

The Sword shall never depart

"Wherefore hast thou despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in His sight? Now therefore the sword shall never depart from thine house, because thou hast despised Me" (2 Sam. 12:9-10).

The very next chapter begins to record the working out of this decree, in the case of Amnon's foolishness and sin. For two full years, Absalom quietly waited his time, plotting vengeance for his sister, and finally the opportunity came, and he slew Amnon, and David begins to feel the inescapable hand of God's righteous judgment.

The mother of Absalom, as far as is recorded, was the only foreigner among David's wives, and thus God works out the punishment of one sin through the consequences of another. Absalom, whose name, pathetically enough, means "*Father of Peace*," was the principal instrument of David's punishment; and David's extreme grief at his death, after all his treachery, seems to indicate a special attachment to Absalom, even above his other children, and a bitter realization of what might have been had he himself acted differently.

Three years Absalom spends in exile at Geshur, and two more in Jerusalem before the king is reconciled to him. Seven years have now passed. Having returned, Absalom goes about cunningly to steal the hearts of the men of Israel. How easily are people deceived by a fair show and smooth words! How shallow and unstable is human loyalty! And, above all, how sharply the case of Absalom brings out the fundamental baseness of human nature, teaching us to ever look with distrust upon our natural desires and reactions.

Paul speaks of the foolishness of those who compared themselves with themselves and consequently found nothing wrong. Comparing their actions with their own natural conceptions and thoughts they found that they agreed perfectly. **But what of the mind of God?** A man's own heart is no safe guide.

But there is a lesson even in Absalom's wickedness—the lesson of the unjust steward. Absalom yielded himself wholeheartedly to selfishness, and the murder of his own father was the logical conclusion, as he stood in his way. Having given himself over to evil, it would have been foolish to draw the line anywhere. He was wiser in his generation than those who go halfway into evil and still attempt to cling to an appearance of good, or those who but half-heartedly follow that which is good. Having chosen his course, he followed it through to the end and hesitated at nothing.

It was truly an evil, human course, but his pursuance of it is a lesson in single-minded perseverance. And his scheming patience, although directed to base and selfish ends, is an illustration of the latent powers in us all which are equally effective for evil or good.

Two years he quietly waited to avenge himself upon Amnon, but the wait did not dull the keen edge of his determination. How long before his insurrection he had harbored ambitions for his father's throne is not disclosed, but there is no haste in his methods—only a painstaking and tireless singleness of purpose and a long and skilful planning—so thorough that when the moment came all Israel was with him, and so secret that David was taken wholly unawares.

Absalom was strong-willed, clever, ruthless and patient—attributes which could have made him as much a power for good as he was for evil, if he had been moved by the wisdom that is from above, instead of that which is from beneath. God allowed him to go far on the course he chose, for it suited God's purpose to do so, and each successful step would further embolden him for the next.

But when the proper time came, God turned his wisdom to foolishness and everything he had taken so long to build collapsed like a house of cards, and destroyed him in its ruins.

"The Lord appointed to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, to the intent that the Lord might bring evil upon Absalom."

What chance had Absalom's wisest scheming in the face of that? He was clever, and he prospered for a while, but the final chapter of his career revealed him as a pitiful and relatively insignificant tool in the hands of God Who was by bitter tribulation shaping the character of a far better man. In all things, **consider the end.**

The events connected with Absalom, tragic though they were, were not without a purpose; and even a certain amount of comfort, for David. The truest depths of friendship are only experienced in adversity; and the loyalty of Ittai the Gittite, and the faithful kindness of Barzillai the Gileadite, would go far toward bearing David up against the infidelity of his son. We are so constituted, in the mercy of God, that sorrow will add a keenness to the comfort of common blessings that are only shallowly appreciated in times of ease.

And the occasion, too, made possible one incident which, while galling at the time, brought out the underlying nobility and gentleness of David's character and would give him much satisfaction later as a bitter trial faithfully and commendably borne. That was the cursing of Shimei of the house of Saul, who viciously taunted David as he fled from Absalom, and insolently stoned him. When Abishai desired permission to destroy him, David said—

"Behold, my son—which carne forth of my bowels—seeketh my life. How much more now may this Benjamite do it? Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on mine affliction, and the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day."

Weak and human though he was in many respects, he was at heart in full harmony with the mind of God. He realized that these trials were a necessary chastening from God to tame his unruly desires, and that the better he endured them, the shorter they would have to be.

As we look back, David seems to stand out apart from all others in the history of Israel. Moses truly is a far more majestic and awe-inspiring figure; Abraham exemplifies the nobility of a patient, enduring faith through a long and weary pilgrimage; but it is into the heart of David that we enter most closely. His life seems crowded with every variety of experience, and ranges from the purest God-fearing courage of his youthful encounter with Goliath to the ugly depths of adultery and murder.

His life was a battle between the highest and most intimate spiritual conceptions of God on the one hand, and all the strong currents of human nature on the other. That he repeatedly failed is true, but what is far more important is that he freely and humbly recognized his failures and continued to press on, accepting every form of tribulation with unresentful resignation.

His life, on the whole, was a broken and frustrated one. A long period he spent as a hunted fugitive—a wanderer away from his country and kindred, attended by a motley following whose company must have been on the whole small comfort and a constant burden. Then, after his wanderings end and he finally becomes king and has subdued all his enemies, he stumbles into a grievous sin which plagues him without respite for the rest of his life.

Had Jonathan lived, much may have been different in David's life, but such was not the purpose of God. The affection between them was of the most exceptional character, calling for the strongest terms of description. In the friendship of Jonathan, David could have found satisfaction and

guidance for the restless desires that led him into pitfalls. But it was God's will that he should learn alone.

After Jonathan's death, David seems to have found affinity with no one, and such comfort as he could get in the course of a life of disappointment and turmoil he must get by a direct and lonely approach to God by himself which, while infinitely more difficult, was perhaps in the ultimate for the best.

The Psalms could never have been written by a man who could find satisfaction and comfort in anything short of a direct and individual communion with God. And therefore, in the wisdom of God, it was Joab and not Jonathan who became David's lifelong companion, though such would never have been David's choice.

God's purpose with David was very high, and David had much to learn. Therefore considerations of his present comfort must give way to those which through long and bitter tribulation would develop in him the peaceable fruits of purity and righteousness.

The wisdom of God chose a vessel ideally suited to His purpose, and no small part of that purpose was the recording of the Psalms. The strong light of the inspiring Spirit, shining through every facet of David's character and experiences, threw as on a screen each detail of hope and despair, of failure and triumph.

Moses' character is made before we meet him as he comes on a divine mission from the wilderness to deliver Israel from bondage. But in the Psalms every aspect of David's development is laid bare before us. Christ alone combined the exalted and prophetic majesty of Moses with the keen humanity of David. Tried and tempted in all points like his brethren, he alone as the representative of mankind fulfilled all the experiences portrayed through David in the Psalms and emerged triumphant and unspotted from them.

David typifies the body of Christ, those whom Christ came to redeem, the chosen generation, the spirit willing and eager but the flesh weak, a man after God's own heart, who through much tribulation must learn the way to the kingdom.

But David, as the writer of the Psalms, was permitted to be the instrument by which Christ was encouraged and strengthened. And each of the members, too, can in some small way share in this honor. For it was for the joy that was set before him that he was enabled to endure, and that joy consisted in the love and affection of those who gratefully accept the benefits he procured.

Our participation in the victory is measured, therefore, by our affection for him, and the value of that vice-royalty is increased by each one that lays hold upon it.

Between Joab and David there was no affinity. David was a man of God. Joab was not. No greater gulf could separate two men than that. They lived in different worlds. David repeatedly struggled and fell, but from beginning to end he was a man of God, intensely loyal and devoted.

Joab was a man of the world. Wiser at times than David, and strangely enough, sometimes his perception rose higher than David's, but to the deeper currents of divine communion which were the basis of David's life, Joab was a stranger.

In his reaction to David's grief for Absalom, Joab is practical and wise. But David could see many things to which Joab was utterly blind. David could see that day many years earlier when the prophet Nathan had stood before him and had solemnly spoken of the great anger of God and the consequences he would have to suffer. David could now see the humiliation of Tamar and the

murder of Amnon, his firstborn. He could see that now another wayward son had been taken, leaving behind an ignoble memory of treachery and dishonor, all the consequences of his own folly and sin. And he would wonder where and when the next blow would fall.

But Joab's rough counsel would sharply remind him that his pilgrimage was not yet ended. Those terrible words would always be before his mind—"***Now, therefore, the sword shall never depart from thine house,***" and he would see dimly, stretching into the future, a continuation of that trail of wickedness and bloodshed which he had set in motion. And so, aroused once again by Joab's brusque prodding, he concealed his grief that no one would understand, and carried on.

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