

SAMUEL THE PROPHET

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY

“SIN BRINGETH FORTH DEATH”

(I Samuel 18:12)

“We scatter seeds with careless hand,
And dream we ne’er shall see them more;
But for a thousand years their fruit appears
In weeds that mar the land, or healthful store.”

- Keble

NEVER has there been a truer illustration of the words in which the Apostle James describes the genealogy of sin and her fateful family than that furnished by the life-history of Saul. No sooner are we told that he had begun to yield to the spirit of evil, than the historian hastens to tell us of the successive steps by which its early suggestions grew into a headlong passion, hurrying the monarch to one breach after another of the Divine law. How true it is that they who offend in one point are finally guilty in all! The first sin is like the letting in of water, which gradually eats away the embankment, so that presently the entire flood of waters inundates the land.

It befell thus. About this time, while Saul was smarting under Samuel’s sentence of deposition, David for the first time crossed his path. Two accounts are given of the introduction of the young shepherd to the God-forsaken and moody monarch, but they are not mutually inconsistent. The one tells of his entering the royal palace as a minstrel; the other of his prowess in war, which rendered his presence an indispensable adjunct to the court.

The attacks of Saul’s depression and despondency become more frequent and severe; and at last it was suggested by his servants tradition says, by Doeg the Edomite that the effect of music should be tried on the poor diseased brain.

“Behold now,” they said, “an evil spirit from God troubleth thee; let our lord now command thy servants, which are before thee, to seek out a man who is a cunning player on the harp; and it shall come to pass, when the evil spirit from God is upon thee, that he shall play with his hand, and thou shalt be well.”

Instantly the king fell in with the suggestion; and presently David’s name was mentioned by one of the young men, who had, perhaps, come from the same part of the country, and had often met the son of Jesse in their native village - may even have sat with him at the feet of the same Rabbi. The young shepherd was possessed of the very qualities which were most captivating for the king.

He was skilful in playing. Already he had come to be known as a man of valor, in the border skirmishes which he maintained with robbers for the integrity of his father's flock. He was skilful in judgment, and eloquent in speech. Manly beauty characterized his countenance and port. It seems as though that had happened to David which happens in measure to all God's servants the unction and abiding of the Holy Spirit had brought out into fair and living prominence his natural traits, as when a spark is taken from common air and plunged into a jar of oxygen gas, or as though an island which had long lain under the spell of Arctic winter could be loosed from its moorings, and drifted down to southern seas, and, beneath the genial touch of the tropic summer, all the buried seeds should burst forth into a rich and luxuriant growth.

The description given to him greatly pleased the king, who was always on the outlook for promising youths; and in the exercise of that unquestioned autocracy which marked his reign, like that of other Eastern monarchs, he dispatched a summons to Jesse to send him David, his son, who was with the sheep.

Such a summons could not be disregarded, and making up a present of the produce of his farm, the old man dispatched his Benjamin to begin to tread the difficult and intricate paths of royal favour.

“And David came to Saul, and stood before him, and he loved him greatly.”

And whenever Saul was overtaken by one of his fits of melancholy, when the sky was overcast with the heavy clouds of God-forsakenness and despair, **“when the evil spirit from God was upon him,”**

David, then probably about eighteen years of age, took the harp and played with his hand, so that Saul was refreshed, and the evil spirit departed from him, and he was well.

Robert Browning has depicted for us, with a wonderful luxuriance of imagination, the scene when the minstrel strove with all the spell of his art to tame and exorcise the depression that mantled the royal brow; how he sang of the scenes in the valleys where the sheep were being gathered beside the brimming waters of the wells; and again of the pasture lands over which they were scattered, browsing on the tender grass.

At one moment there was a strain of martial music, summoning the clans to repel a border foray; at another it seemed as though the voices of maidens were welcoming back from the fight their lovers, crowned with victory. Again, the music told of the rising storm, the rattle of the thunder, the pelt of the hail, until you became aware that the fury of the elements had spent itself, and was dying down into the cadences of a summer landscape bathed in peace.

Now you could have heard the sough of the wind through the trees, or sweeping over the meadows, and anon the music of the spheres, as the heavens declared the glory of God and the firmament told of his handiwork. Sometimes the young poet would rehearse the joy of drinking the pure nectar of young life;

Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock up to rock;
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree; the cool silver shock
Of the plunge in a pool's living water the hunt of the bear,
And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in his lair.

And the meal the rich dates yellowed over with gold-dust divine,
And the locusts flesh steeped in the pitcher! The full draught of wine,
And the sheep in the dried river-channel where bulrushes tell
That the water was wont to go warbling so softly and well.

How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ
All the heart, and the soul, and the senses forever in joy.

It is probable that the spell of music with which David sought to relieve the king's dark moods was greatly successful, as afterwards in the case of Philip V of Spain, who was cured of a fixed melancholy by the music of a famous player.

His fits of insanity became less and less frequent; the need for David's attendance at court was greatly relaxed; and the king may almost have ceased to think of him, amid the many suitors for his royal favour.

Perhaps this very fickleness was part of the disease. It was due probably to the disordered condition of the king's brain that he well-nigh forgot the stripling whom he had greatly loved, and who had become alike his armour-bearer and his physician (16:22).

How long a period elapsed in this way we cannot tell, but another series of events brought Saul and David into closer and more tragical contact. The Philistines had never forgiven the Hebrews for having discarded the yoke, which for so long they had meekly borne; and at last, after a series of forays and raids on the southern borders of Canaan, the tide of invasion could no longer be restrained. It rolled across the frontiers, and poured through the valleys, till the Philistine hosts were gathered together in the valley of the Terebinth, which belonged to Judah, and pitched their camp at Ephes-dammim, "*the Boundary of Blood*," so called, probably, from the dark and bloody encounters which had taken place there.

The valley, or wady, is broad and open, and about three miles long.

It is divided in the center by a remarkable ravine, or trench, formed by a mountain torrent, which is full of foaming water in the winter, though dry in summer. It was the presence of this gorge or channel, some twenty feet wide, with steep vertical sides, and with a depth of ten or twelve feet, that protracted the issue for so long, so that the two hosts lay watching each other for forty days, neither of them daring to face the hazard involved in crossing the valley and its ravine, in the face of the other.

The full story of the combat with Goliath belongs to the Life of David; we only touch on it here as it concerns the ill-fated and hapless Saul.

When the gigantic Philistine champion strode forth, and even dared to come near the lines of the Hebrew troops, clothed in helmet, jerkin, and greaves of bright copper mail, handling a mighty spear, and with a sword girt at his side; and when he boldly challenged the armies of Israel to produce a man worthy to take up the gage of battle, Saul was as dismayed and panic-stricken as any of his soldiers. It is said that he was “**greatly afraid**” (17:11).

Though he was God’s chosen king, and in his earlier life had stood in the might of a simple faith, his disobedience had severed the sinews of his power, and he had become as weak as any other. Obedience and faith are two aspects of the same posture of the soul; as you obey, you are able to believe; as you believe, you can obey.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the fourth chapter, the words are perpetually interchanged. Let a man but have faith in God, he waxes valiant in the fight, and turns to flight armies of aliens. One can chase a thousand, and two put thousands to flight.

Oh! beware of disobedience which introduces trembling and faintness into the heart, so that the sound of a driven leaf chases the fugitive!

All that Saul could do, in the face of the braggart blasphemy of Goliath, was to hold out the most lavish promises of what he would do for the hero who would take up the challenge, and make the proud Gittite bite the dust.

When, finally, David was brought into his presence, his soul glowing with an heroic faith, and avowing his determination to go alone to fight the Philistine, Saul endeavored to dissuade him.

“Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him.”

He had no idea of power other than that which came of long usage (17:33), or of helmets and coats of mail (17:38, 39). The point of David’s narrative of his successful conflicts with the lion and bear was entirely lost on him. Saul looked on them as the result of superior agility and sinewy strength; he did not fathom David’s meaning as he spoke of the great deliverances which the Lord had wrought (17:37).

Already the young psalmist was saying to himself:

**“The Lord is my light and my salvation,
Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the strength of my life,
Of whom shall I be afraid?”**

But such boasts of the believer in God were an enigma to the king. The eyes of his heart were blinded, and he could not see. He had no idea that faith opens altogether new sources of power, touches stops in the great organ of nature which elude other hands, and avails itself of those Divine prerogatives which, like legions of angels, wait in harnessed squadrons around the beset believer.

As David went forth to meet the Philistine, Saul said to Abner, the trusted captain of his army, **“Whose son is the youth? Inquire whose son the stripling is.”**

And when presently the young champion returned with the head of the Philistine in his hand, the one question the king put to him was, **“Whose son art thou, thou young man?”**

It was as though Saul thought to account for his success on the ground of heredity. “Surely,” thought he, “this youth comes of a great line of ancestry; the Blood of Caleb or Joshua must be in his veins; the best of Hebrew stock must have yielded this scion.” It is thus that the man of this world tries to compute and reckon up the child of faith. He is always analyzing the elements of his success and trying to account for him. He has no conception of what God can be or do for the soul that wholly trusts Him.

On the ground of expediency, after his return to Gibeah, Saul set David over the men of war. The harp was exchanged, for the most part, for the sword; and as he went forth on his expeditions against the hereditary foes of Israel, he became more and more necessary to the stability of the throne, as he became increasingly the darling of the nation.

“Whithersoever Saul sent him, he behaved himself wisely.”

Out of this popularity originated the great sin of Saul’s life.

On one occasion, as Saul and David were returning from some final and decisive victory over the Philistines (ver. 6, see marg)., the people crowded to meet them and the troops; and the women, dressed in gay attire, danced around and before the advancing columns, singing to the music of their tambourines and three-stringed instruments. As they performed the usual sacred dance they sang responsively, **“answering one to another,”** an ode of victory, of which this was the refrain;

**“Saul hath slain his thousands,
And David his ten thousands.”**

Instantly the king was smitten with the dart of jealousy.

All his soul was set on fire with the thought that not improbably David was the neighbour of whom Samuel had spoken as being the divinely designated successor to the kingdom, which was even now passing from his hand. What if this bright young soldier, with the light of God on his life, and the love of the people already gathered to his person, was to dispossess him!

“And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said; What can he have more than the kingdom?”

“And Saul eyed David from that day and forward.”

All the love and admiration that he had entertained towards him turned to gall and bitterness.

The milk of human kindness turned sour. His old malady, which had been charmed away from him, came back with more than its wonted force; and on the day after the incident, brooding over his fancied wrongs, it seemed as though his whole nature were suddenly thrown open to an evil spirit, which possessed him and swept him on to do a deed of murderous hatred. Raving in a mad fit of frenzy, he caught up the spear that stood beside him as the emblem of his royal state, and hurled it at David who was sitting before him, endeavoring to charm away his malady.

Not once, but twice, the murderous weapon quivered through the air; but David **“avoided out of his presence twice,”** no doubt imputing the attempt on his life to the king’s illness, and having no idea of the jealousy that was burning in his soul like fire.

Let us take care of the first beginnings of sin, when the least suggestion begins to float in the air around us, like a microbe or germ of malignant and deadly disease. Then is the time to turn to CHRIST with it for deliverance, securing his gracious interposition, as you exercise faith in the grace of his salvation.

“Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me; then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression.”

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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