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God's Instrument in a Day of Declension

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And it came to pass, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-oni: but his father called him Benjamin" (Genesis 35:18).

"And he lifted up his eyes, and saw Benjamin his brother, his mother's son, and said, Is this your youngest brother, of whom ye spake unto me? And he said, God be gracious unto thee. my son. And Joseph made haste; for his heart yearned over his brother: and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber, and wept there" (Genesis 43:29-30, Am. R.V.).

"And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I poured out my soul before the Lord... And it came to pass, when the time was come about, that Hannah conceived, and bare a son; and she called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the Lord" (1 Samuel 1:15,20).

"And the child Samuel ministered unto the Lord before Eli. And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no frequent vision. And it came to pass at that time, when Eli was laid down in his place (now his eyes had begun to wax dim, so that he could not see), and the lamp of God was not yet gone out, and Samuel was laid down to sleep, in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was; that the Lord called Samuel: and he said, Here am I" (1 Samuel 3:1-4).

There are three things about which it is very necessary for us to be quite clear and certain. I will state them briefly and concisely without comment or enlargement.

The first is that God never gives up His original decision to bring His people to spiritual fulness.

The second is that, if His people, in general, move away from His intention, He raises up vessels and ministries both to bring that intention into view, and, as far as possible, to recover His people to it.

And the third thing is that those vessels and ministries have a peculiar and particular history under His hand. They are in a peculiar way governed by the purpose for which they are raised up.

There are two subsidiary factors in that connection. One is that such vessels and ministries must not compare or judge themselves by other standards, by other ministries, by other things that the Lord may be doing. Neither should they be judged by others. God is dealing with them in a particular way, for a particular purpose, not necessarily saying that they are more important than others, but the fact is that they are called to a particular work.

The second thing is that if the purpose of God is corporate, the corporate factor will govern the instrument that He raises up. That is a very important thing to remember. Now this means that each individual within the compass of that ministry and its purpose will himself or herself be governed by the corporate law. Each individual will be a part of something much more than himself or herself, a part of a corporate whole, and will therefore have his or her experience under God's hand in a related way. It will not be just something personal and private. I would that you could remember that and follow it out. For the present we shall not do more than seek some help which we may find in these two of whom we have read - Benjamin and Samuel.

Features Common To Benjamin And Samuel

You probably recognize that there are a number of features common to Benjamin and Samuel. Firstly, they were both sons in a peculiar way. Benjamin was distinguished from his brethren, and, as we read, Joseph took special account of Benjamin, just as Benjamin's father had done. He stood in a particular and peculiar relationship both to the father and to his brethren. Samuel was the same. The sonship of Samuel was quite distinctive, of a different kind from others. We will not stay with it - we note the fact.

The second thing about them was that they were both born of peculiar travail. Rachel died at the birth of Benjamin, and named him Ben-oni, 'Son of my sorrow', born out of sorrow. And we know well of Hannah's distress and sorrow and trial and travail unto Samuel.

Then they both came out of a state of death. That is perfectly clear with Benjamin. Rachel died; Benjamin lived out of her death. Samuel had a background of death, for that was the state of Hannah, and the state of Hannah was only a reflection of the spiritual state of the Lord's people, and out of that grave, that death, Samuel was born.

Again, they both came in at a time of spiritual declension. The days of Benjamin were the days when those brothers, indeed the whole family, Joseph excepted, were in a very poor state spiritually. The selling of Joseph and all that bad conduct and behaviour is the unveiling of a very poor state in the sons of Israel. We know what a state the Lord's people were in in Samuel's days. That needs no further comment.

And then they both represented a turning-point. Benjamin clearly was that - the turning-point in this whole wonderful story. It was upon Benjamin, "little Benjamin", that the whole thing turned. The verse that we picked out from the story, the coming of the brothers to Joseph in Egypt and Joseph lighting upon his youngest brother, is the turning-point. You look at it again. And how true that was of Samuel. He was a turning-point in Israel; so much turned upon him.

A Peculiar History Under God's Hand

Well, these two clearly set forth a vessel such as that of which we spoke at the beginning - the vessel by which God moves into a state of spiritual decline to bring His own full thought into view, and, as far as possible, to recover His people unto it, and such a vessel, as I have said, will have a peculiar kind of history under God's hand, and it is just that history that I want to touch upon here.

(1) A Clear-Cut Beginning

It is very simple in its presentation; not so simple when you come to go through it. In the first place, such a vessel has to begin at the beginning. When the Lord was going to move in at those times, He did not move in through a full-grown man with a lot of history. He moved in through Benjamin, the youngest - you might call him the infant amongst them. With Samuel He started right back there at his birth. In this dispensation, the vessel that is going to bring into view God's full thought, and recover to it as far as can be, will have to be taken right back behind tradition, right back behind a lot of history, right back behind much that has been built up and become common and accepted. It will have to be taken back to start at the beginning. It may have had a Christian life, a Christian upbringing; it may have had behind it much of Christianity; but there will come a crisis when it will seem as though there had been nothing before at all. 'This is the beginning: we are starting all over again now!' There must be that clear-cut beginning which is not just the carry-over of history, the carry-over of form and formalism, but something tremendous, as though there had never been any Christianity before until now. 'This is a break in history!' It will have to be like that with such a vessel: so, if you are not prepared for the Lord to do something with you that will make all that is less than His full thought as nothing, to bring you to a place where you know that all else is as nothing compared with what the Lord now reveals to you and makes known to you and is seeking to bring you into: if you are not prepared for such a work, you cannot be such a vessel in the Lord's hand, or part of such a vessel. It must be like that. And when I say that, I am speaking true to the experience of many. There has come a point when they have realized that all their past Christianity has been almost as nothing, compared with that with which the Lord has now broken in upon them. It is like beginning all over again with a new conception - some have said a new Bible; beginning at the beginning.

(2) A Difference

The second thing about all such instrumentalities is that they must not be a part of the existing spiritual condition. How separate were Hannah and Samuel from the existing condition. Whatever had settled down on Israel, Hannah was not a part of that; she was in revolt against it, she was in travail over it, she was different. As to Samuel, it is so perfectly clear that he was apart. The same was true of Benjamin. There was something different. He was not one of those brothers, those ten brothers. There was a difference. I mention it, and you think about it - that, if we are going to be useful to the Lord in any greater purpose of His heart, we shall have to be no part of that which is content and satisfied with something less, and certainly no part of that which is contrary to His mind. There is to be a difference about us.

(3) The Voice Of The Lord Known Personally

The third thing here is that such have to learn the voice of the Lord for themselves. That comes out very clearly in Samuel. To learn the voice of the Lord for himself was essential to his future ministry. He could be put in the way of learning it, but he had to learn it for himself. The Lord never came to Eli and told Eli what He wanted Samuel to know. He had to come to Samuel himself, and right there

from the beginning Samuel had to learn to recognize and discern and understand the voice of the Lord for himself, directly and personally - and how important that is! That may explain a great deal of the Lord's work with us, with some of you. Why is the Lord dealing with you as He is, and why is it that you can get so little help in your deepest problem at second hand? The Lord is seeking to make you know Him personally at first hand; not to make you independent, but to make you useful. That is very important.

The Need For Faithfulness

Further, such an instrument has to be faithful, even though it seems presumptuous. Naturally it would appear very presumptuous for little Samuel, the child Samuel, to go to Eli and point out where he was wrong. The Lord did not commission Samuel to go and rebuke his elder; but when Eli pressed the point - 'What is it that the Lord has said? hide it not from me' - and, so to speak, put Samuel in the corner and would not let him out, Samuel realized that he had to be faithful. He had to put aside other considerations - even this, that it seemed a presumptuous thing for him to tell the old man Eli all that was wrong about him and his house, and about the nation. Sometimes we are called upon to be faithful when it just seems like presumption, like putting other people right. It must be done in a spirit of meekness, but, as the Apostle says, in all faithfulness. Such a vessel must be faithful, that is the point - faithful to what the Lord has said and has shown.

And as we advance, the difficulties seem to increase and become more acute. In Samuel's case, the next thing was that he had to do what the strange ways of God required, even though his own heart rebelled against it. I am thinking of Saul. Samuel's heart rebelled against making Saul king. He knew why the people had brought Saul forward. He knew that they were giving up the government of the Lord in having a king like unto the nations. His heart rebelled, but the Lord said, 'Do it!' In effect, - 'Trust My wisdom - I know what I am doing; you do it!' Faithfulness to the Lord sometimes requires that we do many things in those sovereign orderings of God with which we ourselves naturally do not agree. That is pressing things very closely, but it is like that sometimes. The Lord took that strange way. The Lord said to Samuel, "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected Me" (1 Samuel 8:7); 'Nevertheless, you have to go and anoint that man'; and, with all his soul revolting, Samuel had to do the thing that the strange ways of God required.

A Prayer Ministry

Now, that would require quite a lot of time to analyze and apply. But what are we getting at? We are getting to the final thing and the inclusive thing with Samuel. Samuel's whole life-ministry was fulfilled through prayer. The Lord singled out Samuel as one of two who, if any could possibly prevail with God, then they would. "Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind would not be toward this people" (Jeremiah 15:1). If anybody can prevail with God it is Samuel; and you know the life of Samuel - what a prayer life it was, how the people took account of it. "Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us" (1 Sam. 7:8). "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you" (1 Sam. 12:23). His ministry was mainly a ministry of prayer, which meant that he had to have a place with God so complete and utter that his own reasonings did not come in, his own feelings did not come in, nothing about himself came in. He was right there with God, and although God told him to do things which seemed altogether contrary to God, and certainly contrary to his own best judgment, he obeyed. He knew it would work out. He could not understand why the Lord was doing it: it was going to be disaster, it seemed to be a contradiction; but he obeyed. We cannot have power with God unless God has got us into a place like that.

A Peculiar Corporate History

I would like to say very much more about this, but I want to close with an extra emphasis, an emphasis upon the point which I made a little while ago: namely, the character of a corporate collective vessel which God may raise up for the purpose of recovering amongst His people His own full thought concerning them and concerning His Son. Such a vessel, based upon and governed by the corporate principle, will have a peculiar corporate history. There is something about such a work and such a ministry and such a purpose which is different.

In the whole range of His sovereign purpose to bring to a knowledge or to a fuller knowledge of Christ, God raises up and uses many particular instrumentalities and ministries. It may be distinctive preachers and preaching places. He has done this, and is still doing it. Or it may be a ministry for the deepening of the spiritual life, and special gifts may be given for this. There are various other particular aspects of God's activity toward His one end, and each is to be recognized, honoured, and respected. We are here concerned with one of these, and our point is that each is dealt with by God in a way which is peculiar and essential to its particular function and purpose in the whole. This ministry of which we are here speaking is different from many others, and being so, it is dealt with by God in a peculiar way. A preaching gift, ministry, and place has its particular purpose, but it does not mean that it necessarily brings into being a corporate organic expression of Christ, and while the material for the House of God may be gathered and instructed by it, it does not always follow that a really related organism such as that referred to above is brought into being. The same may be said of Convention ministry, or a ministry for the deepening of the spiritual life of individual Christians.

When the Lord is concerned with this corporate factor, as He most certainly is, He deals with the vessel and ministry in a particular way; their history is different. The matter of relatedness is a very great factor in spiritual fulness. The matter of dependence upon one another is a very great factor in spiritual enlargement. We are going to learn a very great deal more, and reach a very great deal more fulness in Christ, in a related way, than we should do as individuals under the best ministry. Do believe that; it is very true. Therefore the Lord deals with those who constitute such a vessel, not just as individuals. They are required, every one of them, to take this attitude: 'God is dealing with me in relation to a number of people, all of whom constitute for Him a vessel for a particular purpose, and the only explanation of His ways with me is that related principle. If I were an individual by myself, I should not have to have many of the experiences that I have, and if I had my way, I would get away from all these people as soon as I could and get on on my own and know the Lord for myself without all this business of relatedness!' To take such a course would be to lose the main thing that God is after - you would just get right out of the way of that thing which is nearest to His heart: because for a corporate purpose He must have a corporate instrument, and so He must deal with us on that basis of relationship - and everything is related. Therefore in this realm the enemy will make the breakdown of fellowship his chief object.

Do not take your trying and difficult experiences, your sufferings, as merely personal. Paul was so emphatic and clear about that principle. "... fill up... that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ... for His body's sake, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). He could have put it in another way and said - 'The sufferings that come upon me are not my personal sufferings in relation to my own separate spiritual life and growth. It is not just an individual and separate thing that I am going through, that God wants to bring me personally and alone into some greater fulness of spiritual life. It is related to His whole Body.' Believe that and it will be a help, because we are part of some larger thing, to serve a larger purpose than we as individuals, however much we might know of the Lord, could serve. There is a far greater value to the Lord in having an organic vessel in the greater fulness of Christ than in having a number of separate individuals going on with Him. So that He deals with such in a particular and peculiar way. They have experiences under His hand which are different.

Put yourself into Benjamin's place, in that history that is gathered around the bringing of the father and Joseph and all the brethren together in one family in the good of the Lord's purpose. It was a disrupted family, a family in spiritual decline. It was in a bad way. God had called that family through Abraham that it should be the family representing His full thought in the nations, and now it was like this. How is it going to be brought together in the land of Goshen, how is it going to be formed into the spiritual Israel? 'Little Benjamin' is the key. But look at his experiences. When at last under Joseph's insistence they brought him, tore him from his father's heart and brought him - and then Joseph sent them away and kept Benjamin! Put yourself in Benjamin's place. He is going through a pretty hard time. And when Joseph's cup was found in the sack of Benjamin! - Joseph, acting a part, sent his messenger after them, saying he had missed his cup - and he had deliberately had it put in that sack! This is strange Providence, these are mysterious ways, for Benjamin. Everything seems to be against him. He could have said, 'I am not responsible for this, it is all going against me, I am involved in a trick'. So he was brought back as under a shadow. That lad is going through a difficult time because he is the link.

Samuel, likewise, had no easy time. It was something different. We cannot here work it out in fulness. But this is the peculiar nature of a vessel that is to meet a peculiar need, and this is the particular kind of history that every part of that instrument will have, which is different from all else. So we cannot judge others, nor can we judge our own position in the light of others; and others should not judge us. The Lord Himself knows what He is doing.