

DAVID:

SHEPHERD, PSALMIST, KING

F. B. Meyer, B.A.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SONGS BORN OF SORROW

(I Samuel 23)

“A song of the heart that is broken,
A song of the sighs and the tears,
The sickness, the want, and the sadness
Of the days of our pilgrimage years.

“Sweet sings the great choir of sorrow,
The song of the gladness untold,
To Him on the throne of his glory,
Who wept in the days of old.”

- H. Sears

THE Church owes many of her sweetest hymns to the profound anguish which wrung the hearts of her noblest children. The rough feet of trial and pain have stamped, as in the oil-press, hearts whose life-blood is preserved in matchless lyrics. There is no such raw material for songs that live from heart to heart as that furnished by sorrow.

It has been said by a modern writer that, to his thought, the mysterious beauty of music is more wonderful than the prodigality of form and color which overspreads the whole of nature; and he goes on to show that man only develops and liberates the music which is latent in almost all substances, waiting for his coming to give it expression. “Man only develops what was within them, just as the coal which is extracted from the bowels of the earth, when set on fire, merely liberates the heat and light, which in the forest it received from the sun.” Is not this speechless music locked within nature, pleading to be let out in song or sound through the agency of man part of the earnest expectation of the creature, which waits for the manifestation of the sons of God?

It is remarkable how many of David’s psalms date from those dark and sad days when he was hunted as a partridge upon the mountains. His path may be tracked through the Psalter, as well as in the sacred narrative of his wanderings. Keilah, Ziph, Maon, Engedi, yielded themes for strains which will live forever. To this gifted singer the power was entrusted of eliciting the music that lay concealed in the least congenial haunts. Is it not strange that these wild desolations are now immortal, and that each has contributed chords to the complete music of the soul? We will for a little trace the parallel lines of David’s history and song.

I. A CLUSTER OF PSALMS

KEILAH

While sheltering in the forest of Hareth, tidings came of a foray of the Philistines on one of the hapless border-towns.

“Behold, the Philistines fight against Keilah, and they rob the threshingfloors.”

The year’s harvest was at that time spread out for threshing; it was an opportune moment therefore for the plunderer. The labours of the year were being carried off, and the cattle lifted by Israel’s bitter and relentless foe.

Wrapped in these tidings there was probably a covert appeal for help from one who had often proved himself a wall of defence on the southern frontier. Saul was too far away, and perhaps too intent on his fancied personal wrongs, to be available for the rapid action that was required. David was alert, energetic, near at hand. The appeal to him was not in vain; especially as it was ratified by the Divine voice.

He arose and went down from the hill-country of Judah into the plains, met the marauders on their return journey, heavily laden with booty and impeded with cattle, smote them with great slaughter, and brought back all the spoil to the rejoicing townsfolk, who, in return for his services, gladly lodged and entertained him and his men.

It was a brief spell of sunshine in a dark and cloudy day, and must have been very welcome to the weary little band. To be again in a town that had **“gates and bars”** was as welcome an exchange to life in the dens and caves of the earth as the comforts of civilization are after the privations of the Tartar steppes. And this gleam of comfort probably elicited from the minstrel-chieftain Psalm 31, **“Blessed be the Lord, for He hath showed me his marvellous kindness in a strong city.”**

ZIPH

His stay in Keilah was brought to a summary close by the tidings, given perhaps by Jonathan, that Saul was preparing an expedition to take him, like a trapped bird, even though the city that sheltered his rival were destroyed in the attempt. These tidings were confirmed through the ephod, by which David appealed to the God of Israel; and the further information was communicated that the cowardly and ungrateful townsfolk, when forced to choose between the king and himself, would not scruple to save themselves by surrendering their deliverer.

Then David and his men, in number about six hundred, arose and departed out of Keilah, and went whithersoever they could go. Perhaps they broke up into small parties, whilst the leader, with the more intrepid and devoted of his followers, made his way to the neighborhood of Ziph, about three miles south of Hebron.

This was about the lowest ebb in David's fortunes. The king was searching for him every day with a malignity which made it evident that he had come out to seek his life. Beneath the expressions and formulas of devout religion which he carefully maintained (23:7, 21), Saul secretly cherished the resolve of thwarting the Divine purpose.

He knew, so Jonathan told his friend in a hurried interview the two noble youths arranged in the wood of Ziph, that David would be king over Israel. But this did not abate his determination to take his life if he could. What a desperate condition his soul had reached, as the result of turning itself to its own wild and evil way! And manifestly David had every reason to fear the outbursts of the hatred which, in proud defiance, had even set itself against the will of God.

In addition to this relentless hate, there was the meditated treachery of the Ziphites, who sought to curry favour with the king by betraying David's lurking place. Tidings of their intended falseness came to David, and he moved further south to the wilderness of Maon, where a conical hill gives a far extended view of the surrounding country. But to the spot the men of Ziph conducted the king with such deadly accuracy, that, before they could escape, the little beleaguered band found the hill on which they gathered surrounded by the royal troops, and their escape rendered impossible.

Well for them that a breathless messenger at this juncture burst in on Saul with the words, **"Haste thee, and come; for the Philistines have made a raid on the land."**

Then David drew a long sigh of relief, and sang Psalm 54: **"Save me, O God, by thy name, and judge me by thy might."**

ENGEDI

From Maon, when the heat of the pursuit was over, David removed his quarters eastward to the strong holds of the wild goat on the shores of the Dead Sea. On the western shore, midway between north and south, there is a little piece of level ground, covered with the rich luxuriance of tropical vegetation.

It is jealously fenced in by giant cliffs, jutting out into the dark waters of the lake; but its beauty is maintained by a tepid stream which issues from the limestone rock, four hundred feet above the glen. It is said that grey weather-beaten stones mark the site of an ancient city, and traces of palms have been discovered encrusted in the limestone. But the tangle of a tropical jungle now reigns supreme.

This was David's next resort Engedi, the haunt of the wild goat where deep caverns in the steep cliffs, and the abundance of water-supply, furnished two of the most important items in his sparse and frugal program.

Here, again, the Psalmist sets his experiences to music in two priceless songs. Psalm 57, **"Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee"**; and Psalm 142, **"I cried unto the LORD with my voice; with my voice unto the LORD did I make my supplication."**

Wilderness Experiences also gave rise to other psalms, nil of them marked by a recurrence of the same metaphors borrowed from the wilderness and rocky scenery; of the same protestations of innocence; of the same appeals for the overshadowing wing of the Most High; of the same delicately-worded references to Saul. Amongst these are Psalms 11, 13, 17, 22, 25, 64.

II. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THESE PSALMS

We cannot deal with them in detail; but one or two features arrest the most superficial glance.

Their Imagery.

Men are as lions. “My **soul is among lions, I lie among them that are set on fire.**” His soul takes refuge in God, hiding in the shadow of his wings; as he had often seen the eaglets do beneath the broad pinion of the parent-bird. God is his Rock, he hides in Him; as his fugitive band in the strong deep sides of the cave. His Divine helper will not let his enemies triumph over him; it shall happen to them, as so often happened to hunters in those very wilds, when they fell down the crumbling sides of pits dug to trap the creatures of the forest. At night he shelters in God; with his psaltery he awakes the dawn. All these psalms are bathed in imagery and metaphors like these.

Their Delicate References to Saul.

He does not spare his epithets for those who goad the king to murderous hate. The men that watched for his stumbling, that cried “report it! report it!” that misrepresented and maligned him, are dealt with in no hesitating or mincing tones. But of Saul he says nothing, unless there is a veiled allusion to him in the plural, with which he describes the violent men that sought after his life. There is a plaintive allusion to happy days, past forever, when he manifested his profound sympathy for the king’s terrible malady, wearing sackcloth on his flesh, and humbling his soul with fasting (35:13); but there are no words of reproach, no upbraidings, no repayment of hate with hate. In this there is an anticipation of the teaching and temper of Jesus.

There is a Conscious Rectitude - His conscience was void of offence towards God and man.

If challenged as to his absolute sinlessness, he would have been the first to deprecate anything of the sort; instantly he would have acknowledged that in his rough soldier-life he was constantly in need of the propitiating sacrifices, which should plead for him with God. But, in respect to Saul, or to any treachery against him or his house, or to any crime deserving such treatment as that with which he was threatened, he protested his absolute innocence; and turned confidently to God, with clean hands and a pure heart, as one who had not lifted up his soul unto vanity, or sworn deceitfully (Psalm 7:3, 4, 5; 24).

There is great Evidence of Suffering.

Of all sources of pain, there is none so hard to bear, that stings so sharply, and strikes its poison fangs so deeply, as the malevolence of our fellows.

This is what David suffered from most of all. To his highly sensitive spirit it was the most acute form of torture: that though he was absolutely innocent, though he was willing to give himself to prayer and ministry on their behalf, yet his calumniators pursued him with such unrelenting malice **“Their teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword.”**

But his appeal was to God

**“Save me, O God, by thy name;
And judge me by thy strength . . .
Behold, God is mine helper.”**

**“I will cry unto God most High;
Unto God that performeth all things for me.
He shall send from heaven, and save me . . .
“God shall send forth his mercy and truth.”**

**“Refuge failed me; no man careth for my soul.
I cried unto Thee, O Lord.
I said, Thou art my refuge.”**

What depths of pathos lie in these stanzas of petition! He does not seek to retaliate or avenge his wrong; but commits himself to Him who judgeth righteously, assured that the Righteous One will shelter him during the time of trial, and ultimately bring out his righteousness as the light, and his judgment as the noonday.

If any should read these lines who are unjustly maligned and persecuted, let them rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Some little time may elapse before the hour of deliverance may strike, during which they must wear white robes of stainless innocence and purity (Revelation 6:11); but presently God will arise, and lift the poor out of the dust, the needy from the dunghill, **“to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory.”** For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the expectation of the poor perish for ever.

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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