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A Heart for God's Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

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That little romance - the Book of Ruth - stands as a link between the terrible spiritual tragedy - "Judges" - and God's reaction thereto in David. "Ruth" ends with "Boaz begat Obed; and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David." The beginning of 1 Samuel sees the terrible hang-over of "Judges" and reveals the unspeakably low state that things were in spiritually. This cannot go on, and although a long time may elapse before the glory returns, God takes the vital step that will lead to the glory. That step is taken in the heart of a woman: a woman who in every way embodies the principle of Divine Sovereignty. There is so much in likeness between Hannah's song and the "Magnificat" of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Read them both, and you will feel that Mary has been occupied with Hannah's "Magnificat".

It is in the heart of this woman, Hannah, that God moves to His highest peak in the Old Testament. It is not easy in reading those early chapters of 1 Samuel to get away from the impression that Hannah had a passionate and heart-broken concern for the Lord's testimony. They went up to the Temple from year to year and must have seen and been involved in the conditions and practices described in chapter two, verses 12-17, etc.

That Hannah should later trust her so young child to live amidst such conditions needs some explanation. We would think that such would be the very last place in which any mother who cared for her child would have him live. However, it proved to be right whatever her judgment may have been. The point is that frustration of motherhood only made that mother instinct unbearable, and led her out to God in such a way that if God undertook in such an impossible situation, God should have the fruit of her travail. The mother instinct was God's way of moving in relation to the recovery of His testimony in glory.

In this case - and it has often been so - the masculine strength, the principle of authority and government, while being very necessary, was not enough; indeed, it would fail by itself. The need was of a mother heart of sorrow, pain, travail, and distress. It was not all personal and self-centred. It was toward the Lord, and sacrifice entered into it very deeply. It was indeed a costly way. To have that passion beaten up to breaking-point meant reproach. Hannah was laughed at, ridiculed, despised, and discredited. She was misunderstood and maligned even by the religious head of the people, Eli. Hers was a lonely path. Her husband gave her *things*, but he could not really help her. This was the vessel which, by such a history, God was preparing a long way ahead for His recovery of purpose.

Lest it should be thought that we are being sentimental and fanciful, let us at once say that we are not thinking in terms of male and female necessarily. The Apostle Paul combined the strength of masculine authority and government in his own person and ministry with the tenderness of motherhood. He said: "My little children, of whom I am again in travail" (Galatians 4:19). It is a disposition, a heart, a capacity for suffering and sorrow born of love.

Such is God's need and way. There can be no loss of Divine values without suffering resulting. It is the law of travail instituted and established when man first forfeited the best that God provided. We shall look in vain for any instance of letting go of Divine values which did not result in a train of suffering. But there is that which we may call vicarious suffering; that is, an entering into God's loss with a heart of distress, a 'filling up of that which is lacking of the sufferings of Christ for His body's sake, which is the church'. That is what, in figure, Hannah did.

Samuel was the birth of the prophetic spirit when there was "no open vision". He inherited the travailing spirit of his mother. It was his unhappy lot to spend much of his life in suffering the knowledge that an alternative to God's best had been chosen by the people, and his counsel and warning were rejected and flouted. His judgment and leadership were discounted and ignored until the inevitable troubles arose. But he did bring in the "man after God's heart", who in his turn shared the sorrow and suffering of God during the reign of Saul, man's choice.

What we have desired to indicate is that to bridge the gap between spiritual declension and loss, on the one side, and God's fullest possible purpose, on the other, God has always had to find that which Hannah so beautifully and effectively represents, that is, a vessel with a heart well-nigh broken for His testimony.