

DAVID:

SHEPHERD, PSALMIST, KING

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CHAPTER FOUR

A DARK BACKGROUND

(I Samuel 17:2)

I flung away
Those keys that might have open set
The golden sluices of the day;
But clutch the keys of darkness yet.
I hear the reapers singing go
Into God's harvest; I that might
With them have chosen, here below
Grove shuddering at the gates of night."

- J. R. Lowell

GREAT contrast, as we have said, is evidently intended by the historian between Saul and David. The portrait of Saul is drawn in Rembrandt colors, to set forth the excelling beauty of God's designated king.

The king of Israel took his first step away from God when he permitted himself to be betrayed into undue haste and precipitation, and offered the burnt-offering at Michmash before Samuel came. He took further steps in the same direction in the outburst of indignation against Jonathan for violating his regulation about abstinence from food. But the final break took place when he disobeyed the distinct command of the Lord through his prophet, and spared Agag and the choice of the spoil. Then he rejected the word of the Lord, and God gave him up to his own evil heart.

From that moment his course was always downward toward the gathering gloom of Gilboa. From the disobedient heart God withdraws his keeping power; and as it is no longer tenanted by the Spirit of the Most High, it becomes at once the prey and habitation of unclean spirits, reminding us of the awful words with which Isaiah describes the desolation of Edom (Isaiah 34:14, 15).

Such was the state of Saul's heart. Since he was not willing to retain God in his knowledge, God gave him up to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.

We will notice some points in Saul's dark eclipse which will serve to illustrate salient features in the young shepherd's character.

I. FORSAKEN BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Browning conceives of him amid the black mid-tent's silence, from which for days together not a sound came to the anxious watchers; the blackness of darkness reigning; within, the figure of Saul resting against the tent-prop without movement, speech, or appetite for food; shuddering for a moment under the first spell of music, and then resuming his insensibility to all.

The departure of the Spirit of the Lord probably refers to that special equipment for the regal office which had once come mightily upon him. In his case, it had rather to do with office than with any change of disposition and heart (I Samuel 10:10; 11:6). By his wilfulness and disobedience, Saul forfeited this royal prerogative. The light faded off his soul, and he became as other men.

Nothing in this world, or the next, can be compared for horror to the withdrawal of God from us.

It involves the perdition of body and soul; because it is the one force by which evil is restrained, and good fostered. Take the sun from the center of the solar system, and each planet, breaking from its leash, would pursue a headlong course, colliding with the rest, and dashing into the abyss. So when God's presence is lost, every power in the soul rises in revolt. Ah! bitter wail, when a man realizes the true measure of the calamity which has befallen him, and cries with Saul, "**I am sore distrest; for God is departed from me, and answereth me no more!**"

It is a very serious thing to ask if we are not tampering with the Spirit of the Lord. To do so will turn the most radiant dawn into the chill twilight of a wintry day when the blizzard fills the air with snow and ice. Beware lest you fret against the Divine delays, or disobey the Divine command. Know in this thy day the things that belong to thy peace, lest they be for ever hid from thy view; and, as the sun's last rim sinks beneath the waves, the storm-clouds of jealousy, superstition, frenzy, bear down in thick battalions.

How different with David! The Lord was with him.

To the clear, bright eye of his faith the living God was more real than the giant that stalked each morning before the hosts of Israel. Had He not delivered him from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear? And was He not as real amid the dignity of the Court or the clash of the battle-field? The dew of the Divine blessing rested upon that fair young head, and the light of the Shekinah shone from the inner shrine through those clear blue eyes. With him the Spirit of God was not simply an equipment of gift for service, but the resident presence of the Divine in soul and heart.

II. TROUBLED BY AN EVIL SPIRIT FROM THE LORD

Evidently the conception is of the Lord surrounded by spirits, some good, and some evil. He has only to speak, and one powerful to exercise a malign and deadly influence hastens to do his bidding. Micaiah spoke after the same manner in the dark hour of Ahab's infatuation (I Kings 22:19-23). This method of speech is unfamiliar.

We prefer to say that God permits evil spirits to fasten on souls which have refused Him, as vultures on the carcase from which life has fled. We go farther, and say that God always means to do the best by every creature that He has made: but that we have the power of extracting evil from his good; of transforming his sunshine and rain into hemlock and deadly nightshade and rank poison; of transmuting the roses which fall from his hand into the red-hot cinders that scorch and burn into the flesh.

Never doubt that God is good; that He sends good and gentle spirits to stay man from his purpose, and conduct him into the light of life: but when we turn against God, it seems as though He has commenced to be our enemy, and to fight against us; the reality being that, whereas we once went with the stream of the Divine blessing, we are now wading against it with difficulty and peril. With the froward God shows Himself froward; and with the perverse, his angels, conscience, gratitude, the memory of the past, convictions of duty, intended to elevate and save, oppose their progress as mortal foes. They wrestle with us or rather, we wrestle with them in the dark night, in which we cannot distinguish friend from foe. So when Judas had finally chosen to betray our Lord, the very pleadings of Jesus hardened his heart, and sealed his doom.

With David, on the other hand, the Spirit of God was constantly co-operating. He lived and walked in fellowship with the unseen. All the genial influences of heaven, as they fell upon his young spirit, elicited responses of love and faith; like the strains of music which each passing breeze summons from the Eolian lyre.

III. SAUL'S DISCORD

The fact that music was the corrective of the king's malady seems to indicate that, being, wrong with God, he was out of harmony with the universe, which is the circumference of which God is center. It is impossible to define music. In its grander and more lovely strains it has escaped the defiling touch of sin, and is, so to speak, the echo of eternity; spray from the waves of light and glory that break upon our shores; the expression of the infinite order and rhythm of the spheres.

Music, therefore, is the natural expression of the perfect life and peace of heaven. There the harpers harp upon their harps; there redeemed and glorified spirits raise new songs; there holy beings express their perfect accord with the nature of God and the order of the universe in outbursts of harmonious sound. Perfected sense, which can only be had on the condition of unbroken union with God's will, purpose, and life, would detect all things uttering, "Hallelujah!" and be compelled by the contagiousness of a holy sympathy to swell the anthem.

To all this Saul was a stranger. He was out with God, and there was consequently discord in his heart and life. Music falling on his ear recalled memories of his former better self, and laid a brief spell upon the discordant elements of his soul; reducing them to a momentary order, destined, however, to be marred and spoilt so soon as the sweet sounds were withdrawn.

Yes, it is ever thus. If you have not received the Atonement, if you are not at peace with God through Jesus Christ, you are at enmity, by wicked works and inward temper; and there can be, therefore, no sympathy between you and the universe around.

Art, music, the engagements of daily business, the whirl of society, the exercises of religion may do what David's harp did for Saul, in producing a momentary stillness and sense of harmony with your environment; but it is only for a moment: when the spell is withdrawn, the olden spirit of disorder asserts itself.

With David, on the other hand, the harp was the symbol of a soul at rest in God. All things were, therefore, his; all spoke to his soul of the harmonies subsisting in the unseen and eternal world. And it was because his own spirit was so perfectly harmonious with the nature of God and with the universe, that he could cast the spell of calming and quieting influence over another. This may explain the influence of music in all ages of the world over the maladies of the soul. Elisha called for a minstrel to calm his disquieted spirit. Pythagoras, as Seneca tells us, was in the habit of quieting the troubles of his mind with a harp. Philip V. of Spain was recalled from the profoundest melancholy by the famous singer Farinelli. The servants of Saul were therefore justified in urging him, in one of his lucid moments, to permit them to seek out a man who was a cunning player on the harp. And the power that David exercised over him is an illustration of a similar charm which we may individually exert upon the restless, storm-tossed spirits around us. Let us accept God's basis of the reconciliation. Let us stand beneath the Cross, which is the center of reconciliation from the discords of sin, till we are in perfect accord with it; and let us go forth to induce men to come to that center also, to be reconciled to God, and to learn the mystery of that peace of which Jesus spoke on the eve of his death and the day of his resurrection.

IV. SAUL'S UNBELIEF

If a man is wrong with God, faith is impossible; for it is the health-bloom of the soul. When, therefore, Goliath stalked through the valley of Elah, and defied the armies of Israel, Saul was greatly afraid. Where was now the prowess that engaged the early love and admiration of the people, that delivered Jabesh Gilead, and that vexed the foes of Israel whithersoever he turned himself? It had vanished; as the beauty passes from the surface of the fruit which is rotten at the core, and as the forms of the hills disappear from ruffled water. Under happier conditions he would have become the champion of his people; now he cowered in his tent.

To David, on the other hand, there was no such fear. His soul was full of God. He was his light and salvation, whom should he fear? the strength of his life, of whom should he be afraid? He was hidden in the secret of God's pavilion, and abode under the shadow of the Almighty. There was no unsteadiness in the hand that slung the stone, no tremor in the heart. He was strong in faith; because his young heart was pure, and good, and right, and in living fellowship with the Lord.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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