

DAVID:

SHEPHERD, PSALMIST, KING

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE STRIPES OF THE CHILDREN OF MEN

(II Samuel 12-19)

No action, whether foul or fair,
Is ever done, but it leaves somewhere
A record written by fingers ghostly,
As a blessing or a curse, and mostly
In the greater weakness or greater strength
Of the acts which follow it.”

- Longfellow

IN may be forgiven, as David's was, and yet a long train of sad consequences ensue. The law of cause and effect will follow on, with its linked chain of disaster: though God's mercy to his erring and repentant children will be shown, in converting the results of their sin into the fires of their purification; in setting alleviation of the tenderest sort against their afflictions; and in finally staying the further outworking of evil. All these facts stand out upon the pages which tell the story of God's Chastisement, Alleviations, and Deliverances.

O soul of man, this is solemn reading for us; it is the inner story of God's dealing with his own. As He dealt with David, He will deal with us. He will forgive, but He may have to use the rod; He may restore to his favour, and yet permit us to drink the bitter waters which our sin has tapped. Be meek, patient, and submissive; thou wilt come forth out of the ordeal a white soul, and men shall learn through thy experiences the goodness and severity of God. Forgiven men may have to reap as they have sown.

I. GOD'S CHASTISEMENTS

Bathsheba's little child was very sick; it was the child of sin and shame, but the parents hung over it; for seven days the mother watched it, and the father fasted and lay on the earth. He suffered more in seeing the anguish of the babe than if ten times its pain had been inflicted on himself. It cuts to the quick when the innocent suffer for our crimes. On the seventh day the child died.

Two years after, one of his sons treated his sister as David had treated Uriah's wife. They say a man never hears his own voice till it comes back to him from the phonograph. Certainly a man never sees the worst of himself until it re-appears in his child.

In Amnon's sin David beheld the features of his own unbridled passions; and in his murder by Absalom two years after, David encountered again his own blood-guiltiness.

Absalom's fratricide would never have taken place if David had taken instant measures to punish Amnon. But how could he allot that penalty to his son's impurity which he had evaded for himself? (Leviticus 18:9-29). Nor could he punish Absalom for murder, when he remembered that he, a murderer, had eluded the murderer's fate.

When presently Absalom's rebellion broke out, it received the immediate sanction and adherence of David's most trusty counsellor, whose advice was like the oracle of God. What swept Ahithophel into the ranks of that great conspiracy? The reason is given in the genealogical tables, which show that he was the grandfather of Bathsheba, and that his son Eliam was the comrade and friend of Uriah. It is thought by some that at this time David was smitten with some severe form of disease.

Psalms 51 and 55 are supposed to record his sufferings during these dreary years. They tell the tale of his depression, depict the visitors that surrounded his bed, and recount the comments they passed on the sick man.

The most disastrous and terrible blow of all was the rebellion of Absalom. His beautiful figure; ready wit; apparent sympathy with the anxieties and disappointments of the people, fretting under the slow administration of the law; his sumptuous expenditure and splendor all these had for four years been undermining David's throne, and stealing away the hearts of the people: so that, when he erected his standard at Hebron, and was proclaimed king throughout the land, it was evident that the people had lost their former reverence and love for David perhaps the story of his sin had disappointed and alienated them, and they hurried to pay their homage at the shrine of the new prince.

We need not recount the successive steps of those stormy days. The panic-stricken flight of the king, "**Arise and let us flee, make speed to depart**"; the bare-foot ascent of Olivet; the anguish that wept with loud voice; the shameful cursing of Shimei; the apparent treachery of Mephibosheth; the humiliation of David's wives in the sight of that sun which had witnessed his own sin; the gathering of all Israel together unto Absalom in apparent oblivion of the ties which for so many years had bound them to himself.

Such were the strokes of the Father's rod that fell thick and fast upon his child.

They appeared to emanate from the malignity and hate of man; but David looked into their very heart, and knew that the cup which they held to his lips had been mixed by heaven, and were not the punishment of a Judge, but the chastisement of a Father.

Outside the story of Christ, there is nothing in the Bible more beautiful than his behavior as he passed through this tangled growth of thorns. "**Carry back the Ark of God,**" he said to Zadok; "**he will bring me again, and shew me both it, and his habitation; But if he thus say, I have no delight in thee; behold, here am I, let him do to me as seemeth good unto him.**"

And when Shimei, perhaps referring to the recent execution of the sons of Rizpah, and perhaps suggesting that he had been guilty of the death of Ishbosheth, called him a man of blood because of his dealings with Saul's house, David said to Abishai, "**Behold, my son, which came forth of my bowels, seeketh my life: how much more now may this Benjamite do it? let him alone, and let him curse; for the LORD hath bidden him.**"

Thus, when Judas brought the bitter cup to the lips of Christ, the Master said, "**The cup which my Father hath given me.**"

Let us never forget the lesson. Pain and sorrow may be devised against us by the malignity of an Ahithophel, a Shimei, or a Judas: but if God permits such things to reach us, by the time that they have passed through the thin wire of his sieve they have become his will for us; and we may look up into his face and know that we are not the sport of chance, or wild misfortune, or human caprice, but are being trained as sons. Without such chastisement we might fear that we were bastards.

II. GOD'S ALLEVIATIONS

They came in many ways. The bitter hour of trial revealed a love on the part of his adherents of which the old king may have become a little oblivious.

Ahithophel's defection cut him to the quick.

He tells the story in the psalms we have mentioned. His sensitive nature winced to think that the man of his friendship, in whom he trusted, and who did eat of his bread, had lifted up his heel against him; but then Hushai the Archite came to meet him with every sign of grief, and was willing, as his friend, to plead in the council-chamber of Absalom. Shimei might curse him; but Ittai the stranger, a man of Gath, with all his men, swore allegiance for life or death.

Zadok and Abiathar are there with the Ark, their ancient animosity forgotten in their common sorrow for their master; Ziba meets him with summer fruits, clusters of raisins, and loaves of bread; Shobi, and Machir, and Barzillai make abundant provision for his hungry, weary, and thirsty followers; his people tell him that he must not enter the battle, because his life is priceless, and worth ten thousand of theirs.

It was as though God stooped over that stricken soul, and as the blows of the rod cut long furrows in the sufferer's back, the balm of Gilead was poured into the gaping wounds. Voices spoke more gently; hands touched his more softly; pitiful compassion rained tender assurances about his path; and, better than all, the bright-harnessed angels of God's protection encamped about his path and his lying-down. Thus he came to sing some of his sweetest songs, and amongst them Psalms 3, 4, 51, 62, 63, 143.

The two former are his morning and evening hymns, when his cedar palace was exchanged for the blue canopy of the sky. He knows that he has many adversaries, who say, "**There is no help for him in God**"; but he reckons that he is well guarded.

**“Thou, O Lord, art a shield for me,
My glory, and the lifter-up of mine head.”**

He is not afraid of ten thousands of the people; he lies down in peace to sleep, and awakes in safety, because the Lord sustains him. He knows that the Lord hath set him apart for Himself, and feels that the light of his face will put more gladness into his heart than the treasures of the kingdom which he seemed to have forfeited for ever.

Then, from the drought-smitten land, which they were obliged to traverse, his soul thirsts to see the power and glory of God, as he had seen them in the sanctuary; and already he realizes perfect satisfaction. To long for God is to find Him; to thirst after Him is to feel the ice-cold water flowing over the parched lips. With these came a clear prevision of the issue of the terrible strife:

**“The king shall rejoice in God:
Every one that sweareth by Him shall glory:
But the mouth of them that speak lies shall be stopped.”**

III. GOD’S DELIVERANCE

The raw troops that Absalom had so hastily mustered were unable to stand the shock of David’s veterans, and fled.

Absalom himself was dispatched by the ruthless Joab, as he swayed from the arms of the huge terebinth. The pendulum of the people’s loyalty swang back to its old allegiance, and they eagerly contended for the honour of bringing the king back.

Even the men of Judah, conscious of having forfeited his confidence by so readily following Absalom, repented, and urged him to return. Shimei cringed at his feet. Mephibosheth established his unflinching loyalty. Barzillai was bound to the royal house for ever by his profuse acknowledgments and the royal offers to Chimham. All seemed ending well.

One unfortunate occurrence delayed the peaceful conclusion of the whole matter.

The ten tribes were greatly irritated that Judah had made and carried through all the arrangements for the king’s return, and gave vent to hot, exasperating words. These the men of Judah answered with equal heat. At an inopportune moment, Sheba sounded the trumpet of sedition, and raised the cry that was destined in the days of Rehoboam again to rend the land.

“Every man to his tents, O Israel.”

The ten tribes immediately seceded, and another formidable revolt yawned at David’s feet; and it was only put down by incredible exertions on the part of Joab.

The death of Sheba was the last episode in this rebellion which was quelled in blood, and always left a scar and seam in the national life.

Many were the afflictions of God's servant, but out of them all he was delivered.

When he had learnt the lesson, the rod was stayed. He had been chastened with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men; but God did not take away his mercy from him as from Saul: his house, his throne, and kingdom, in spite of many conflicting forces, being made sure.

Thus always the rod, the stripes, the chastisements; but amid all the love of God, carrying out His redemptive purpose, never hasting, never resting, never forgetting, but making all things work together till the evil is eliminated, and the soul purged. Then the after-glow of blessing, the calm ending of the life in a serene sundown.

~ end of chapter 26 ~

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