

The Ghost of a Chance

BY HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK



Text: "Bring me up Samuel"
— *I Samuel 28:11*

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THE GHOST OF A CHANCE

THERE is a picture that haunts the imagination these days concerning which I wish to speak seriously with you on this last Sunday in the old year. It is the picture of our children or of their children after them sitting amid the wreckage of our Western civilization and vainly wishing that they might get back again the chance that we have in our hands now.

If we feel indisposed to entertain that picture we may at least agree that it is the more intelligent and thoughtful persons of our generation who feel it most and the careless and thoughtless who see it least. To say that it is impossible is nonsense. Too many times in history the children of great civilizations—Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome—have sat amid the wreckage of their power wishing that they could get back again the chance that their fathers threw away, for us to suppose that such a fate is unlikely to befall us.

Let us dramatize this situation for our thought by one of the most picturesque scenes in the Old Testament—Saul going down to the witch of Endor's cave crying, "Bring me up Samuel." One moonlight night on Mount Tabor I saw the setting of that old scene with unforgettable impressiveness. Far across the plain of Esdraelon, shining in the moonlight, one could see Mount Gilboa, where long ago Saul's army had encamped. Here in the foreground, three miles away, the lights of the little village of Endor, still called by the same name, were shining clear.

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One vividly could picture Saul, perhaps on such a night as this, slipping away from his army in disguise, skirting the hosts of the Philistines, to the witch of Endor's cave, there in despair of his situation to plead with that ancient medium for a chance to speak to the dead prophet again—"Bring me up Samuel."

Now, the point is that Saul had had Samuel. He had had Samuel for many years and had disregarded and humiliated him. Samuel, the prophet, had picked Saul out to be the king of Israel, had tried to stand beside him and counsel him, had offered him his friendship and his wisdom; and Saul had thrown him over, dropped the old pilot, and floundered on alone with growing folly and misfortune until now, when the final crisis comes and Samuel is dead, he wants the ghost of his old chance back again. "Bring me up Samuel."

How familiar and how tragic that situation is! To have a great opportunity, to be careless about it and lose it and then want the ghost of it back again—how human that is! How many men, nations, and civilizations have gone down to Endor's cave crying, "Bring me up Samuel!"

Any one who knows human life knows that there must be husbands and wives here this morning saying that. They had every opportunity for a beautiful marriage and a lovely home, but one or the other, or both of them, have tossed aside the sanctities of family life or handled with ill-tempered fingers the fineness of family relationships, and now, in a crisis too imminent to be avoided, we can see them slipping down to the witch of Endor's cave wishing that they had the ghost of their old chance back again.

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One knows also that there must be persons here this morning acquainted with Endor's cave in their moral life. Here is a man thirty years of age under anxious watchcare in a New York hospital. He started drinking ten years ago. He is an alcoholic now, desperately trying to keep his footing on a steep and slippery incline whose bottom is a drunkard's grave, and it is not pleasant to hear him as he talks about the chance that he had a decade since, with a free, unfettered life, and cries, "Bring me up Samuel."

Yes, look far enough and you will find whole nations in Endor's cave. They had their chance. Once they rode high on the saddle of the world but the insane game of war has been played for them with disastrous consequence, and because they live closer than we do to the ruins of old empires, from Tyre to Rome, that once bestrode the world and fell, they are not so childishly optimistic as we are. They are wondering today whether they will ever get the ghost of their old chance back again.

My friends, the witch of Endor's cave is very populous, and a good time to visit it voluntarily, before we are forced to, and look at it with discerning eyes, is the last Sunday of an old year. How many of us even these last twelve months can remember chances lost that we wish we had back again! As to the basic principle which underlies all this we would agree. If any man or nation or civilization has a fine chance, then let the most be made of it, for it is fairly easy to keep an opportunity but it is desperately difficult to recover one. How one wishes that that simple, basic truth could be made plain to individuals, to say nothing of civilizations!

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You young men and women from our own families, there is no doubt about your having a great chance. You have it in your hands today—the heritage of fine opportunity—and it is not so hard to keep if you will, but it is desperately difficult to get back again if once you lose it.

That is true about reputation. As I look back on my youth I think they did not adequately stress the importance of reputation. They used to say that character is what a man is and reputation is what people think he is; take care of the first and the second will take care of itself. Well, there is truth in that and sometimes a man must fall back on it, but whenever I see a youth with a clean name, no tarnish on it yet, I think of the multitudes who would give almost everything they possess to have that chance back again. You remember the lines that Robert Burns wrote for his own grave:

*The poor Inhabitant below
Was quick to learn and wise to know,
And keenly felt the friendly glow,
And softer flame;
But thoughtless follies laid him low,
And stain'd his name!*

What is true about reputation is true about character. Wide areas of youth are divided into two parts: those who start with a heavy handicap and work up, and those who start with a great opportunity and throw it away. As for the first, thirty years ago you could have seen washing dishes in a Pittsburgh hotel kitchen a young Hungarian peasant lad just over, unable to speak English. What chance had he? Well, some time since I gave the hand of fellowship to that boy welcoming him into the communion of the Chris-

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tian Church. He worked by day and studied at night. When he graduated from the night high school he took as the subject for his oration the opportunities that America gives to the boys who come to her shores. He worked his way through one of our colleges and graduated an honor man, worked his way through the Harvard Law School and into the membership of a New York law firm, and some of you may have cases with him, for all I know, little thinking that once he was a kitchen boy in a Pittsburgh hotel. That is one kind. He had a slim chance but he made the most of it.

Here is the other—a man whose name once was known from one end of this country to the other as a leader in the Student Christian Movement. He had every chance and, for a while a shining light, he is now a profane, contemptible wreck of a man, eking out a miserable existence in the back areas of the city. To see him is to hear the prayer, "Bring me up Samuel."

Now what always lies behind this tragic experience in Endor's cave? Some one says, Sin. Yes, but that is too general. Always a silly optimism lies behind it. Say what we will about the unsupportable dreariness of life without hope, the fact still remains that when hope goes to seed in foolish optimism the consequences are disastrous. Imagine going to Saul in those first days of his early victories and saying to him, Saul, you are making a fool of yourself; Samuel is the greatest opportunity you have; make the most of him or, if not, some day you will go down to some witch of Endor's cave wanting the ghost of this chance back again. Saul would not have believed it. He would have "hoped for the best." He would have thought that everything would

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come out right. I want to tackle that attitude this morning. It is one of the most prevalent, popular attitudes of the United States in particular and it is one of the most dangerous things in the world today. As a people we are tempted to a silly optimism.

For one thing, we had a gigantic continent to exploit and the psychological results of that have been tremendous. We could waste our coal, waste our forests, spend our natural resources like drunken sailors, but everything would come out all right. Imagine America ever going down to the witch of Endor's cave wanting the ghost of her chance back again—impossible! But it is not impossible. It is inevitable unless we can be cured of our fatuous optimism.

Moreover, predisposed to a Pollyanna attitude by our resourceful continent, we have been carried further by our faith in inevitable progress. Many Americans who have given up almost all the rest of their religion—faith in God, the soul, and immortality—still believe with utter credulity in the inevitability of progress. Their philosophy of history is that we are all on an escalator going up; if we should run we would go faster but anyway, willy-nilly, no matter what we do, tomorrow we will be higher than today; we are going up. That is a disastrous and absurd lie. Ask Greece; ask Rome; ask some of my English friends who are wondering if today even Great Britain can come back again. Regress is as possible as progress. It is all a question as to whether the nation successfully wrestles with her opportunity while she has it.

Moreover, predisposed to a Pollyanna attitude by our great continent and carried further by this

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faith in automatic and guaranteed progress, we crown our optimism with a comfortable religion. Americans are noted around the world for having worked out the most comfortable religion on earth. When I listen to some of the characteristic productions of the churches I am sick at heart. Religion for comfort only—that is it. All too little realistic grappling with stern facts. All too little facing of difficult issues. All too little that is costly as though men had a serious sense of human destinies hanging in the balance. Religion for comfort only! A great deal of our American faith amounts to little more than this: that God is like a father with his children in a boat; he lets his children steer; sometimes to train them he lets them steer in perilous places but, just as a father when a storm rises and the rocks are near, will take the tiller and steer to safety, so God in every pinch of peril will recover us; whatever we do, everything will come out all right in the end; trust him for that. That is a dangerous religious falsehood. Look down the shores of history and see. What are those wrecks beaten to pieces on the rocks? Man after man, nation after nation, civilization after civilization that had their chance and rose to prominence and power and, growing wayward, threw their opportunity away and now are hulks beaten to pieces on the reefs of history. God does let his children wreck their boats.

All around the nave of this church, on the capitals of the pillars, are carved scenes from the life of Jeremiah. I wish that they might break into speech. We need his voice in America today. He lived and worked when the Jewish people were on the verge of their great catastrophe, the exile. Everybody else was optimistic. They

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would tinker up this political alliance or that; they would trust God, whatever happened, to recover them in the end. As Jeremiah said, "They have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace." He only was a realist. For forty years of prophethood he stood among his people, the one man in Judah who saw the facts and courageously declared them. He hated the message that he had to deliver as any man hates to be sobering when he would far rather be cheerful. He said it was like a fire in his bones and that he could not contain it. But in the end what he foresaw came to pass and that fatuously optimistic people, throwing its chance away, went out into the Endor's cave of the Babylonian exile, crying, "Bring me up Samuel."

When I say that we in America need Jeremiah's voice, I am no croaking raven, crying, "Nevermore, nevermore." Our Samuel is not dead yet. That is why it is worth while talking about him. Not by a long way, I hope, has he departed from us. We still have a glorious opportunity. It is in our hands, but now is the time to emphasize that fact. If on this road of a foolish optimism we go much further, there is no power in heaven above or the earth beneath that will keep us, too, from Endor's cave.

Consider, for example, that we still have a chance to stop war. The more one knows about it the slimmer he sees the chance to be, but we still have a chance to stop war. Still the memories of our people can vividly recall the ugly and brutal hell that war is. Still books and plays keep vividly in the imagination of the populace the obscene abominations that war involves. Still

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straight-shooting thinkers like Albert Einstein plead for a pacifism that will refuse in the name of patriotism to support again the unspeakable damnation of a war. We still have a widespread popular hatred of war. Yes, and those international agencies that grew up out of our first passionate reaction against war, the League of Nations, the World Court, Disarmament Conferences, are still struggling hard trying to keep the candle of reason burning in a windy world. We have yet a chance to stop war, and heaven knows! we had better take it because another world war would rob our children of everything that we have cared for most. But sometimes when I talk with Americans about this, watch their apathetic, indifferent attitude, even to great matters of public policy like the World Court, I am dismayed.

In 1890 the United States appropriated \$36,500,000 for its army; for 1931 the appropriation was \$351,000,000. In 1890 the appropriation for the navy was \$21,000,000 and for 1930 was over \$380,000,000. And that is going on all over this poverty-stricken earth. We are traveling precisely the same road that all the civilizations before us have traveled and with our sentimental optimism we will not believe it. My friends, if we are going to have peace we must care about peace more than we have been caring, care for it sacrificially as our fathers used to care for causes that they died for. All too commonly we picture peace as a dove or a beautiful maiden scattering largess from her ample cornucopia. That is no figure for peace. When peace comes she will not arrive as a dove or as a carefree beauty but as one who has been despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. We have our choice: to

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care about peace with some serious sense that civilization is in the balance, or else to have our children cry for the ghost of our chance back again.

Once more, we still have a chance to build a humane and decent economic life that will minister to the welfare of all people. I do not see how any one can look across the world today without perceiving that it is a narrow chance. For see the picture: communism rising as a prodigious world power and all the capitalistic nations arming themselves to the teeth to fly at each other's throats and tear each other to pieces. I suspect that folks are generally tempted to think of ministers of religion as visionary idealists and business men as hard-headed realists. Upon the contrary, I should like nothing better than to help some of my business friends to be hard-headed realists just now. For capitalism is on trial. That is the realistic situation. Our whole capitalistic society is on trial; first within itself, for obviously there is something the matter with the operation of a system that over the Western world leaves millions upon millions of people out of work who want work and millions more in the sinister shadows of poverty. Second, capitalism is on trial with communism for its world competitor. Now, I do not like communism; I love liberty too much. I cannot stomach such suppression of free speech, free assembly, free labor as communism involves. But this verbal damning of communism now prevalently popular in the United States will get us nowhere. The decision between communism and capitalism hinges on one point. Can capitalism adjust itself to this new age? Can it move out from its old individualism, dominated by the selfish profit-motive, and so

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create a new co-operative epoch with social planning and social control, that it can serve, better than it has, the welfare of all the people? If it can, it can survive. If it cannot, some form of communism will be forced upon our children. Be sure of that! Today our chance to build a more decent economic life but, if we lose it, tomorrow our children wanting the ghost of that chance back again.

The issue of all this is a deep need which I urge on my conscience just as I urge it on yours. We need a rebirth of citizenship, a rebirth of public spirit, a renaissance of spiritual life and ethical Christianity that will issue in social-mindedness. With prosperity selfish individualism is natural. When wealth is plentiful each one struggles for as large a share as possible for himself. But that is not our situation now. Some of you here this morning are suffering cruelly in this depression. Some of you here whom I know personally, accustomed to plenty, are in a situation where penury is lurking around the corner. And the factors that caused that are not individual but social; they are not even national—they are world-wide.

Selfish individualism for man or nation in this new world is downright insanity. There may have been a time, on the frontier, when a man could be the master of his own fate, but now a man's welfare or a man's disaster depends so on world-wide conditions, which he cannot handle for himself, that only social-mindedness, co-operatively handling them together for the good of all, can meet the issue. John Wesley said once, "I look upon all the world as my parish." Unless we can get that kind of public spirit, with

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some intelligence to make it effective, nothing else can save us.

Now bring this truth for a moment down to our own individual consciences. When Jeremiah was trying to save the Jewish people from their fate, he had a nephew named Baruch who later became his private secretary and through whom the records of his ministry are preserved for us. Baruch was tempted to a selfish individualism. He was a member of a great family; he had as good a chance as any to serve his private ambition; he saw his own brother achieve political prestige and he was tempted to a selfish life. But Jeremiah, seeing how desperately critical the social situation was, challenged him with words that I wish could be burned into the conscience of this country. "Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not."

Centuries afterwards a boy was walking across the campus at Cornell wondering what he would do with his life and because there was a religious meeting on and he was curious, he stepped into the hall just as the text was being announced. This was it: "Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not." That was the turning point of that boy's life, as it had been, long before, of Baruch's, and with some importance to Christianity withal, because that boy was John R. Mott. I challenge my conscience and yours with those words today. This generation is no flower garden to dally in. Today our chance to build a more decent world, tomorrow our children wanting the ghost of it back again. Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not.

If this sermon has seemed depressing, I beg of you to notice that our message is a lesson, not

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in gloom but in appreciation. What it says to every man or nation, is, Appreciate your Samuel; while you have any Samuel, appreciate him! A more practical message could hardly be brought to us. How fortunate some of us are—home, friends, repute, character, opportunity—and for all the criticalness of the social situation, a magnificent chance left yet to build a warless and humane world. How many Samuels will cross the frontiers of the New Year with us! God keep us, every one, from throwing the chance away. God save us, every one, from Endor's cave.

PRAYER

Eternal God, our Father, we beseech Thee that Thou wilt lay a heavy hand on consciences here that have been at ease in Zion. Stir us up from our selfish love of comfort. Drive us, we beseech Thee, from our too easy nests. Give us eyes to see the serious facts of our time and courage to meet them and dedicated intelligence to handle them. We ask it in the spirit of Christ. Amen.

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