

God's Fulness for an Empty Vessel.

1 Samuel 4 and 7.

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The two chapters given above furnish a most impressive illustration of a principle which runs all through the inspired volume, namely, that the moment man takes his right place, God can meet him in perfect grace — free, sovereign, unqualified grace: the fullness of God waits on an empty vessel. This great principle shines everywhere from Genesis to Revelation. The word "principle" hardly expresses what is meant; it is too cold. We would speak of it as a grand, living, divine fact, which shines with heavenly lustre in the gospel of the grace of God and in the history of God's people collectively and individually, both in the Old and New Testament times.

But man must be in his right place. This is absolutely essential. It is only there he can get a right view of God. When man as he is, meets God as He is, there is a perfect answer to every question, a divine solution of every difficulty. It is from the standpoint of utter and hopeless ruin that man gets a full, clear, delivering view and sense of God's salvation. It is when man gets to the end of himself in every shape and form — his bad self and his good self, his guilty self and his righteous self — that he begins with a Saviour-God. This is true at the starting-post, and true all along the way. The fullness of God ever waits on an empty vessel. The great difficulty is to get the vessel empty: when that is done, the whole matter is settled, because the fullness of God can then flow in.

This surely is a grand, fundamental truth; and in the chapters which stand at the head of this paper we see it in its application to the Lord's earthly people of old. Let us turn to them for a moment.

In the opening of 1 Samuel 4 we find Israel defeated by the Philistines; but instead of humbling themselves before the Lord, in true contrition and self-judgement because of their terrible condition, and accepting their defeat as the just judgement of God, there is utter insensibility and hardness of heart. "And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us to-day before the Philistines?" Now it is very evident from these words that the elders were not in their right place. The word "wherefore" would never have dropped from their lips had they but realized their moral condition. They would have known too well why it was. There was shameful sin in their midst — the vile conduct of Hophni and Phinehas. "Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord; for men abhorred the offering of the Lord" (1 Sam. 2: 17).

But alas! the people had no true sense of their terrible condition, and, as a consequence, they had no true sense of the remedy. Hence they say, "Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies." What a delusion! What utter blindness! There is no self-judgement, no confession of the dishonour done to the name and worship of the God of Israel, no looking to Jehovah in true brokenness and contrition of heart. No; there is the vain notion that the ark would save them out of the hand of their enemies.

"So the people sent to Shiloh, that they might bring from thence the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, which dwelleth between the cherubim: and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God." What a fearful condition of things! The ark of God associated with those ungodly men whose wickedness was about to bring down upon the whole nation the just judgement of a holy and righteous God. Nothing can be more dreadful, nothing more offensive to God, than the daring attempt to connect His name, His truth, with wickedness. Moral evil, under any

circumstances, is bad enough; but the attempt to combine moral evil with the name and service of Him who is holy and true, is the very highest and darkest form of wickedness, and can only bring down the heavy judgement of God. Those ungodly priests, the sons of Eli, had dared to defile the very precincts of the sanctuary with their abominations; and yet these were the men who accompanied the ark of God into the field of battle. What blindness and hardness of heart! That one sentence, "Hophni and Phinehas were there with the ark of the covenant of God," embodies in its brief compass the terrible reflection of Israel's moral condition.

"And when the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all *Israel shouted with a great shout*, so that the earth rang again." How vain was the shout! — how hollow the boast! — how empty the pretension! Alas! it was followed, as must ever be the case, by humiliating defeat. "The Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man into his tent: and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. And the ark of God was taken, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were slain."

What a condition of things! The priests slain; the ark taken; the glory departed. The ark in which they boasted, and on which they confidently built their hope of victory, was actually in the hands of the uncircumcised Philistines. All was gone. That one terrible fact — the ark of God in the house of Dagon — told the melancholy tale of Israel's complete failure and ruin. God must have reality, truth and holiness in those with whom He deigns to dwell. "Holiness becometh Thy house, O Lord, forever." It was a privilege of the very highest order to have Jehovah dwelling in their midst; but it demanded holiness. He could not connect His name with unjudged sin. Impossible. It would be a denial of His nature, and God cannot deny Himself. He must have the place where He dwells suited to His nature and character. "Be ye holy, for I am holy." This is a grand, fundamental truth, which must be tenaciously held and reverently confessed. It must never be surrendered.

But let us glance for a moment at the history of the ark in the land of the Philistines. It is at once solemn and instructive. Israel had signally failed and shamefully sinned. They had proved themselves wholly unworthy of the ark of the covenant of the Lord; and the Philistines had laid their uncircumcised hands upon it, and actually presumed to bring it into the house of their false god, as if the Lord God of Israel and Dagon could be in the same house! Blasphemous presumption! But the glory which had departed from Israel was vindicated in the darkness and solitude of the temple of Dagon.

God will be God, however His people may fail; and hence we see that when Israel had utterly failed to guard the ark of His testimony, and allowed it to pass into the hands of the Philistines, — when all was lost in man's hand, — then the glory of God shone out in power and splendour: Dagon fell, and the whole land of the Philistines was made to tremble beneath the hand of Jehovah. His presence was intolerable to them, and they sought to get rid of it as soon as possible. It was proved beyond all question to be utterly impossible that Jehovah and the uncircumcised could go on together. Thus it was, thus it is, and thus it ever must be. "What concord hath Christ with Belial? . . . And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?" None whatever.

Let us now turn for a few moments to 1 Sam. 7. Here we find another condition of things altogether. Here we shall find something of the empty vessel, and, as is ever the case, the fullness of God waiting upon it. "And it came to pass, while the ark abode in Kirjath-jearim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years: and *all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.*" In 1 Sam. 5 and 1 Sam. 6 we see that the Philistines could not do *with* Jehovah. In 1 Sam. 7 we see that Israel could not do *without* Him. This is striking and instructive. The world cannot endure the very thought of the

presence of God. We see this from the very moment of the fall, in Gen. 3. Man fled away from God ere God drove him out of Eden. He could not endure the divine presence. "I heard Thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Thus it has ever been, from that moment to the present. As some one has said, "If you could put an unconverted man into Heaven, he would get out of it as soon as possible." What a telling fact! How it stamps the whole human race, and accounts for any depth of moral pravity into which a member of that race may sink! If man cannot endure the presence of God, where is he fit for, and what is he capable of? Weighty and solemn questions!

But "all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord." Twenty long, dreary years had rolled on without the blessed sense of His presence; "And Samuel spake unto all the house of Israel, saying, If ye do return unto the Lord *with all your hearts*, then put away the strange gods, and Ashtaroth, from among you, and *prepare your hearts* unto the Lord, and serve Him *only*, and HE" not the ark — "will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines. Then the children of Israel did put away Baalim and Ashtaroth, and served the Lord only. And Samuel said, Gather all Israel to Mizpeh, and I will pray for you unto the Lord. And they gathered together to Mizpeh, and drew water, and poured it out before the Lord, and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord" (1 Sam. 7: 2-6.)

Here we have a different condition of things altogether from that presented in 1 Sam. 4. Here we see the empty vessel getting ready to receive the fullness of God. There is no hollow assumption, no looking to an outward form for salvation. All is reality, all heart-work here. Instead of the boastful shout, there is the out-poured water — the striking and expressive symbol of utter weakness and good-for-nothingness. In a word, man is taking his right place; and that, as we know, is the sure precursor of God taking His place. This great principle runs like a beautiful golden line all through the divine volume, all through the history of God's people, all through the history of souls. It is wrapped up in that brief but comprehensive clause, "Repentance and remission of sins." Repentance is man's true place. Remission of sins is God's response. The former is the empty vessel; the latter, the fullness of God. When these meet, all is settled.

This is very strikingly presented in the scene now before us. Israel having taken their true place, God is free to act on their behalf. They had confessed themselves to be as water poured upon the ground — perfectly helpless, perfectly worthless. This was all they had to say for themselves, and this was enough. God can now enter the scene and make short work with the Philistines. "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

"And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt offering wholly unto the Lord: and Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel; and the Lord heard him. And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel" — How little they knew whom they were coming against, or who was about to meet them! "But the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel.... Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer (the stone of help), saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

What a contrast between Israel's boastful shout in 1 Sam. 4 and Jehovah's thunder in 1 Sam. 7! The former was human pretension; the latter, divine power. That was instantly followed by humiliating defeat; this, by splendid triumph. The Philistines knew nothing of what had taken place — the water poured out, the penitential cry, the offering up of the lamb, the priestly intercession. What could uncircumcised Philistines know about these precious realities? Just nothing. When the earth rang with Israel's pretentious shout, they could take cognisance of that. The men of the world can understand and

appreciate self-assertion and self-confidence; but these are the very things that shut out God. On the other hand, a broken heart, a contrite spirit, a lowly mind, are His delight. When Israel took the low place, the place of self-judgement and confession, then Jehovah's thunder was heard, and the host of the Philistines was scattered and confounded. The fullness of God ever waits on an empty vessel. Blessed, precious truth! May we enter more fully into its depth, fullness, power, and scope!

Ere closing this brief paper, I would just observe that 1 Sam. 4 and 7 remind us of the churches of Laodicea and Philadelphia, in Rev. 3. The former presents to us a condition which we should sedulously avoid; the latter, a condition which we should diligently and earnestly cultivate. In that, we see miserable self-complacency, and Christ left outside. In this, we see conscious weakness and nothingness, but Christ exalted, loved, and honoured; His Word kept, and His Name prized.

And be it remembered that these things run on to the end. It is very instructive to see that the last four of the seven churches give us four phases of the Church's history right on to the end. In Thyatira, we find Romanism; in Sardis, Protestantism. In Philadelphia, as we have said, we have that condition of soul, that attitude of heart, which every true believer and every assembly of believers should diligently cultivate and faithfully exhibit. Laodicea, on the contrary, presents a condition of soul and an attitude of heart from which we should shrink with godly fear. Philadelphia is as grateful as Laodicea is loathsome to the heart of Christ. The former, He will make a pillar in the temple of His God; the latter, He will spew out of His mouth, and Satan will take it up and make it a cage of every unclean and hateful bird — Babylon! An awful consideration for all whom it may concern. And let us never forget that for any to pretend to be Philadelphia is really the spirit of Laodicea. Wherever you find pretension, assumption, self-assertion or self-complacency, there you have, in spirit and principle, Laodicea — from which may the good Lord deliver all His people!

Let us be content to be nothing and nobody in this scene of self-exaltation. Let it be our aim to walk in the shade, as far as human thoughts are concerned, yet never be out of the sunshine of our Father's countenance. In a word, let us ever bear in mind that "*the fullness of God ever waits on an empty vessel.*"