

DAVID:

SHEPHERD, PSALMIST, KING

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

A FIT OF MISTRUST

(I Samuel 27)

“ Ever thus the spirit must,
Guilty in the sight of Heaven,
With a keener woe be riven,
For its weak and sinful trust
In the strength of human dust;
And its anguish thrill afresh
For each vain reliance given
To the failing arm of flesh.”

- Whittier

THE Psalms, which, with more or less probability; may be assigned to this period of David's life, are marked with growing sadness and depression. Amongst them may be reckoned the 10, 13, 17, 22, 25, 64, and perhaps 40 and 69. Those of the first group have many features in common. The scenery of the wilderness, the psalmist like a hunted wild thing, the perpetual insistence on his innocence and invocation of the Lord's interference, the bitter description of his sorrows such are the characteristic features of these Psalms. But, besides, there is a tone of despair:

**“Why standest Thou afar off, O Lord?
Why hidest Thou Thyself in times of trouble?” (10:1).**

**“How long, wilt Thou forget me, O Lord? for ever?
How long wilt Thou hide thy face from me?” (13:1).**

**“My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?
Why art Thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?” (22:1).**

**“Save me, O God:
For the waters are come in unto my soul.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing.
I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me” (49:1)**

These notes are sad, plaintive, and despairful; it is as though the sufferer were near the limits of his endurance.

It seemed hopeless to effect any permanent alteration in Saul's feelings towards him, so long as Cush, and Doeg, and Abner, and others who had proved themselves his inveterate foes, were able so readily to instill their poison into the royal ear. It had become so increasingly difficult to elude the hot pursuit of the royal troops, whom long practice had familiarized with his hiding-places and haunts. And it became more and more perplexing to find sustenance for the large body of followers now attached to him.

Every day he had to provide for six hundred men, besides women and children; and the presence of these more tender souls made it perilously difficult to maintain a perpetual condition of migration or flight. He had now two wives; and from what is said of the sack of Ziklag, shortly afterwards, we should judge that the larger proportion of the outlawed band consisted of those who had wives, and sons, and daughters, and property (30:3, 6, 19, 22).

In other days of healthier faith, these considerations would not have availed to shake the constancy of his much-tried soul. He would have stayed himself upon his God, and been strengthened with all power, unto all patience and long suffering with joy. But of late his faith had become impaired and the loins of his godly courage slackened, so that he said in his heart, **“I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul; there is nothing better for me than that I should escape into the land of the Philistines; and Saul shall despair of me, to seek me any more in all the borders of Israel; so shall I escape out of his hand.”**

I. LET US EXAMINE THIS SUDDEN RESOLUTION

It was the suggestion of worldly policy. “David said in his heart.”

On other occasions, as we have observed more than once, it had been his wont to summon the priest with the sacred ephod, or to inquire of God through Gad; but in this resolution he had recourse to neither the one nor the other. In the matter of Nabal he had acted under the sudden impulse of passion; here under that of panic. He looked at circumstances, perhaps listened to the counsels of men who were attracted to him by the qualities of daring, bravery, and frank generosity, which made him the popular hero of his time, but had no sympathy with the deeper springs of his life in God, and faith, and prayer. Never act in a panic; nor allow man to dictate to thee; calm thyself and be still; force thyself into the quiet of thy closet until the pulse beats normally and the scare has ceased to perturb. When thou art most eager to act is the time when thou wilt make the most pitiable mistakes. Do not say in thine heart what thou wilt or wilt not do; but wait upon God until He makes known his way. So long as that way is hidden, it is clear that there is no need of action, and that He accounts Himself responsible for all the results of keeping thee where thou art.

It was very dishonoring to God.

Had He not sworn to make him king, to cast forth his enemies as out of a sling, and to give him a sure house? Had not these promises been confirmed by Samuel, Jonathan, Abigail, and Saul himself? Had not the golden oil designated him as God's anointed? How impossible it was that God should lie or forget his covenant!

By immutable pledges his Almighty Friend had bound Himself, seeking to give his much-tried child strong consolation, if only He would remain within the sheltering walls of the refuge-harbor which these assurances constituted; and it was easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one jot or tittle of the Divine engagements to become invalid.

Surely, then, it was unworthy of David to say, in effect:

“I am beginning to fear that God has undertaken more than He can carry through. True, He has kept me hitherto; but I question if He can make me surmount the growing difficulties of my situation. Saul will, sooner or later, accomplish his designs against me; it is a mistake to attempt the impossible. I have waited till I am tired; it is time to use my own wits, and extricate myself while I can from the nets that are being drawn over my path.”

The resolution must have given great rejoicing to many of his followers; but all devout souls must have felt that the leader’s despairing confession was in sad contrast to his exhortation, so repeatedly insisted upon, to wait on God.

**“Let none that wait on Thee be ashamed;
Let them be ashamed that transgress without cause.”**

How much easier it is to indicate a true course to others in hours of comparative security, than to stand to it under a squall of wind!

It was highly injurious.

Philistia was full of idol temples and idolatrous priests (II Samuel 5:21). It lay outside the inheritance of the Lord, the sacred land of Palestine, deemed by the pious Israelites of those days to be the special location and abiding-place of the Most High, and to be banished from whose sacred borders seemed like going into a wild and desolate land of estrangement and God-abandonment. What fellowship could David look for with the Divine Spirit who had chosen Israel for his people and Jacob for the lot of his inheritance? How could he sing the Lord’s songs in a strange land? What share could he claim in the sacrifices which sent up the thin spiral of smoke on the sites of Nob or Kirjath-Jearim? Besides, their perpetual familiarity with the rites and iniquities of idolatry could not but exert an unwholesome and altogether disastrous effect on the minds of the unstable in his band. Poison must have been injected into many hearts, that wrought disastrously in after years. What was harmless enough in the case of David, who knew that an idol was nothing in the world, was perilous in the extreme to the weak consciences in his train which were denied by what they saw and heard.

It was the entrance on a course that demanded the perpetual practice of deceit. He was received at Gath with open arms. Before, when he had sought the shelter of the court of Achish, he had but a handful of companions; now he was the leader of a formidable band of warriors, who might easily turn the scale of strength in the long struggle between Israel and Philistia. **“And David dwelt with Achish, he and his men, every man with his household.”**

This proximity to the royal palace and the court became, however, extremely irksome to the Hebrews. Their movements were always under inspection, and it was difficult to preserve their autonomy and independence. Finally, therefore, David asked that one of the smaller towns might be assigned to him; and to his great comfort received permission to settle at Ziklag, a town in the south country, originally allotted to Judah, then transferred to Simeon, and latterly captured by the Philistines, but not occupied by them (Joshua 15:31; 19:5; I Chronicles 4:30).

The sense of security and relief to these hunted men must have been very great, as they found themselves within the slender fortifications of the little town. For long they had known no settled home, their life full of alarm and flight, the weapon always at their side or in their hand, the senses alert to the rustle of a leaf, or the slightest movement in the covert; from all these there was now a grateful pause.

For sixteen months they had a measure of repose and safety. The old men and women sat in the streets, and the shouts of merry children in their play were no longer instantly and jealously hushed lest they should attract the scouts of the royal army.

“It was told Saul that David was fled to Gath, and he sought no more again for him.”

David’s mind was, however, kept on the stretch, constantly at work, weaving a tissue of duplicity and cruelty. He had really no love for Achish, no zeal for the maintenance of his rule; he had not deserted the chosen people, though he had fled before Saul; in his deepest soul he was still a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

Maintenance for himself and his followers must, of course, be provided; and in those days of wild border-war, nothing was more obvious, to the Philistines at least, than to raid the land on which he had turned his back. This, of course, he would not do; and so he turned his sword on the petty tribes of the south country, who were in alliance with Philistines, but the hereditary foes of his own people.

Amongst these were the Geshurites, and Girzites, and the Amalekites, all nomad tribes, living by plunder. To obviate any report of his proceedings reaching the ears of Achish, David was compelled to adopt the cruel and sanguinary policy of saving neither man nor woman alive: and when Achish, by virtue of his feudal lordship, required of him an account of his expedition, he said evasively that he had been raiding against the south of Judah, and instanced tribes, which were known to be under the direct protection of Israel. The fact of his having brought back no captives, the most valuable part of booty, was reckoned by the Philistines a proof of the passionate hate with which he regarded his countrymen, making him forego the pecuniary advantage accruing from the sale of slaves, rather than the satisfaction of beholding their dying anguish.

“And Achish believed David, saying, He hath made his people Israel utterly to abhor him; therefore he shall be my servant for ever.”

The whole behavior of David at this time was utterly unworthy of his high character as God’s anointed servant. It was also a barren time in his religious experience.

No psalms are credited to this period. The sweet singer was mute. He probably acquired a few new strains of music, or even mastered some fresh instruments, whilst sojourning at Gath, the memory of which is perpetuated in the term Gittith, a term which frequently occurs in the inscriptions of the Psalms composed afterwards. But who would barter a song for a melody, a psalm for a guitar? It was a poor exchange. There was something in the air of those lowland plains that closed the utterances of the sweet voice that had sung to God amid the hills of Judah and the caves of Ain-jedi.

How precisely do these symptoms of old-time declension and relapse correspond with those which we have observed in ourselves and others! The way of faith may be irk some to the flesh, but it is free and glad to the spirit. It may have to trace its steps with difficulty among the hills, but a new song is in its mouth, of praise and thanksgiving. But when we descend to the lowlands of expediency and worldly policy, a blight comes on the landscape of the soul, a silence on the song of the heart.

From that moment we are left to maintain our position by our own scheming and planning; we ask God to help us, but dare not count on Him absolutely to provide for us; we are driven into tight corners, from which we escape by subterfuge and duplicity, such as we in our souls despise; we realize that we have purchased our deliverance from the pressure of adverse circumstances at too great a cost, and have bartered the smile of God for that of Achish, so soon to be turned from us; the munitions of Divine protection for the walls of Ziklag, over the ruins of which we shall soon be weeping scalding tears.

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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