

DAVID:

SHEPHERD, PSALMIST, KING

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE MERCY OF GOD THAT LED TO REPENTANCE

(I Samuel 29, 30)

Prostrate your soul in penitential prayer!
Humble your heart beneath the mighty hand
Of God, Whose gracious guidance oft shall lead
Through sin and crime the changed and melted heart,
To sweet repentance and the sense of Him.”

THROUGHOUT that season of declension and relapse which we have been considering, the loving mercy of God hovered tenderly over David’s life. When we believe not, He remains faithful He cannot deny Himself; and when his servants are wandering far afield, sowing for themselves thistledown, and piercing themselves through with bitter sorrows, He is encompassing their path and their lying down, solicitous of heart and compassionate, exhibiting the tenderest traits of his mercy and pity, as though to win them back to Himself.

This is particularly illustrated by the present stage of David’s history.

There was a special focusing of Divine gentleness and goodness to withdraw him from his purpose, to keep back his soul from the pit and his life from perishing with the sword.

We will now trace the successive stages in this loving process of Divine restoration; and as we do so, we will believe that all these things doth God work still, to bring back our souls from the pit, that we may be enlightened with the light of life.

In us also. David’s words shall be verified, spoken as he reviewed this part of his career from the eminence of prosperity and glory to which God’s goodness afterwards raised him, “**Thy gentleness hath made me great.**” God’s restoring mercy was evident.

I. IN INCLINING STRONG AND NOBLE MEN TO IDENTIFY THEMSELVES WITH DAVID’S CAUSE

“**Now these are they,**” says the chronicler, “**that came to David to Ziklag, while he yet kept himself close because of Saul the son of Kish: and they were among the mighty men, helpers of the war**” (I Chronicles 12:1).

And he proceeds to enumerate them.

Some came from Saul's own tribe, experienced marksmen, who could use, with equal dexterity, the right hand and the left, in slinging stones and in shooting arrows from the bow.

Some came from the eastern bank of the Jordan, swimming it at the flood, mighty men of valor, men trained for war, whose faces were like the faces of lions, and they were as swift as roes among the mountains.

Some came from Benjamin and Judah, assuring David that there was no ground for his suspicions of their loyalty.

What a manly, generous ring there was in those reassuring words as uttered by their leader, Amasai, and which were probably the expression of the feelings of all the contingents of heroes which at this time rallied around David's standard, "**Thine are we, David; and on thy side, thou son of Jesse: peace, peace be unto thee, and peace be to thine helpers; for thy God helpeth thee.**"

Evidently the spirit of discontent was abroad in the land.

The people, weary of Saul's oppression and misgovernment, were beginning to realize that the true hope of Israel lay in the son of Jesse. They therefore went out to him without the camp, bearing his reproach, content to forfeit everything they possessed in the assurance that they would receive it all again, and a hundredfold beside, when he came by his own.

Thus from day to day "**there came to David to help him, until it was a great host, like the host of God.**"

Thus, in silence and secrecy, loyal and true hearts are gathering around our blessed Lord, the center of whose kingdom is not earthly but heavenly; who has gone away to receive a kingdom, but who shall certainly return; and when He is manifested in his kingly glory, then shall they also be manifested with Him.

Who then are willing to leave the tottering realm of the prince of this world, soon to be shattered on the last great battlefield of time, and identify themselves with the kingdom of the Son of David, which is destined to endure as long as the sun?

II. IN EXTRICATING HIS SERVANT FROM THE FALSE POSITION INTO WHICH HE HAD DRIFTED

The Philistines suddenly resolved on a forward policy.

They were aware of the disintegration which was slowly dividing Saul's kingdom; and had noticed with secret satisfaction the growing numbers of mighty men who were leaving it to seek identification with David, and therefore, presumably, with themselves.

Not content, therefore, with the border hostilities that had engaged them so long, they resolved to follow the course of the maritime plain the long stretch of low-lying land on the shores of the Mediterranean; and to strike a blow in the very heart of the land, the fertile plain of Esdraelon, destined to be one of the greatest battle-fields of the world, drenched with the blood of great leaders, as Sisera, Saul, and Joash, and of vast hosts, Philistine and Hebrew, Egyptian and Assyrian, Roman and Maccabaeon, Saracen and Anglo-Saxon.

The Philistines gathered their **“hosts together for warfare, to Aphek; and the Israelites pitched by the fountain which is in Jezreel.”**

When this campaign was being meditated, the guileless king assured David that he should accompany him.

This was perhaps said as a mark of special confidence. It would have been foolhardy on the part of Achish to associate David with himself on such an expedition, had he not conceived the most absolute confidence in his integrity. He had seen no fault in his protegee from the first hour of his coming into his court, but had looked on him as an angel of God; he had no hesitation, therefore, in summoning him to march beside him, and even to be captain of his bodyguard.

“Therefore will I make thee keeper of mine head for ever.”

It was a relief to the gentle nature of the king to turn from his imperious lords to this generous, open-hearted soul, and entrust himself to his strong care.

It was, however, a very critical juncture with David.

He had no alternative but to follow his liege lord into the battle; but it must have been with a sinking heart. It looked as though he would be forced to fight Saul, from whom for so many years he had fled; and Jonathan, his beloved friend; and the chosen people, over whom he hoped one day to rule. He could not but reply evasively, and with forced composure and gaiety: **“Thou shalt know what thy servant will do;”** but every mile of those fifty or sixty which had to be traversed must have been trodden with lowering face and troubled heart. There was no hope for him in man. It may be that already his heart was turning in eager prayer to God, that He would extricate him from the net which his sins had woven for his feet; and in the evasiveness of the reply he gave to Achish, there is a trace of glimmering hope that God would yet show a way of escape from his fearful dilemma.

If by your mistakes and sins, you have reduced yourself to a false position like this, do not despair; hope still in God. Confess and put away your sin, and humble yourself before Him, and He will arise to deliver you. You may have destroyed yourself; but in Him will be your help.

“If any of thine be driven out - outcasts because of their disobedience and apostasy - unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: And the LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers.”

An unexpected door of hope was suddenly opened in this valley of Achor.

When Achish reviewed his troops in Aphek, after the lords of the Philistines had passed on by hundreds and by thousands, David and his men passed on in the rearward with the king. This aroused the jealousy and suspicion of the imperious Philistine princes, and they came to Achish with fierce words and threats.

“What do these Hebrews here? Make this fellow return, that he may go again to his place which thou hast appointed him, and let him not go down with us to battle.”

In vain Achish pleaded on the behalf of his favorite; the Philistines would have none of it. They pointed out how virulent a foe he had been, and how tempting the opportunity for him to purchase reconciliation with Saul by turning traitor in the fight.

In the end, therefore, the king had to yield. It cost him much to inform David of the inevitable decision to which he was driven; but he little realized with what a burst of relief his announcement was received.

We can imagine David saying to himself as he left the royal pavilion:

**“Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers:
the snare is broken, and we are escaped.”**

He made a show of injured innocence:

“What have I done, and what hast thou found in thy servant so long as I have been before thee unto this day, that I may not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?”

But his heart was not with his words; and it was with unfeigned satisfaction that he received the stringent command to depart from the camp with the morning light. As in the grey dawn he stealthily mustered his men to start, did he not fling one glance as far as the mists permitted to the camp of Israel, where the lion-heart of the beloved Jonathan was doubtless preparing itself for the fight? Oh to have been permitted to be beside him in repelling one of the most formidable invasions of their lives!

III. BY THE DIVINE DEALINGS WITH HIM IN RESPECT TO THE BURNING OF ZIKLAG

It was by God's great mercy that the Philistine lords were so set against the continuance of David in their camp. They thought that they were executing a piece of ordinary policy, dictated by prudence and foresight; little realizing that they were the shears by which God was cutting the meshes of David's net. Their protest was lodged at exactly the right moment; had it been postponed but for a few hours, David had been involved in the battle, or had not been back in time to overtake the Amalekites, red-handed in the sack of Ziklag.

As David was leaving the battlefield, a number of the men of Manasseh, who appear to have deserted to Achish, were assigned to him by the Philistines, lest they also should turn traitors on the field.

Thus he left the camp with a greatly increased following.

Here, too, was a proof of God's tender thoughtfulness, because at no time of his life was he in greater need of reinforcements than now. God anticipates coming trial, and reinforces us against its certain imminence and pressure. We are taken into the House Beautiful to be armed, before we descend into the valley of conflict with Apollyon.

It was altogether according to God's merciful providence that, contrary to his wont, David had left no men to defend Ziklag during his absence.

It is difficult to understand the laxity of his arrangements for its safeguard in those wild and perilous times; but apparently not one single soldier was left to protect the women and children. Yet it was well; for when a band of Amalekites fell suddenly on the little town, there was none to irritate them by offering resistance, none to obstruct their will, nothing to excite their fear of pursuit or revenge. Evidently neither David nor his soldiers would be back from the war for weeks or months; there was therefore no need to exercise the usual precautions they could spread themselves abroad over all the ground, eating and drinking, and feasting.

In the first outburst of grief and horror, nothing but the gracious interposition of God could have saved David's life.

On reaching the spot which they accounted home, after three days exhausting march, the soldiers found it a heap of smouldering ruins; and instead of the welcome of wives and children, silence and desolation reigned supreme.

“Then David and the people that were with him lifted up their voice, and wept until they had no more power to weep”; but in David's case there was an added element of distress.

Those who had a little before cried, **“Peace, peace to thee, thou son of Jesse, thy God helpeth thee,”** now spoke of stoning him. The loyalty and devotion which he had never failed to receive from his followers were suddenly changed to vinegar and gall. The milk of human kindness had turned sour in this awful thunderstorm.

But this was the moment of his return to God. In that dread hour, with the charred embers smoking at his feet; with the cold hand of anxiety for the fate of his wives feeling at his heart; with the sense of duplicity and deceit which he had been practicing, and which had alienated him from God, on his conscience; with this threat of stoning in his ears; his heart suddenly sprang back into its old resting-place in the bosom of God.

“David was greatly distressed, for the people spake of stoning him; because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters: but David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.”

From this moment David is himself again, his old strong, glad, noble self. For the first time, after months of disuse, he bids Abiathar bring him the ephod, and he enquires of the Lord. With marvellous vigor he arises to pursue the marauding troop, and he overtakes it. He withholds the impetuosity of his men till daylight wanes, loosing them from the leash in the twilight, and leading them to the work of rescue and vengeance with such irresistible impetuosity that not a man of them escaped, save four hundred young men who rode upon camels and fled. And when the greed of his followers proposed to withhold from those whose faintness had stayed them by the brook Besor all share in the rich plunder, he dared to stand alone against the whole of them, and insisted that it should not be so, but that as his share was that went down to the battle, so his should be that tarried by the stuff. Thus he who had power with God had power also with man.

And when, shortly after, the breathless messenger burst into his presence with the tidings of Gilboa's fatal rout, though they meant the fulfillment of long-delayed hopes, he was able to bear himself humbly and with unaffected sorrow, to express his lament in the most exquisite funeral ode in existence, and to award the Amalekite his deserts.

He was sweet as well as strong, as courteous as brave. For when he returned to Ziklag, his first act was to send of the spoil taken from the Amalekites to the elders of all the towns on the southern frontier where he and his men were wont to haunt, acknowledging his indebtedness to them, and so far as possible requiting it.

Thus the sunshine of God's favour rested afresh upon his soul. He had broken from Doubting Castle and Giant Despair, and had reached again the path of obedience and safety. God had brought him up from the horrible pit and the miry clay; had set his feet on a rock, and established his going; and had put a new song of praise in his mouth. Let all backsliders give heed and take comfort. These things were written aforetime for our instruction, that we, through the comfort and instruction of the Scriptures, might have hope.

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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