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

**1 SAMUEL-016. SAUL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me."*

*1 Samuel 28:15*

Among all the persons of Scripture who are represented as having fallen away from God and wrecked their lives, perhaps there is none so impressive as the giant form of the first king of Israel. Huge and black, seamed and scarred with lightning marks of passions, moody and suspicious, devil-ridden and lonely, doubting his truest friends, and even his son, striking blindly in his fury at the gracious, sunny poet-warrior who shows so bright, so full of resource, so nimble, so generous, by contrast with the heavy strength of the moody giant, and ever escapes the javelin that quivers harmlessly in the wall, with an inevitable destiny hanging over his head, and at last creeping to wizards that peep and mutter, and dying a suicide, with his army in full flight and his son dead at his feet--what a course and what an end for the chosen of the Lord, on whom the Spirit of the Lord came with the anointing oil, and gave him a new heart for his kingly office.

I know not anywhere a sadder story: and I know not where human lips ever poured out a more awful wail--like a Titan in his rage of pain-- than these words of our text. Bright hopes and fair promise, and much that was good and true in performance--all came to this. A few hours more and the battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him, and he was greatly distressed by reason of the archers. Madness, despair, defeat, death, all were the sequel of, Because thou hast rejected the commandment of the Lord, the Lord hath also rejected thee from being king. A true soul's tragedy! Let us look together at its course, and gather the lessons that lie on the surface. We have neither space nor wish here to enter upon the many points of minute interest and curiosity which are in the story. We have to be contented with large outlines.

Look then

**I. At the bright dawn.**

The early story gives us many traits of beauty in Saul's character. Not only physical strength but a winning personality are apparent. His modesty and humility when Samuel salutes him are made plain. And we are distinctly told that as he turned away from Samuel, God gave him another heart, by which we are to understand not regeneration but an inspiration, that equipped him for his office.

How many a man finds that sudden elevation ruins him! But often it evokes what is good, brings an entire change of disposition, as with Harry of Mon-mouth. But it was not only his new responsibility which brought into action powers that had previously been dormant. New circumstances, no doubt, did something, but Saul's new heart was God's gift.

The story of the beginning of his reign reveals a very noble and lovable character. We can but mention his modesty in hiding among the stuff, his disregard of the murmurs of those who would not do homage (made as though he had been deaf), his return, as it would seem, to his home-life and farm-work, his chivalrous boldness and warlike energy, which sprung at once to activity on the call of a great exigency in Jabesh-Gilead, his humane and sweet repression of the people's desire, in their first flush of pride in their soldier king, to slay his enemies, and his devout acknowledgment that not he but God has wrought this salvation.

So for the first year of his reign all went well.

How much of divine influence a man may have and yet fling it all away! How unreliable a thing mere natural goodness is! How much apparent goodness may coexist with deep-seated evil! How bright a beginning may darken into a tempestuous day! How seeds of evil may lurk in the fairest character! How little one can be judged by part of his life! How it is not the possession, but the retention, of goodness and devout impressions that makes a man good.

**II. The gathering clouds.**

The acts recorded as darkening the fair dawn of Saul's reign may seem too trivial to deserve the stern retribution that followed them, but small acts may be great sins. The first of them was his offering sacrifices without authority, an act which Samuel stigmatised as wanton, deliberate disobedience to the commandment of the Lord thy God. Next came his rash and absurd laying of a curse on any soldier who should eat food before evening, and his consequent mad determination to kill Jonathan, for taking a little honey on the end of his rod. Next came his flagrant disobedience to the divine command transmitted to him through Samuel, to smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not, We shudder at such ferocious extermination, but we are to remember that Saul was moved by no pity, but by mere lust for loot, and tried to deceive God, in the person of His representative Samuel, by the lie that the people had coerced him, and that the motive for preserving the best of the cattle was to sacrifice them to the Lord. Samuel's blaze of indignation gave the world the great word: Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.

Putting all these acts together, we have the sad picture of a character steadily deteriorating. He is growing daily more self-willed and impatient of the restraint of God's commanding will. He is chafing at his position as a viceroy, not an absolute sovereign. He is becoming tyrannical, careless of his subjects lives, intolerant of opposition, remonstrance, or advice. The tragedy of his decadence is summed up in Samuel's stern word: Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, He hath also rejected thee from being king.

Trivial acts may show great and deep-seated evil. A small swelling under the arm-pit is the sign of the plague and the precursor of swift death.

The master-sin is disobedience, self-willed departure from God. That disobedience may be as virulently active in a trifle as in a deed that men call great. Self-will is the tap root of all sin, however labyrinthine the outgrowth from it.

Disobedience honeycombs a soul. The attractive early traits in Saul's character slowly perhaps but steadily, disappeared. The fair morning sky was heavy with thunder-clouds by midday, and they all began with a light fleecy film that none noticed at first.

**III. The long eclipse.**

An evil spirit from the Lord troubled him, and the Spirit of God departed from him.

Modern psychologists would call Saul's case an instance of insanity brought about by indulgence in passion and self-will. Is there any reason why the deeper, more religious explanation should not be united with the scientific one? Does not God work in the working of natural phenomena?

What we nowadays call insanity is not very far off from a man who habitually indulges in passionate self will, and spurns God from any authority over his life. What were Saul's characteristics now? The story tells of bursts of ungovernable fury, of unslumbering and universal suspicions, of utter misery, seeing enemies everywhere and complaining, None of you hath pity upon me, of ferocious cruelty and gloomy despair, of paroxysms of agonising but transient remorse.

It is an awful picture, and it grimly teaches lessons that we shall be wise to write deeply on our hearts.

* What a ruin a man makes of himself!
* How hideous a godless soul is!
* What unhappiness is certain if we dismiss God from ruling our lives!
* How useless remorse is unless it leads to repentance!

**IV. The stormy sunset.**

The scene at Endor makes one's flesh creep. No more tragic picture of failure and despair was ever painted. The greatest dramatists, whose creations move the terror and pity of the world, have imagined no more heart-touching figure.

It matters very little--nothing at all in fact--either for the dramatic force or for the religious impressiveness of the scene, whether the woman brought up Samuel, or whether she was as much awed as Saul was, by the coming up of an old man covered with the well-known mantle. The boding prophecy of to-morrow's defeat and death filled yet fuller the cup that had seemed to be already full of all misery. And that collapse of strength in the huddled figure, prostrate in the witch's den, may well stand for a prophecy of what will be the upshot at the last of a self-will that boasts of its own power, and tries to shake off dependence on God.