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

**1 SAMUEL-007. SAMUEL'S CHALLENGE AND CHARGE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And Samuel said unto all Israel, Behold, I have hearkened unto your voice in all that ye said unto me, and have made a king over you. 2. And now, behold, the king walketh before you: and I am old and grayheaded; and, behold, my sons are with you: and I have walked before you from my childhood unto this day. 3. Behold, here I am: witness against me before the Lord, and before His anointed: whose ox have I taken? or whose ass have I taken? or whom have I defrauded? whom have I oppressed? or of whose hand have I received any bribe to blind mine eyes therewith? and I will restore it you. 4. And they said, Thou hast not defrauded us, nor oppressed us, neither hast thou taken ought of any man's hand. 5. And he said unto them, The Lord is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day, that ye have not found ought in my hand. And they answered, He is witness. 6. And Samuel said unto the people, It is the Lord that advanced Moses and Aaron, and that brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. 7. Now therefore stand still, that I may reason with you before the Lord of all the righteous acts of the Lord, which he did to you and to your fathers. 8. When Jacob was come into Egypt, and your fathers cried unto the Lord, then the Lord sent Moses and Aaron, which brought forth your fathers out of Egypt, and them dwell in this place. 9. And when they forgat the Lord their God, He sold them into the hand of Sisera, captain of the host of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab, and they fought against them. 10. And they cried unto the Lord, and said, We have sinned, because we have forsaken the Lord, and have served Baalim and Ashtaroth: but now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, and we will serve Thee. 11. And the Lord sent Jerubbaal, and Bedan, and Jephthah, and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and ye dwelled safe. 12. And when ye saw that Nahash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us: when the Lord your God was your king. 13. Now therefore behold the king whom ye have chosen, and whom ye have desired! and, behold, the Lord hath set a king over you. 14. If ye will fear the Lord, and serve Him, and obey His voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall both ye and also the king that reigneth over you continue following the Lord your God: 15. But if ye will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as it was against your fathers."*

*1 Samuel 12:1-15*

The portion of Samuel's address included in this passage has three main sections: his noble and dignified assertion of his official purity, his summary of the past history, and his solemn declaration of the conditions of future wellbeing for the nation with its new king.

**I.** Probably the war with the Ammonite king Nahash, which had postponed the formal inauguration of the king, had been carried on in the neighbourhood of the Jordan valley; and thus Gilgal would be a convenient rendezvous. But it was chosen for other reasons also, and, as appears from 1 Samuel x. 8, had been fixed on by Samuel at his first interview with Saul. There the Covenant had been renewed, after the wanderers had crossed the river, with Joshua at their head, and it was fitting that the beginnings of the new form of the national life should be consecrated by worship on the same site as had witnessed the beginnings of the national life on the soil of the promised land. Perhaps the silent stones, which Joshua reared, stood there yet. At all events, sacred memories could scarcely fail, as the rejoicing crowd, standing where their fathers had renewed the Covenant, saw the blackened ruins of Jericho, and the foaming river, now, as then, filling all its banks in the time of harvest, which their fathers had crossed with the ark, that was now hidden at Kirjath-jearim, for their guide. The very place spoke the same lessons from the past which Samuel was about to teach them.

There is just a faint trace of Samuel's disapproval of the new order in his first words. He takes care to throw the whole responsibility on the people; but, at the same time, he assumes the authoritative tone which becomes him, and quietly takes the position of superiority to the king whom he has made. I Samuel xi. 15 seems to imply that he took no part in the rejoicings. It was Saul and all the men of Israel who were so glad. He was still hesitant as to the issue, and obeyed the divine command with clearer insight into its purpose than the shouting crowd and the proud young king had. There is something very pathetic in the contrast he draws between Saul and himself. The king walketh before you, in all the vigour of his young activity, and delighting all your eyes, and I am old and gray-headed, feeble, and fit for little more work, and therefore, as happens to such worn-out public servants, cast aside for a new man. Samuel was not a monster of perfection without human feelings. His sense of Israel's ingratitude to himself and practical revolt from God lay together in his mind, and colour this whole speech, which has a certain tone of severity, and an absence of all congratulation. Probably that accounts for the mention of his sons. The elders frank statement of their low opinion of them had been a sore point with Samuel, and he cannot help alluding to it. It was not for want of possible successors in his own house that they had cried out for a king. If this be not the bearing of the allusion to his sons, it is difficult to explain; and this obvious explanation would never have been overlooked if Samuel had not been idealised into a faultless saint. The dash of human infirmity and fatherly blindness gives reality to the picture. I have walked before you from my youth unto this day. Note the recurrence of the same expression as is applied to Saul in the former part of the verse. It is as if he had said, Once I was as he is now,--young and active in your sight, and for your service. Remember these past years. May your new fancy's record be as stainless as mine is, when he is old and grayheaded! The words bring into view the characteristic of Samuel's life which is often insisted on in the earlier chapters,--its calm, unbroken continuity and uniformity of direction, from the long-past days when he wore the little coat his mother made him, with so many tears dropped on it, till this closing hour. While everything was rushing down to destruction in Eli's time, and his sons were rioting at the Tabernacle door, the child was growing up in the stillness; and from then till now, amid all changes, his course had been steady, and pointed to one aim. Blessed they whose age is but the fruitage of the promise of their youth! Blessed they who begin as little children, with the forgiveness of sin and the knowledge of the Father, and who go on, as young men, to overcome the Evil One, and end, as fathers, with the deeper knowledge of Him who is from the beginning, which is the reward of childhood's trust and manhood's struggles!

Samuel is still a prophet, but he is ceasing to be the sole authority, and, in his conscious integrity, calls for a public, full discharge, in the presence of the king. Note that verse 3 gives the first instance of the use of the name Messiah, and think of the contrast between Saul and Jesus. Observe, too, the simple manners of these times, when ox and ass were the wealth. They would be poor plunder nowadays. Note also the various forms of injustice of which he challenges any one to convict him. Forcible seizure of live stock, fraud, harsh oppression, and letting suitors put gold on his eyes that he might not see, are the vices of the Eastern ruler to-day, and rampant in that unhappy land, as they have been ever since Samuel's time. I think I have heard of politicians in some other countries further west than Gilgal, who have axes to grind and logs to roll, and of the wonderful effects, in many places of business, of certain circular gold discs applied to the eyes. This man went away a poor man. He does not seem to have had salary, or retiring pension; but he carried away a pair of clean hands, as the voice of a nation witnessed.

**II.** Having cleared himself, Samuel recounts the outlines of the past, in order to emphasise the law that cleaving to God had ever brought deliverance; departure, disaster; and penitence, restoration. It is history with a purpose, and less careful about chronology than principles. Facts are good, if illuminated by the clear recognition of the law which they obey; but, without that, they are lumber. The philosophy of history is not reached without the plain recognition of the working of the divine will. No doubt the principles which Samuel discerned written as with a sunbeam on the past of Israel were illustrated there with a certainty and directness which belonged to it alone; but we shall make a bad use of the history of Israel, if we say, It is all miraculous, and therefore inapplicable to modern national life. It would be much nearer the mark to say, It is all miraculous, and therefore meant as an exhibition for blind eyes of the eternal principles which govern the history of all nations. It is as true in Britain to-day as ever it was in Judea, that righteousness and the fear of God are the sure foundations of real national as of individual prosperity. The kingdoms of this world are not the devil's, though diplomatists and soldiers seem to think so. If any nation were to live universally by the laws of God, it might not have what the world calls national success; it would have no story of wholesale robbery, called military glory, but it would have peace within its borders, and life would go nobly and sweetly there. Happy is the people, that is in such a case: yea, happy is the people, whose God is the Lord.

The details of Samuel's resume need not occupy much time. Note the word in verse 7, reason, or, as the Revised Version renders, plead. He takes the position of God's advocate in the suit, and what he will prove for his client is the righteousness of his dealings in the past. The story, says he, can be brought down to very simple elements,--a cry to God, an answer of deliverance, a relapse, punishment, a renewed cry to God, and all the rest of the series as before. It is like a repeating decimal, over and over again, each figure drawing the next after it. The list of oppressors in verse 9, and that of deliverers in verse 11, do not follow the same order, but that matters nothing. Clearly the facts are assumed as well known, and needing only summary reference. The new-fashioned way of treating Biblical history, of course, takes that as an irrefutable proof of the late date and spuriousness of this manufactured speech put into Samuel's mouth. Less omniscient students will be content with accepting the witness to the history. Nobody knows anything of a judge named Bedan, and the conjectural emendation Barak is probable, especially remembering the roll-call in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Gideon, Barak, and Jephthah appear in the same order, with the addition of Samson. The supposition that Samuel, in this verse, is an error for Samson, is unnecessary; for the prophet's mention of himself thus is not unnatural, in the circumstances, and is less obtrusive than to have said me.

The retrospect here given points the lesson of the sin and folly of the demand for a king. The old way had been to cry to God in their distresses, and the old experience had been that the answer came swift and sufficient; but this generation had tried a new method, and fear of Nahash the Ammonite had driven them to look for a man to help them. The experience of God's responses to prayer does not always wean even those who receive them from casting about for visible helpers. Still less does the experience of our predecessors keep us from it. Strange that after a hundred plain instances of His aid, the hundred and first distress should find us almost as slow to turn to Him, and as eager to secure earthly stays, as if there were no past of our own, or of many generations, all crowded and bright with tokens of His care! We are always disposed to doubt whether the power that delivered from Sisera, Philistines, and Moab, will be able to deliver us from Nahash. The new danger looks the very worst of all, and this time we must have a king. All the while Israel had God for its king. Our dim eyes cannot see the realities of the invisible world, and so we cleave to the illusions of the visible, which, at their best, are but shadows of the real, and are often made, by our weak hearts, its rival and substitute. What does the soldier, who has an impenetrable armour to wear, want with pasteboard imitations, like those worn in a play? It is doubtful wisdom to fling away the substance in grasping at the shadow. Saul was brave, and a head and shoulders above the people, and he had beaten Nahash for them; but Saul for God is a poor exchange. Do we do better, when we hanker after something more tangible than an unseen Guide, Helper, Stay, Joy, and Peace-bringer for our hearts, and declare plainly, by our eager race after created good, that we do not reckon God by Himself enough for us?

**III.** The part of Samuel's address with which we are concerned here closes with the application of the history to the present time. The great point of the last three verses is that the new order of things has not changed the old law, which bound up well-being inseparably with obedience. They have got their king, and there he stands; but if they think that that is to secure their prosperity, they are much mistaken. There is a touch of rebuke, and possibly of sarcasm, in pointing to Saul, and making so emphatic, as in verse 13, the vehemence of their anxiety to get him. It is almost as if Samuel had said, Look at him, and say whether he is worth all that eagerness. Do you like him as well, now that you have him, as you did before? There are not many of this world's goods which stand that test. The shell that looked silvery and iridescent when in the sea is but a poor, pale reminder of its former self, when we hold it dry in our hands. One object of desire, and only one, brings no disappointment in possessing it. He, and only he, who sets his hope on God, will never have to feel that he is not so satisfied with the fulfilment as with the dream.

Israel had rejected God in demanding a king; but the giver of their demand had been God, and their rejection had not abolished the divine government, nor altered one jot of the old law. They and their king were equally its subjects. There is great emphasis in the special mention of your king as bound to obedience as much as they; and, if we follow the Septuagint reading of verse 15, the mention is repeated there in the threatening of punishment. No abundance of earthly supports or objects of our love or trust in the least alters the unalterable conditions of well-being. Whether surrounded with these or stripped of all, to fear and serve the Lord and to hearken to His voice is equally the requisite for all true blessedness, and is so equally to the helper and the helped, the lover and the loved. We are ever tempted to think that, when our wishes are granted, and some dear or strong hand is stretched out for aid, all will be well; and we are terribly apt to forget that we need God as much as before, and that the way of being blessed has not changed. Those whose hearts and homes are bright with loved faces, and whose lives are guarded by strong and wise hands, have need to remember that they and their dear ones are under the same conditions of well-being as are the loneliest and saddest; and they who have none other that fighteth for them have no less need to remember that, if God be their companion, they cannot be utterly solitary, nor altogether helpless if He be their aid.