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The Message of Samuel

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Although we have often here spoken about Samuel and his relationship, in principle at least, to our own times, I feel that the Lord wants that we should just have a little while for a fresh occupation with the central and outstanding message which Samuel seems to bring to us. So we turn to the first of the books which goes by his name without reading at length any particular part, but just have the book opened at the beginning.

The Parallel Between Samuel's Day and Our Own

In the first place, we remind ourselves of the time into which Samuel came and the state of things among the Lord's people. It is quite clear from the definite statements here that things were far from expressive of the Lord's mind concerning His people. When Samuel was born, everything spiritual was in a state of disorder and feebleness. You will remember that the priesthood was defiled, and that Eli, the spiritual head of the nation, was in decline in every way, unable to cope with the situation and fast moving towards that tragic and pathetic end to which he came.

Then in the early years of Samuel's life, even after he had taken up his youthful ministry in the temple, things were going from bad to worse. The Lord's people were defeated by the Philistines, and we know that the Philistines in the Old Testament in principle represent the Antichrist. The ark of the covenant went into their hands, into captivity; and so things spiritually were in a very bad way. We are told that there was no open vision, the Word of God was precious, or rather rare, in those

days. We should say that there was a terrible absence of revelation. The Word of God was very largely a closed book, although it was there. No open vision.

There was no authority or voice of authority, no one stood out with a distinctive note as to the mind of the Lord, and in all these things and the many other sad conditions, it does not require very much understanding of the times to recognise something very similar in our own day. Without straining that comparison and that similarity, there is no doubt that many of those conditions obtain spiritually in our own times. There is spiritual feebleness amongst the Lord's people in a very widespread way, and the Lord's people are, in a great many cases, conscious of it. There is an assertiveness on the part of the powers of evil working by the principle of Antichrist, bringing the Lord's testimony under their domination. When we speak of Antichrist, we speak of Antichrist in principle, that is, the thing which puts its hand upon the things of God in an uncircumcised way for its own glory; that is Antichrist - ever for the glorifying of man, the glorifying of human things, taking the glory from God and possessing what belongs to God with a view to enhancing the prestige and glory of man. That can be done in a religious way, just as much as in an irreligious way. Well, that is the Philistines and that is Antichrist, and there is a very great deal of that today, an impingement upon the things of the Lord to use them for the exaltation and glorifying of man, and what is, after all, of man in his enterprise.

Whether we are able to accept that or not, I am sure that we will all agree with this, that there is no voice of authority for the Lord today. There was a time when the Lord had voices on this earth which were voices of spiritual authority and not so long since. That can be put in another way. The Lord had men before His people who were listened to by His people, who were men who had a message from God and the people knew it. That is not so today. There are many good men who give more or less good addresses, but we look in vain for the man or the men recognised by the people of God more or less generally, who have a message for the day, for the time, from God. That is not so now. There is no authority in the way of a voice from God today. No one will dispute that. We languish, the church languishes, the world languishes, for such a voice. No one will say that the church has that voice today.

Well, that at least is a right comparison with Samuel's day, in spite of the earnest and impassioned fight for evangelicalism by fundamentalist activities, we are compelled to say that if modernism is the present outstanding expression of Antichrist, the testimony of Jesus lies very largely under the domination of modernism.

One of the features of modernism is that it takes away the absolute sovereign Lordship and Deity of Christ, and today things are languishing for that truth to be brought back into its place. It puts humanism in the place of regeneration, and a great note today, the strong note amongst men, is that of the wonderful potentialities of man, what a good thing man is, what a lot of good there is in man. Strange that humanism like that should be having such a vogue at this time when there was never a more diabolical exhibition of what can come out of the human heart, and yet there it is. And over against the demand for men to be born again and the declaration that nothing good can come out of this old creation, good is only in Christ, over against that there is this well-nigh worldwide 'gospel' of the goodness of human nature, the wonderful inherent goodness of humanity; that is modernism, that is Antichrist. That was the Philistines in the Old Testament who would lay their hands upon the secret things of God, and make them captive to their own glorification. It is necessary for us to recognise what that state is in our time before we can see what to do about it and what the need is.

Are you not moved by this state, by this one thing alone - the terrible need of a voice of authority on God's behalf in our day, a distinctive clear note which has in it the authority of, "Thus saith the Lord"! You see, you just come into the same state of things as obtained in the days of Judges; for Samuel, while he bridged the gap between the judges and the kings, was a judge. He judged Israel, and in the days of the judges, every man did that which was right in his own eyes. There was no king in Israel; and is it not true that, so far as the truth of God is concerned, every man is doing that which is right in his own eyes today? I mean that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of different interpretations, and every one is its own authority, right in its own eyes, and the absolute governance of the Word of God by the Holy Spirit is set aside. The Word of God does not govern today, but man's interpretation of the Word of God governs, and every man does that which is right in his own eyes, and therefore his eyes or his reason is the authority. It is the authority of man's reason in connection with the Word of God, and so man does that which is right in his own eyes, "This is my interpretation of the Word of God, therefore it means this and I take this line because I believe it means this!" And by all who have taken that position, there is no subjecting of themselves to the Holy Ghost in emptiness and confession that no one can know the Word of God save by revelation of the Holy Spirit. That is how the Word of God comes to its place of governing, and until that is so, you take the Scriptures and every man does that which is right in his own eyes; there is no king. In other words, the Holy Ghost is not sovereign in the matter of knowing the truth. That is what it was then. That is how it is today very largely in the general way, and in the more inward way; there is no open vision. Even the children of God who are more faithful to the Lord have little real spiritual revelation. It was a sad day into which Samuel came. It was a dark patch in Israel's history, and so it is today. Recognising the state of things, we are able to move on to recognise the significance of Samuel, and those things which were true about Samuel, representing the need of a day such as his and a state of things such as that into which he came.

A Samuel Instrument

Well, Samuel came in; in the first place, in all purity and simplicity. He represents a clean start. That is very simple, but it is very fundamental - a simple, clean start. There was the whole existing order, a system of things, an order which was in disorder, disorder noted again and again in many ways. It seems almost an unconscious statement when it says, "*...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*", "*...ere the lamp of God went out*". An unconscious admission of a terrible disorder. God had said that lamp must never go out, that testimony must never be allowed to die down. Just in the narrative it gives the whole thing away - "*ere the lamp of God went out*". There are many other hints of what things were like. There was the disorder, there was the existing system of things, this confusion and chaos and weakness, but Samuel seems to come in as altogether apart from it, pure, clean and clear, as something that is not touched, not contaminated, not spoiled by this; as pure as a little child.

A new beginning! You can never change an apostate, corrupt or broken down state of things by setting to work upon it from the outside. That has been proved again and again. It is no use going into a thing which has departed from the Lord's order and trying to put it shipshape again. God has got to make a clean, fresh beginning with something - Samuel starting, as it were, from the beginning in the pristine purity of His thought. That is drastic, but it is something which is quite clear in the Word of God and true to the history of God's work. You try it and see what you can do with something that has got contaminated, mixed up and disordered. You can spend your life trying to put that straight and die of a broken heart. God must get hold of something that is apart. God must begin again with something that is out of that; something pure. It may be very small like a little child.

God's order is never to remedy a disease when that disease is moral, but to have a new birth. He never heals a Lazarus, but lets him die and starts with resurrection. That is God's law. He does not cure the old creation.

Well, that is the first step and when we pray for God's new thing, that is what we mean. God's new thing is something that is free, clear, not entangled.

Knowing the Voice of the Lord

When God gets hold of that, He begins to educate it, and the first thing that God teaches that instrument with which He is going to deal with this situation, is to know His voice. Just to know His voice. The first lesson that Samuel had to learn in the sanctuary was to know God's voice, to discriminate between the voice of God and the voice of man. He first thought it was Eli, but he had to learn the difference. An elementary lesson, but a very vital one.

We shall never be of any use to the Lord in a situation such as this until in an inward way we have learned to know the voice of the Lord. This is not what the Lord says, that is another step, but the difference between the Lord's voice and every other voice - the voice of our own reasoning, the voice of our own desire and impulse, the voice of our will and inclination, the voice of other people; every other voice, and this Voice alone - that we have inwardly a perception, a sense, a discernment, "That is the Lord's voice!" So that we are able to say, "Yes, I know that as the Lord's voice, I know that to be the Lord speaking!" There is something about the Lord's speaking which is different. You cannot define it, you cannot explain it, but you know that is the Lord. When He speaks - "That is the Lord!" And when He does not speak and there are a lot of others speaking, you know that is not the Lord. There is some inward, indefinable faculty which simply registers that conclusion in your consciousness, "That is the Lord; that is not man, that is not another authority, I know that is the Lord!"

Will you not say that that is the first great step in authority? You and I will never speak with any authority until we know in ourselves the authority of the voice of the Lord as altogether different from all other voices. Now, you may think that that is difficult. It is not so difficult as you think, but it is so much in the realm of experience. Immediately you take it into the mental, or theoretical, or doctrinal realm, then it becomes very difficult and complicated. Immediately you begin to ask yourself, "Do I really know the difference?" then you find perhaps you are not able to say, but I venture to suggest to you that if two people were saying the same thing and one was saying that thing by the Holy Spirit and the other one was saying that thing because they had read it, you would know. They have read the same thing in the same Book. To one it had come from the Lord as a revelation to his heart and he said it in the Holy Spirit. The other one had read it and thought it was splendid and said it, and as they said it, you would know. You do not know how, you cannot answer, but you would know. That is what I mean, and until you and I have that faculty to discern between what man is saying, even with all the strength of his own conviction, and what God is saying in the power of the Holy Spirit, we have not learned the first secret of real usefulness to the Lord, a Samuel ministry. That is the first step. I would like you to think about that in the New Testament.

Knowing the Mind of the Lord

The next step was that Samuel was taught to know the mind of the Lord. That is something further - the *mind* of the Lord. First the discernment of the sound - shall we say the tone, the voice - then the

mind of the Lord. "*The Lord said to Samuel...*" and then you have all that the Lord said, "*and Samuel lay until the morning*". How many hours did he lay? We do not know, maybe long hours he lay waiting for the morning. He had come to know the mind of the Lord about the situation, about His people, what He was going to do, and any such instrument has got to come to the place where it does know that it knows what the Lord thinks about things, and what the Lord's mind is about His people, and what the Lord would do.

Do not let us advance too far with that, and say that, because you do know the mind of the Lord, because you are very sure that you know it, that there is going to be a clear way for you, that that is at once the guarantee of a straight course. It was not so with Samuel. It was the beginning of trouble for Samuel, the beginning of sorrow. From that time, things began to take a new plunge towards disaster; from that time the Israelites went down under their enemies; from that time the ark went into captivity. Perhaps we would think, "Oh, if only God got hold of an instrument and gave that instrument the revelation of His thoughts and mind about things, now a new day of glory breaks!" No, not necessarily. It may be that that instrument will hold in its heart with this deepest assurance and knowledge that that is God's mind, and have to wait a long time before the real values of that begin to appear. It may be all that terrible phase of Saul's reign before the issue begins to break, in the bringing in of David, the new day of God's reign. It may be a dark passage, hard going.

What I mean is that Samuel did not see for a long time a change because he had been brought into such heart fellowship with God in God's revolt and reaction to the situation. He had to wait a long time before he saw the real glorious outcome of that fellowship with God. He had to go through a dark tunnel. So do not let us imagine that such a revelation to the heart means an immediate change of the situation. The point is that before God can move on to that more glorious state, that day when His people will come out into a better place, He has got the instrument which in the first place knows His voice, and then knows His thoughts, His mind; He knows in this way that, whatever the conditions are and whatever the cost is, that instrument cannot change its position, can never say, "Well, I am going to take another course, this is too difficult, too perplexing, too costly!" Oh no, whatever the position is, however costly and dark and terrible, that vessel simply knows that God has revealed His thoughts; it has the mind of the Lord about His people from the Lord Himself. It is a great lesson and a great thing to come there. Well, that is the second thing.

The Word of Power

The third thing about Samuel is that he had the word of power. There is this statement in chapter 3:19 - "*The Lord... let none of his words fall to the ground.*" That means that what Samuel said was destined to come true. Sooner or later that would be proved to be of God. He had the word of power. "*No word of God is devoid of power*". He had the Word of God. That is a characteristic of such an instrument as God needs in a day like this, that it has the Word which, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear, is God's word which is destined to prove right. There may be a long period between the utterance of that word and its vindication. There may be a lot of history.

Take the case of Saul. The people said, "Make us a king like unto the nations!" They clamoured and insisted. Samuel warned them, Samuel rebuked them: "You have repudiated the Lord, this is a disastrous step you have taken, this can lead you nowhere but to tragedy!" That is the effect of Samuel's warning, but they insisted. Samuel had to go up and down the land from Gilgal to Mizpah, go in his circuit a good many times before his word came true. The day came when Saul was exposed to all as Israel's fall. Of course, they did not believe it, they would not have it, they were

right; but Samuel had said the Lord's word about this. You may wait for many years, but in the end all that history has but been steadily working towards what has been said. You see, people cannot always accept what you say. Perhaps they will not, perhaps they are not in a position to accept when it is the truth, so they make light of it, set it aside, repudiate it, and God takes them through history and that history is steadily working towards the position where at last they have to say, "You were right!" Now, that is not said with a view to the congratulation of vindication, but the necessity is that an instrument, to be used in a time like this, has the word of God, the word of power, which cannot fall to the ground. It must eventually be proved to be right. Samuel had the word of power.

Power with God

Next, Samuel had power with God. "*Samuel among them that call upon His name*" (Psa. 99:6). "*Though... Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be towards this people*" (Jer. 15:1). God is saying, "Samuel, Samuel has made Me repent many times, Samuel has had such power with Me from time to time as to make Me change My mind, but, even though it were a Samuel - not this time!" What a place of power with God. He had power with God. Such must be the instrument.

The Test and Object of All

And finally for the present, all this has to be gathered up into one thing, and this one thing is the test of it and the proof of it. Quite a lot of us can be very cocksure and we may talk about our revelation; we know, and we have the mind of the Lord, and hold our ground and refuse to move for anybody! Anybody can be in that position and be wholly deceived. The test and the proof is this, the thing for which Samuel was supremely, all-inclusively and finally brought into being: the enthronement of God's King, the establishment of the absolute authority and sovereignty of the Lord's anointed. Samuel was brought in undoubtedly for this end - to bring in David, "*I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him*" (Psa. 89:20). Who found David, who anointed him? In the first place it was Samuel, it was through the instrumentality of Samuel that David was found, it was through the instrumentality of Samuel that David was anointed, and that was the supreme and all-inclusive thing of Samuel's existence: to establish the absolute sovereignty of God's anointed King.

Does our knowledge of the voice, the mind, the word, does all this have this effect, that the Lord Jesus comes into His rights, His place? Is the issue that His sovereign Lordship is really brought into operation? I put that challenge out lest any of us should feel that we are very sure, we know. The nature of our assurance is determined by the issue. The issue is not to vindicate us, not to establish us, not to give us a place where everybody says, "You were right!" God forbid that there should be anything like that about us! God forbid that we should hanker after anything like that and have our eye on the day when we are going to be vindicated! Not at all. The beautiful thing about Samuel all his days was his humility. What he put up with, what he allowed! His attitude, even towards Saul, was a most exemplary attitude. He realised that, for the time being, there was no alternative. Even God had to give way to this people for the time being before they would learn. It was no use God acting sovereignly in this matter and smashing in; there would be no fruit in that way. God had to allow Saul for the time being and give him a chance, and Samuel came in and said, "All right, Lord! I do not believe in this man, I do not accept him, I do not believe he is your choice, but all right, Lord, it is necessary for the time being, so I will work in! I will not be a man going about disaffected all the time!" So he anointed Saul and kissed Saul. That was no Judas kiss, but a sublime act of resignation. Do you not think Samuel knew the truth about Saul? Of course he did!

Nevertheless, for the time, he let go and worked in with the Lord's method of realising His end. The point is this: this beautiful humility of Samuel. From the beginning to the end of his life Samuel is strong, but self-effacing; and we can never imagine Samuel living for his own vindication. No, he was born and he lived for one thing - for the Lordship of God's King. That is the test in the first place, but that is the object of such a ministry - to bring in the Lord's Anointed to have His place, His rightful place. That is what the Lord's heart is set upon and that is what real fellowship with God means. We must hasten to the close.

The Relationship of Hannah and Samuel

There is the instrument, the vessel, we see its nature. How is such an instrument brought into being? Well, we have to go back a little in the story and go back to Samuel's mother, to Hannah. It is a beautiful story, but we can sum it all up in this. Seeing that Hannah is here as a woman, she must represent some spiritual principle, for women through the Scriptures always represent spiritual principles, and in a sentence, it is this: Hannah represents that part of the church which mourns over the state of the Lord's people and travails for an instrument by which that state shall be met and changed. That is all; that sums up Hannah. Here she is found in the first place mourning. She is in bitterness of spirit, and what is she asking for? A man-child. Do you notice that? It is not just children she wants, she is not deploring her state. No, she wants a man child. Why does she want a man child? She goes on to tell you, or afterwards that comes out quite clearly. She got a man child and he is for the Lord. She has given him and dedicated him to the Lord. This is what is in her heart. If she had just wanted a child, she would have kept the child herself, she would never have let that child out of her sight, he or she would have been so precious, but no, she had something more than that in view - the Lord and the Lord's interest. She is mourning in bitterness and in soul travail for this man child, the instrument by which the Throne is to come into view and be established.

You do not need me to take you over to the New Testament - a man child caught up to God, to His Throne. That is all clear, but in the application, in spirit and in principle, Hannah and Samuel may be one. Samuel cannot be without Hannah, and Hannah cannot be realised without Samuel. I mean this: that if there is that part of the church which is in this same exercise unto this same end, that part of the church will become the man child. Its fulfilment will be through this other designation. It will be unto the throne.