

UNFAVORABLE ANSWERS TO PRAYER.

– 1 SAM. 8:1-10. – JULY 5. –

Golden Text: – "Prepare your hearts unto the Lord, and serve him only." – 1 Sam. 7:3.

THE International Lesson course now turns again to the Old Testament. Six months ago we considered the child Samuel, his parentage, training, acceptance with God, etc. The present lesson takes up the thread of history in Samuel's old age. There is not a suggestion anywhere of disloyalty to the Lord or to the people of Israel on the part of this great prophet Samuel; the Lord's love and favor continued with him to the very close of his life and made it useful to the very end. As he advanced in years, and as the nation of Israel advanced in numbers, it seemed a proper thing that, in addition to the court of justice presided over by the prophet, there should be another court, especially on the southern boundary of Palestine, at Beersheba; and having sons, it was but natural that the prophet should expect of them considerable ability, discretion, wisdom and integrity in serving the Lord and his people according to the example which he had set them. Where could he expect to find more competent assistant judges for service in Beersheba than his own sons?

We perceive that integrity of character, although transmissible to a certain degree, cannot be fully relied upon in the children, however noble and God-fearing the parent. The heart, the will, of each individual, is independent; training may indicate to it the proper course, but full consecration to the Lord is essential to the full, ripe development of character. Samuel's integrity is shown by the fact that when it was proven to him that his sons were guilty of accepting bribes to pervert justice, he promptly removed them from their positions of influence. Doubtless he had in mind the course of his predecessor, Eli, who was too lax in his dealings with his own sons, and thus permitted great calamities to come upon them and upon the people. The nobility

and integrity of Samuel's course, which so commends itself to all lovers of righteousness, was no doubt to some extent guided by the lessons of the Lord exemplified in Eli's case. Certain it is that Samuel continued in the divine favor to the end of his course.

As we have already seen, there were elders, or judges, in all the tribes, whose business it was to conduct and adjudicate the smaller matters of the people of their own tribe. It was probable, therefore, that only the larger questions were brought before Samuel and his sons, who constituted, we might say, a kind of superior court – Samuel, as a prophet and judge of divine appointment, representing the Lord. The government of Israel was different from that of every other government in the world. God was their real King, and in his providences, according to the covenant he had made with them, he supervised their affairs – whether by permitting them to go into temporary captivity to their enemies, because of sins and unfaithfulness to him, or by prospering the nation and delivering them and guiding their efforts favorably when living in obedience to him. Under the judgeship of Samuel they had no king, no emperor, no one except the Lord, to hold an autocratic position, and whose word would be law – the judges raised up for them from time to time being providentially guided by the Lord. The government was not a republic in the present day understanding of that term. The people did not choose their own head, or president, or judge; they merely looked for the leadings of divine providence and accepted such judges as the Lord raised up for them. Their condition was a most happy one in many respects: how much better to have the Lord's providential guidance in all our affairs than to trust in our own wisdom or in the wisdom of some other man or some royal family!

As the Elders of Israel perceived that the sons of Samuel were not to be relied upon to follow in the steps of their father, and to be faithful and impartial judges, seeking to know and to judge amongst the people according to the divine will, they became fearful; they forgot – or perhaps never fully recognized – that God was their real Judge, their

King, and that Samuel was only his representative and mouthpiece. They forgot that although Samuel was growing old, the Lord was "the same yesterday, today and forever," unchangeable, and able to raise up for them, in his own due time, a judge of the kind best suited to their necessities. The anxious Elders of Israel consulted together and concluded that they would feel better satisfied if they were permanently tied up to some autocratic ruler – if they became the servants of some one of their number, and permitted his family in a line of succession to be their masters, their kings. Doubtless, too, they did not [R3216 : page 202] realize that, personally and nationally, they were on a higher plane than the nations around them that had kings; they felt, on the contrary, that they were "out of style"; and, as people are very apt to do, they concluded that the majority must be right, and probably felt somewhat ashamed to speak of their tribes as a nation without a king, without a master, without a visible lord, claiming allegiance merely to the invisible Jehovah. Kitto tells us of a somewhat similar sentiment springing up amongst the Dutch when the latter had a republican form of government:

"When the English and Dutch were plotting for power and influence in the East, the English, in order to damage their rivals, industriously circulated the dangerous secret that the Dutch had no king. The oriental mind was puzzled and perplexed by the indication of a condition so utterly beyond the scope of its experience and comprehension. The Dutch, alarmed for the effect of this slur upon their respectability, stoutly repelled the charge as an infamous calumny, – affirming that they had a very great king, and exalted, for the nonce, their Stadtt to the higher rank."

Influenced by this servility to custom, the Elders of Israel brought their petition, or prayer, to Samuel that he, as God's representative, would anoint for them a king – a special ruler over them, and make them as a whole a nation of servants to one of their own nation. It is hard for us to sympathize with such ignoble sentiments, such prayers for their own degradation. Samuel seems to have viewed the matter

from this standpoint, and, perhaps, also regarded it as a personal slight to himself. However, he very properly took the matter to the Lord in prayer. It was not for him to decide what and how – he was merely the Lord's mouthpiece and representative to speak to the Israelites in the name of the Lord whatever message he should receive. Ah, how grand it would be if the whole world could be under such a rule, – heavenly wisdom directing, and incorruptible earthly judges communicating and enforcing the divine message and law! And this, the Scriptures inform us, is what will come to pass eventually, the Lord's declaration being, "I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning." (Isa. 1:26.) However, before that grand condition – of which the Jewish law-givers and judges were merely the crudest types – can be realized, it will be necessary for the great King Immanuel to take his great power and reign and subdue all things unto himself. Then, "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power" – they will be ready to hearken to the voice of the Lord through those whom he will eventually appoint and recognize as his mouthpieces.

The Lord's answer to Samuel was that the prayer or petition of the people through their elders would be granted; but directed that he should, nevertheless, explain to them what this answer to their prayers, this fulfilment of their desires, would mean – that it would mean the surrender of their liberties and rights; that the rule of a king would be more or less despotic, tyrannical and selfish; that their sons and daughters would be taken to be servants in various capacities; that a large portion of their substance would be taken as taxes for the support of royalty, and that they would be subject to the whims of these masters whom they were desiring, whose pride and ambition would some time lead to rivalries and warfare, in which the whole people, as their servants, would suffer with them.

The elders heard all this delineation of the unwisdom of their course, but were, nevertheless, well satisfied to make the experiment – they wanted to be like the nations around them. How strong is the influence of imitation in all mankind! how necessary that all should

have before their minds true standards, true ideals of greatness of liberty or of righteousness, – of [R3217 : page 202] that which is really advantageous! Herein the Lord's people have his wisdom, his spirit – have a standpoint of observation superior to that of others, and possess the spirit of a sound mind proportionate to their education in the school of Christ. He has an education in the school of the Lord which gives him a finer acumen in respect to all the things of this present time, which seem comparatively insignificant to him in comparison with the things of the future – the eternal things. As the Apostle says, "He that is spiritual judgeth [understandeth] all things, yet he himself is judged [understood] of no man." – 1 Cor. 2:15.

The Lord pointed out that the people were not rejecting Samuel, but were rejecting him. Indeed, that they had not rejected Samuel was evident from the fact that they came to him with the request. It was their lack of faith in the Lord that led them to fear what would happen after Samuel should die, or when his usefulness should become impaired through old age. The Lord points out that this had been the attitude of Israel from the first – "all the works that they have done since I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, wherein they have forsaken me and served other gods, – so do they also unto thee." They, of course, forsook Samuel as their judge; for the king whom he would anoint would be the judge instead. But the discredit to Samuel was nothing in comparison to their discrediting and rejecting the One whom he represented.

The Lord's people of today may draw from these incidents a valuable lesson in connection with the divine supervision of spiritual Israel. The Lord organized the Church very much along the same lines as he organized natural Israel. He is the Head of the Church – the guide and director and instructor of the Church. He guarantees that all things shall work together for good [R3217 : page 203] to those who love him and follow his guidance. For a time the Lord's people were content with such leadership as he raised up for them in his own way, content that the Lord should direct through the leaders of Zion and that no man

should be called lord, or master, or king. For a time spiritual Israel looked only for such instructors, lawgivers, judges, teachers and assistants in the spiritual way as the Lord in his providences raised up for them. But, by and by, there came a time when they said, Let us make us a king – let us have a head in the Christian Church such as there is in all the heathen religions around us. The Lord had already pointed out to his people a great Leader by whom he had made them free; that they all were brethren, and that only one was Lord and Master; that they should recognize no man as lord, and should recognize each other only as servants; and that the one who served most thoroughly – through the Lord's supervision – was to be esteemed as raised up and provided by divine providence for the service, and to be esteemed in proportion to his humility and loyalty to the Lord and his Word.

The spirit of subserviency and the desire to have a head led, first, to a division amongst the Lord's people into two classes called clergy and laity, a division not recognized nor sanctioned in the Word of the Lord; and, secondly, amongst the clergy it led to the exaltation of some, called archbishops, to the position of lordship over districts; and, thirdly, it led to the choice amongst the archbishops of one to be a chief, or pope; and ultimately it led to this chief being considered infallible and a divinely appointed king over spiritual Israel. As there were some better and some worse amongst the kings of natural Israel, so there were some better and some worse amongst the popes who ruled in spiritual Israel for centuries. Finally, as there was a split in the kingdom of Israel between the ten tribes and the two tribes, so there came in time a split in spiritual Israel nominal, and Protestantism arose, no longer recognizing the popes as kings in spiritual Israel. However, the spirit of subserviency being still present, and the spirit of liberty wherewith Christ had made his people free being still lacking, the Reformation movement led to the appointment and recognition of numerous petty kingdoms in spiritual Israel – the Lutheran house and the Episcopal house and the Presbyterian house and the Methodist house, etc., etc., with their various ecclesiastical

princes and potentates, doctors of divinity, etc. – lording it over God's heritage. – 1 Pet. 5:3.

It is time for the establishment of the true kingdom – it is just at hand. It is time for the gathering of the elect out of every quarter, every district of this figurative Babylon in which the Lord's people are captives to these devices of Satan; it is time for a reassertion of the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free; it is time that the Lord's people should recognize him as their only King and Director; it is time for them to hear the words, "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils, for wherein is he to be accounted of?" (Isa. 2:22); it is time for the Lord's people to realize that the Lord is entirely competent to conduct his own work in the way most pleasing to himself, and most advantageous to those who are truly his; it is time for them to look to the Lord to see what agents, what channels of truth, what ministries of service in spiritual Israel he has provided or is providing. When we come to realize the situation, we find that all this matter of recognizing popes, cardinals, bishops, doctors of divinity, etc., is contrary to the divine arrangement – in direct antagonism to the same; but that, nevertheless, it has not hindered, and will not be permitted to hinder, the accomplishment of the Lord's work and the gathering of the true Israelites, the elect, the precious, the Lord's jewels, out of nominal Israel. This work of the Lord is going gradually on, regardless of what the people in general may do.

We have considered this lesson under the head of "Unfavorable Answers to Prayer," because it furnishes an excellent illustration along this line. What might have been the condition of Israel had they not prayed for a king, we cannot know particularly; but we can know, on the strength of the Lord's Word, that it would have been more favorable to them if they had been in a condition of heart which would have led them to thank God for his care, and to rejoice in him as their King, and to have made no such petition for an earthly monarch as is here recorded. The Lord through the Prophet Hosea (13:9-11) intimates that the answer of this prayer for a king was disadvantageous

to the nation; saying, "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help. I will be thy king: where is any other that may save thee in all thy cities? and thy judges of whom thou saidst, Give me a king and princes? I gave thee a king in mine anger, and took him away in my wrath." The king whom the Lord intends to give to Israel and to the world is Messiah. In due time the Lord will set his king upon his holy hill Zion; the law shall go forth from Mount Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem; in his day the righteous shall flourish and evil doers shall be cut off. The Lord took away the kings of Israel when the people went into captivity to Babylon; there have been no independent kings of their nation since. Today, after centuries of experience without a king of their own, and under various kings of various nations, they are probably in a better condition of heart than ever before to receive the great blessing which God intends to bring to them first amongst the nations of the [R3217 : page 204] world. The prophet declares of them respecting Messiah's Kingdom, that they shall be ready to hail it and shall say, "This is our God, we have waited for him and he will save us." They certainly had serious experiences, not only under their own kings, but under all the kings of the earth; they certainly should be glad that the time shall again come when the Lord will be King over them – and over all the earth; when he shall restore to them a system of lawgivers and judges, and bless all the families of the earth through the seed of Abraham, – Messiah and his bride, the overcomers of spiritual Israel. – Gal. 3:16,29.

What we thus see exemplified on a large and national scale we may see exemplified in a small way closer to us. How many of us in our ignorance and blindness have at some time in life prayed for the various systems of bondage, for the various sects of Christendom, and labored, too, for their upbuilding, only to find ourselves injured spiritually by that which we prayed for and labored for. We asked amiss, as did the Elders of Israel, while, instead, our hearts as well as theirs should have inquired continually for the ways of the Lord, for his leadings, not asking to have him favor and bless that which we ignorantly and mistakenly supposed to be for his glory and our own

good. Let us learn to pray aright, as well as to labor and to hope aright; and in order so to do let us be swift to hear, slow to speak, swift to hearken to the Word of the Lord and to the lesson which he has already given us, and to his method of instructing us and guiding us and blessing us. Let us be slow to tell him what our preferences are; indeed, let us seek to attain that development of Christian character which will permit us always not to seek our own wills, but the will and way of our Father in heaven.

The same principle will apply in the more private affairs of our daily lives. Several parents have told us, with aching hearts, of prayers answered which subsequently they could have wished never answered; they have told us of companions and children on their deathbeds for whose lives they had prayed with importunity and without either the words or the sentiment, Thy will be done, and how the Lord answered those prayers, and what terrible evils had come to them through the answers. All cases may not be alike, but the properly exercised and heart-developed children of God should expect to attain to the place where all of their prayers are answered, and answered in the best possible way, and most satisfactorily, because the Lord's Word dwells in them richly. They would not ask amiss – would not ask anything contrary to the divine will and providences; but rather, trusting to the divine wisdom, their prayer would be, "Lord, thy will, not mine, be done."

