as good John Newton puts it, in words which bid fair to last longer than Samuel's gray stone:--

Each sweet Ebenezer I have in review

Confirms His good pleasure to help me quite through.

We may write that on every field of our life's conflicts, and have it engraved at last on our gravestones, where we rest in hope.

The best use of memory is to mark more plainly than it could be seen at the moment the divine help which has filled our lives. Like some track on a mountain side, it is less discernible to us, when treading it, than when we look at it from the other side of the glen. Many parts of our lives, that seemed unmarked by any consciousness of God's help while they were present, flash up into clearness when seen through the revealing light of memory, and gleam purple in it, while they looked but bare rocks as long as we were stumbling among them. It is blessed to remember, and to see everywhere God's help. We do not remember aright unless we do. The stone that commemorates our lives should bear no name but one, and this should be all that is read upon it: Now unto Him that kept us from falling, unto Him be glory!