

DAVID:

SHEPHERD, PSALMIST, KING

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE FAITH OF GOD'S ELECT

(I Samuel 17)

“Who the line
Shall draw, the limits of the power define
That even imperfect faith to man affords?”

- Wordsworth

IN the valley of Elah to-day the traveler finds the remains of an immense terebinth. Perhaps this gave it its name, “*the valley of the terebinth*.” Starting from the neighborhood of the ancient city of Hebron, the valley runs in a north-westerly direction towards the sea; it is about a mile across, and in the middle there is a deep ravine, some twenty feet across, with a depth of ten or twelve feet. Winter torrents have made this their track.

Having recovered from the chastisement inflicted on them by Saul and Jonathan at Michmash, the Philistines had marched up the valley of Elah, encamping on its western slope between Shochoh and Ephes-dammim; a name with an ominous meaning “*the boundary of blood*” probably because on more than one occasion it had been the scene of border forays.

Saul pitched his camp on the other side of the valley; behind them the Judean hills, ridge on ridge, to the blue distance, where Jerusalem lay, as yet in the lands of the Jebusite. That valley was to witness an encounter which brought into fullest contrast the principles on which God's warriors are to contend not only with flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of darkness. Three figures stand out sharply defined on that memorable day.

First, the Philistine Champion.

He was tall nine feet six inches in height; he was heavily armed, for his armour fell a spoil to Israel, was eagerly examined, and minutely described; they even weighed it, and found it five thousand shekels of brass, equivalent to two hundredweight; he was protected by an immense shield, borne by another in front of him, so as to leave his arms and hands free; he wielded a ponderous spear, whilst sword and javelin were girt to his side; he was apt at braggadocio, talked of the banquet he proposed to give to the fowls and beasts, and defied the armies of the living God.

Second, Saul.

A choice young man and a goodly. There was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he; from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people. He had also a good suit of armour, a helmet of brass, and a coat of mail. In earlier days, when he had blown the trumpet, its notes had rung throughout the land, stirring all hearts with anticipations of certain victory. Even now the formula of his former faith and fervour came easily to his lips, as he assured the young shepherd that the Lord would certainly be with him; but he dared not adventure himself in conflict with what he reckoned were utterly overwhelming odds. He was near daunting David with his materialism and unbelief: **“Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth.”**

Third, David.

He was but a youth, and ruddy, and withal of a fair countenance.

- No sword was in his hand; he carried a staff, probably his shepherd's crook;
- No armour had he on, save the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation;
- No weapon, but a sling in his hand and five smooth stones which he had chosen out of the torrent bed, and put in the shepherd's bag which he had, even in his scrip.

But he was in possession of a mystic spiritual power, which the mere spectator might have guessed, but which he might have found it difficult to define. The living God was a reality to him. His countrymen were not simply, as Goliath insinuated, servants to Saul; they were the army of the living God. When he spake of armies, using the plural as of more than one, he may have been thinking of Jacob's vision of the host of angels at Mahanaim; or of Joshua's, when the Angel of the Covenant revealed himself as Captain of the Lord's host that waited unseen under arms, prepared to co-operate with that which Israel's chieftain was about to lead across the Jordan.

As likely as not, to the lad's imagination the air was full of horses and chariots of fire; of those angel hosts, which in after days he addressed as strong in might, hearkening unto the voice of God, and hastening to do his pleasure in all places of his dominion.

At least, he had no doubt that the Lord would vindicate his glorious name, and deliver into his hands this uncircumcised Philistine. Let us study the origin and temper of this heroic faith.

IT HAD BEEN BORN IN SECRET, AND NURSED IN SOLITUDE

As day after day he considered the heavens and earth, they appeared as one vast tent, in which God dwelt. Nature was the material dwelling-place of the eternal Spirit, who was as real to his young heart as the works of His hands to His poet's eyes. God was as real to him as Jesse, or his brothers, or Saul, or Goliath. His soul had so rooted itself in this conception of God's presence, that he bore it with him, undisturbed by the shout of the soldiers as they went forth to the battle, and the searching questions addressed to him by Saul.

This is the unfailing secret. There is no short cut to the life of faith, which is the all-vital condition of a holy and victorious life. We must have periods of lonely meditation and fellowship with God. That our souls should have their mountains of fellowship, their valleys of quiet rest beneath the shadow of a great rock, their nights beneath the stars, when darkness has veiled the material and silenced the stir of human life, and has opened the view of the infinite and eternal, is as indispensable as that our bodies should have food.

Thus alone can the sense of God's presence become the fixed possession of the soul, enabling it to say repeatedly with the psalmist, "**Thou art near, O Lord.**"

IT HAD BEEN EXERCISED IN LONELY CONFLICT

With a beautiful modesty David would probably have kept to himself the story of the lion and the bear, unless it had been extracted from him by a desire to magnify the Lord. Possibly there had been many conflicts of a similar kind; so that his faith had become strengthened by use, as the sinews of his wiry young body by exertion. In these ways he was being prepared for this supreme conflict.

What we are in solitude, we shall be in public. Do not for a moment suppose, O self-indulgent disciple, that the stimulus of a great occasion will dower thee with a heroism of which thou betrayest no trace in secret hours. The crisis will only reveal the true quality and temper of the soul. The flight at the Master's arrest will make it almost needless for the historian to explain that the hour which should have been spent in watching was squandered in sleep. It is the universal testimony of holy men that lonely hours are fullest of temptation. It is in these we must conquer if we would be victorious when the eyes of some great assembly are fastened upon us.

IT STOOD THE TEST OF DAILY LIFE

There are some who appear to think that the loftiest attainments of the spiritual life are incompatible with the grind of daily toil and the friction of the home.

"Emancipate us from these," they cry, "give us nothing to do, except to nurse our souls to noble deeds; deliver us from the obligations of family ties, and we will fight for those poor souls who are engrossed with the cares and ties of the ordinary and commonplace."

It was not thus with David. When Jesse, eager to know how it fared with his three elder sons, who had followed Saul to the battle, bade David take them rations, and a present to the captain of their division, there was an immediate and ready acquiescence in his father's proposal: "**he rose up early in the morning, and took, and went, as Jesse had commanded him.**"

And before he left his flock he was careful to entrust it with a keeper. We must always watch not to neglect one duty for another; if we are summoned to the camp, we must first see to the tendance of the flock. He that is faithful in the greater must first have been faithful in the least. It is in the home, at the desk, and in the Sunday-school, that we are being trained for service at home and abroad. We must not forsake the training-ground till we have learnt all the lessons God has designed it to teach, and have heard his summons.

IT BORE MEEKLY MISCONSTRUCTION AND REBUKE

Reaching the camp, he found the troops forming in battle array, and ran to the front. He had already discovered his brothers, and saluted them, when he was arrested by the braggart voice of Goliath from across the valley, and saw, to his chagrin, the men of Israel turn to flee, stricken with sore affright. When he expressed surprise, he learnt from bystanders that even Saul shared the general panic, and had issued rewards for a champion. So he passed from one group to another of the soldiery, questioning, gathering further confirmation of his first impressions, and evincing everywhere the open-eyed wonder of his soul that **“any man’s heart should fail because of him.”**

Eliab had no patience with the words and bearing of his young brother. How dare he suggest that the behavior of the men of Israel was unworthy of themselves and their religion! What did he mean by inquiring so minutely after the particulars of the royal reward? Was he thinking of winning it? It was absurd to talk like that! Of course it could only be talk; but it was amazing to hear it suggested that he, too, was a soldier and qualified to fight. Evidently something should be said to thrust him back into his right place, and minimize the effect of his words, and let the bystanders know who and what he was. **“Why art thou come down? With whom,”** he said, with a sneer, **“hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness?”** Ah, what venom, as of an asp, lay in those few words! David, however, ruled his spirit, and answered softly. “Surely,” said he, “my father’s wish to learn of your welfare was cause enough to bring me here.” It was there that the victory over Goliath was really won. To have lost his temper in this unprovoked assault would have broken the alliance of his soul with God, and drawn a veil over his sense of His presence. But to meet evil with good, and maintain an unbroken composure, not only showed the burnished beauty of his spirit’s armour, but cemented his alliance with the Lamb of God.

To bear with unflinching meekness the spiteful attacks of malice and envy; not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good; to suffer wrong; to possess one’s soul in patience; to keep the mouth with a bridle when the wicked is before us; to pass unruffled and composed through a very cyclone of unkindness and misrepresentation this is only possible to those in whose breasts the dove-like Spirit has found an abiding place, and whose hearts are sentinelled by the peace of God; and these are they who bear themselves as heroes in the fight. A marvellous exhibition was given that day in the valley of Elah that those who are gentlest under provocation are strongest in the fight, and that meekness is really an attribute of might.

IT WITHSTOOD THE REASONINGS OF THE FLESH

Saul was very eager for David to adopt his armour, though he dared not don it himself. He was taken with the boy’s ingenuous earnestness, but advised him to adopt the means. “Don’t be rash; don’t expect a miracle to be wrought. By all means trust God, and go; but be wise. We ought to adopt ordinary precautions.”

It was a critical hour. Had David turned aside to act on these suggestions, he would certainly have forfeited the Divine alliance, which was conditioned by his guileless faith.

There is no sin in using means: but they must come second, not first; they must be such as God suggests. It is a sore temptation to adopt them as indicated by the flesh, and hope that God will bless them, instead of waiting before Him, to know what He would have done, and how. Many a time has the advice of worldly prudence damped the eager aspiration of the spirit, and hindered the doing of a great deed.

But an unseen hand withdrew David from the meshes of temptation. He had already yielded so far to Saul's advice as to have donned his armour and girded on the sword. Then he turned to Saul and said, "**I cannot go with these**"; and he put them off him. It was not now Saul's armour and the Lord, but the Lord alone; and he was able, without hesitation, to accost the giant with the words, "**The Lord saveth not with sword and spear.**"

His faith had been put to the severest tests and was approved. Being more precious than silver or gold, it had been exposed to the most searching ordeal; but the furnace of trial had shown it to be of heavenly temper. Now let Goliath do his worst; he shall know that there is a God in Israel.

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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