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DAVID: FIVE SERMONS

NOTE:—The first four of these Sermons were preached before the University of Cambridge.

SERMON I. DAVID'S WEAKNESS

Psalm lxxviii. 71, 72, 73. He chose David his servant, and took him away from the sheep-folds. As he was following the ewes great with young ones, he took him; that he might feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance. So he fed them with a faithful and true heart, and ruled them prudently with all his power.

I am about to preach to you four sermons on the character of David. His history, I take for granted, you all know.

I look on David as an all but ideal king, educated for his office by an all but ideal training. A shepherd first; a life—he is remembered—full of danger in those times and lands; then captain of a band of outlaws; and lastly a king, gradually and with difficulty fighting his way to a secure throne.

This was his course. But the most important stage of it was probably the first. Among the dumb animals he learnt experience which he afterwards put into practice among human beings. The shepherd of the sheep became the shepherd of men. He who had slain the lion and the bear became the champion of his native land. He who followed the ewes great with young, fed God's oppressed and weary people with a faithful and true heart, till he raised them into a great and strong nation. So both sides of the true kingly character, the masculine and the feminine, are brought out in David. For the greedy and tyrannous, he has indignant defiance: for the weak and helpless, patient tenderness.

My motives for choosing this subject I will explain in a very few words.

We have heard much of late about 'Muscular Christianity.' A clever expression, spoken in jest by I know not whom, has been bandied about the world, and supposed by many to represent some new ideal of the Christian character.

For myself, I do not understand what it means. It may mean one of two things. If it mean the first, it is a term somewhat unnecessary, if not somewhat irreverent. If it mean the second, it means something untrue and immoral.

Its first and better meaning may be simply a healthy and manful Christianity, one which does not exalt the feminine virtues to the exclusion of the masculine.

That certain forms of Christianity have committed this last fault cannot be doubted. The tendency of Christianity, during the patristic and the Middle Ages, was certainly in that direction. Christians were persecuted and defenceless, and they betook themselves to the only virtues which they had the opportunity of practising—gentleness, patience, resignation, self-sacrifice, and self-devotion—all that is loveliest in the ideal female character. And God forbid that that

side of the Christian life should ever be undervalued. It has its own beauty, its own strength too made perfect in weakness; in prison, in torture, at the fiery stake, on the lonely sick-bed, in long years of self-devotion and resignation, and in a thousand womanly sacrifices unknown to man, but written for ever in God's book of life.

But as time went on, and the monastic life, which, whether practised by man or by woman, is essentially a feminine life, became more and more exclusively the religious ideal, grave defects began to appear in what was really too narrow a conception of the human character.

The monks of the Middle Ages, in aiming exclusively at the virtues of women, generally copied little but their vices. Their unnatural attempt to be wiser than God, and to unsex themselves, had done little but disease their mind and heart. They resorted more and more to those arts which are the weapons of crafty, ambitious, and unprincipled women. They were too apt to be cunning, false, intriguing. They were personally cowardly, as their own chronicles declare; querulous, passionate, prone to unmanly tears; prone, as their writings abundantly testify, to scold, to use the most virulent language against all who differed from them; they were, at times, fearfully cruel, as evil women will be; cruel with that worst cruelty which springs from cowardice. If I seem to have drawn a harsh picture of them, I can only answer that their own documents justify abundantly all that I have said.

Gradually, to supply their defects, another ideal arose. The warriors of the Middle Ages hoped that they might be able to serve God in the world, even in the battle-field. At least, the world and the battle-field they would not relinquish, but make the best of them. And among them arose a new and a very fair ideal of manhood: that of the 'gentle, very perfect knight,' loyal to his king and to his God, bound to defend the weak, succour the oppressed, and put down the wrong-doer; with his lady, or bread-giver, dealing forth bounteously the goods of this life to all who needed; occupied in the seven works of mercy, yet living in the world, and in the perfect enjoyment of wedded and family life. This was the ideal. Of course sinful human nature fell short of it, and defaced it by absurdities; but I do not hesitate to say that it was a higher ideal of Christian excellence than had appeared since the time of the Apostles, putting aside the quite exceptional ideal of the blessed martyrs.

A higher ideal, I say, was chivalry, with all its shortcomings. And for this reason: that it asserted the possibility of consecrating the whole manhood, and not merely a few faculties thereof, to God; and it thus contained the first germ of that Protestantism which conquered at the Reformation.

Then was asserted, once for all, on the grounds of nature and reason, as well as of Holy Scripture, the absolute sanctity of family and national life, and the correlative idea, namely, the consecration of the whole of human nature to the service of God, in that station to which God had called each man. Then the Old Testament, with the honour which it puts upon family and national life, became precious to man, as it had never been before; and such a history as David's became, not as it was with the mediæval monks, a mere repertory of fanciful metaphors and allegories, but the solemn example, for good and for evil, of a man of like passions and like duties with the men of the modern world.

These great truths, once asserted, could not but conquer; and they will conquer to the end. All attempts to restore the monastic and feminine ideal, like that of good Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding, failed. They withered like hot-house exotics in the free, keen, bracing English air; and in our civil wars, Cavalier and Puritan, in whatever they differed, never differed in their sound and healthy conviction that true religion did not crush, but strengthened and consecrated a valiant and noble manhood.

Now if all that 'Muscular Christianity' means is that, then the expression is altogether unnecessary; for we have had the thing for three centuries—and defective likewise, for it is not a merely muscular, but a human Christianity which the Bible taught our forefathers, and which our forefathers have handed down to us.

But there is another meaning sometimes attached to this flippant expression, 'Muscular Christianity,' which is utterly immoral and intolerable. There are those who say, and there have been of late those who have written books to shew, that provided a young man is sufficiently brave, frank, and gallant, he is more or less absolved from the common duties of morality and self-restraint.

That physical prowess is a substitute for virtue is certainly no new doctrine. It is the doctrine of every red man on the American prairies, of every African chief who ornaments his hut with human skulls. It was the doctrine of our heathen forefathers, when they came hither slaying, plundering, burning, tossing babes on their spear-points. But I am sorry that it should be the doctrine of any one calling himself a gentleman, much more a Christian.

It is certainly not the doctrine of the Catechism, which bids us renounce the flesh, and live by the help of God's Spirit a new life of duty to God and to our neighbour.

It is certainly not the doctrine of the New Testament. Whatsoever St. Paul meant by bidding his disciples crucify the flesh, with its affections and lusts, he did not mean thereby that they were to deify the flesh, as the heathen round them did in their profligate mysteries and in their gladiatorial exhibitions.

Neither, though the Old Testament may seem to put more value on physical prowess than does the New Testament, is it the doctrine of the Old Testament, as I purpose to show you from the life and history of David.

Nothing, nothing, can be a substitute for purity and virtue. Man will always try to find substitutes for it. He will try to find a substitute in superstition, in forms and ceremonies, in voluntary humility and worship of angels, in using vain repetitions, and fancying that he will be heard for his much speaking; he will try to find a substitute in intellect, and the worship of intellect, and art, and poetry; or he will try to find it, as in the present case, in the worship of his own animal powers, which God meant to be his servants and not his masters. But let no man lay that flattering unction to his soul. The first and the last business of every human being, whatever his station, party, creed, capacities, tastes, duties, is morality: Virtue, Virtue, always Virtue. Nothing that man will ever invent will absolve him from the universal necessity of being good as God is good, righteous as God is righteous, and holy as God is holy.

Believe it, young men, believe it. Better would it be for any one of you to be the stupidest and the ugliest of mortals, to be the most diseased and abject of cripples, the most silly, nervous incapable personage who ever was a laughingstock for the boys upon the streets, if only you lived, according to your powers, the life of the Spirit of God; than to be as perfectly gifted, as exquisitely organised in body and mind as David himself, and not to live the life of the Spirit of God, the life of goodness, which is the only life fit for a human being wearing the human flesh and soul which Christ took upon him on earth, and wears for ever in heaven, a Man indeed in the midst of the throne of God.

And therefore it is, as you will yourselves have perceived already, that I have chosen to speak to you of David, his character, his history.

It is the character of a man perfectly gifted, exquisitely organised. He has personal beauty, daring, prowess, and skill in war; he has generosity, nobleness, faithfulness, chivalry as of a mediæval and Christian knight; he is a musician, poet, seemingly an architect likewise; he is, moreover, a born king; he has a marvellous and most successful power of attracting, disciplining, ruling his fellow-men. So thoroughly human a personage is he, that God speaks of him as the man after his own heart; that our blessed Lord condescends to call himself especially the Son of David.

For there is in this man (as there is said to be in all great geniuses) a feminine, as well as a masculine vein; a passionate tenderness; a keen sensibility; a vast capacity of sympathy, sadness, and suffering, which makes him truly the type of Christ, the Man of sorrows; which makes his Psalms to this day the text-book of the afflicted, of tens of thousands who have not a particle of his beauty, courage, genius; but yet can feel, in mean hovels and workhouse sick-beds, that the warrior-poet speaks to their human hearts, and for their human hearts, as none other can speak, save Christ himself, the Son of David and the Son of man.

A man, I say, of intense sensibilities; and therefore capable, as is but too notorious, of great crimes, as well as of great virtues.

And when I mention this last fact, I must ask you to pause, and consider with me very solemnly what it means.

We may pervert, or rather misstate the fact in more than one way, to our own hurt. We may say cynically, David had his good points and his bad ones, as all your great saints have. Look at them closely, and in spite of all their pretensions you will find them no better than their neighbours. And so we may comfort ourselves, in our own mediocrity and laziness, by denying the existence of all greatness and goodness.

Nathan the prophet said that David's conduct would be open to this very interpretation, and would give great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme. But I trust that none of you wish to be numbered among the enemies of the Lord.

Again, we may say, sentimentally, that these great weaknesses are on the whole the necessary concomitants of great strength; that such highly organised and complex characters must not be judged by the rule of common respectability; and that it is a more or less fine thing to be capable at once of great virtues and great vices.

Books which hint, and more than hint this, will suggest themselves to you at once. I only advise you not to listen to their teaching, as you will find it lead to very serious consequences, both in this life and in the life to come.

But if we do say this, or anything like this, we say it on our own responsibility. David's biographers say nothing of the kind. David himself says nothing of the kind. He never represents himself as a compound of strength and weakness. He represents himself as weakness itself—as incapacity utter and complete. To overlook that startling fact is to overlook the very element which has made David's Psalms the text-book for all human weaknesses, penitences, sorrows, struggles, aspirations, for nigh three thousand years.

But this subject is too large for me to speak of to-day; and too deep for me to attempt an explanation till I have turned your thoughts toward another object, which will explain to you David, and yourselves, and, it seems to me at times, every problem of humanity. Look not at David, but at David's greater Son; and consider Christ upon his Cross. Consider him of whom it is written, 'Thou art fairer than the children of men: full of grace are thy lips, because God hath blessed thee for ever. Gird thee with thy sword upon thy thigh, O thou most Mighty, according to thy worship and renown. Good luck have thou with thine honour; ride on, because of the word of truth, of meekness, and righteousness; and thy right hand shall teach thee terrible things. Thy arrows are very sharp, and the people shall be subdued unto thee, even in the midst among the King's enemies.' Consider him who alone fulfilled these words, who fulfils them even now eternally in heaven, King over all, God blessed for ever. And then sit down at the foot of his Cross: however young, strong, proud, gallant, gifted, ambitious you may be—sit down at the foot of Christ's Cross, and look thereon, till you see what it means, and must mean for ever. See how he nailed to that Cross, not in empty metaphor but in literal fact, in agonising soul and body, all of human nature which the world admires—youth, grace, valour, power, eloquence, intellect: not because they were evil, for he possessed them doubtless himself as did none other of the sons of men—not, I say, because they were evil, but because they were worthless and as nothing beside that divine charity which would endure and conquer for ever, when all the noblest accidents of the body and the mind had perished, or seemed to perish. In the utmost weakness and shame of human flesh he would shew forth the strength and glory of the Divine Spirit; the strength and the glory of duty and obedience; of patience and forgiveness; of benevolence and self-sacrifice; the strength and glory of that burning love for human beings which could stoop from heaven to earth that it might seek and save that which was lost.

Yes. Look at Christ upon his Cross; the sight which melted the hearts of our fierce forefathers, and turned them from the worship of Thor and Odin to the worship of 'The white Christ;' and from the hope of a Valhalla of brute prowess, to the hope of a heaven of righteousness and love. Look at Christ upon his Cross, and see there, as they saw, the true prowess, the true valour, the true chivalry, the true glory, the true manhood, most human when most divine, which is self-sacrifice and love—as possible to the weakest, meanest, simplest, as to the strongest, most gallant, and most wise.

Look upon him, and learn from him, and take his yoke upon you, for he is meek and lowly of heart, and you shall find

rest unto your souls; and in you shall be fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah, which he spake, saying, 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither the mighty man glory in his might, neither let the rich man glory in his wealth: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord, who exercises loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord.'

SERMON II. DAVID'S STRENGTH

Psalm xxvii. 1. The Lord is my light, and my salvation; whom then shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be afraid?

I said, last Sunday, that the key-note of David's character was not the assertion of his own strength, but the confession of his own weakness. And I say it again.

But it is plain that David had strength, and of no common order; that he was an eminently powerful, able, and successful man. From whence then came that strength? He says, from God. He says, throughout his life, as emphatically as did St. Paul after him, that God's strength was made perfect in his weakness.

God is his deliverer, his guide, his teacher, his inspirer. The Lord is his strength, who teaches his hands to war, and his fingers to fight; his hope and his fortress, his castle and deliverer, his defence, in whom he trusts; who subdueth the people that is under him.

To God he ascribes, not only his success in life, but his physical prowess. By God's help he slays the lion and the bear. By God's help he has nerve to kill the Philistine giant. By God's help he is so strong that his arms can break even a bow of steel. It is God who makes his feet like hart's feet, and enables him to leap over the walls of the mountain fortresses.

And we must pause ere we call such utterances mere Eastern metaphor. It is far more probable that they were meant as and were literal truths. David was not likely to have been a man of brute gigantic strength. So delicate a brain was probably coupled to a delicate body. Such a nature, at the same time, would be the very one most capable, under the influence—call it boldly, inspiration—of a great and patriotic cause, of great dangers and great purposes; capable, I say, at moments, of accesses of almost superhuman energy, which he ascribed, and most rightly, to the inspiration of God.

But it is not merely as his physical inspirer or protector that he has faith in God. He has a deeper, a far deeper instinct than even that; the instinct of a communion, personal, practical, living, between God, the fount of light and goodness, and his own soul, with its capacity of darkness as well as light, of evil as well as good.

In one word, David is a man of faith and a man of prayer—as God grant all you may be. It is this one fixed idea, that God could hear him, and that God would help him, which gives unity and coherence to the wonderful variety of David's Psalms. It is this faith which gives calm confidence to his views of nature and of man; and enables him to say, as he looks upon his sheep feeding round him, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, therefore I shall not want.' Faith it is which enables him to foresee that though the heathen rage, and the kings of the earth stand up, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his Anointed, yet the righteous cause will surely prevail, for God is king himself. Faith it is which enables him to bear up against the general immorality, and while he cries, 'Help me, Lord, for there is not one godly man left, for the faithful fail from among the children of men'—to make answer to himself in words of noble hope and consolation, 'Now for the comfortless troubles' sake of the needy, and because of the deep sighing of the poor, I will up, saith the Lord, and will help every one from him that swelleth against him, and will set him at rest.'

Faith it is which gives a character, which no other like utterances have, to those cries of agony—cries as of a lost child—which he utters at times with such noble and truthful simplicity. They issue, almost every one of them, in a sudden counter-cry of joy as pathetic as the sorrow which has gone before. 'O Lord, rebuke me not in thine indignation: neither chasten me in thy displeasure. Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am weak: O Lord, heal me, for my bones are vexed. My soul also is sore troubled: but, Lord, how long wilt thou punish me? Turn thee, O Lord, and deliver my soul: O save me for thy mercy's sake. For in death no man remembereth thee: and who will give thee thanks in the pit? I am weary of my groaning; every night wash I my bed: and water my couch with my tears. My beauty is gone for very trouble: and worn away because of all mine enemies. Away from me, all ye that work vanity, for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord hath heard my petition: the Lord will receive my prayer.'

Faith it is, in like wise, which gives its peculiar grandeur to that wonderful 18th Psalm, David's song of triumph; his masterpiece, and it may be the masterpiece of human poetry, inspired or uninspired, only approached by the companion-Psalm, the 144th. From whence comes that cumulative energy, by which it rushes on, even in our translation, with a force and swiftness which are indeed divine; thought following thought, image image, verse verse, before the breath of the Spirit of God, as wave leaps after wave before the gale? What is the element in that ode, which even now makes it stir the heart like a trumpet? Surely that which it itself declares in the very first verse:

'I will love thee, O Lord, my strength; the Lord is my stony rock, and my defence: my Saviour, my God, and my might, in whom I will trust, my buckler, the horn also of my salvation, and my refuge.'

What is it which gives life and reality to the magnificent imagery of the seventh and following verses? 'The earth trembled and quaked: the very foundations also of the hills shook, and were removed, because he was wroth. There went a smoke out in his presence: and a consuming fire out of his mouth, so that coals were kindled at it. He bowed the heavens also, and came down: and it was dark under his feet. He rode upon the cherubims, and did fly: he came flying

upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness his secret place: his pavilion round about him with dark water, and thick clouds to cover him. At the brightness of his presence his clouds removed: hailstones, and coals of fire. The Lord also thundered out of heaven, and the Highest gave his thunder: hailstones, and coals of fire. He sent out his arrows, and scattered them: he cast forth lightnings, and destroyed them. The springs of waters were seen, and the foundations of the round world were discovered, at thy chiding, O Lord: at the blasting of the breath of thy displeasure. He shall send down from on high to fetch me: and shall take me out of many waters.' What protects such words from the imputation of mere Eastern exaggeration? The firm conviction that God is the deliverer, not only of David, but of all who trust in God; that the whole majesty of God, and all the powers of nature, are arrayed on the side of the good and of the oppressed. 'The Lord shall reward me after my righteous dealing: according to the cleanness of my hands shall he recompense me. Because I have kept the ways of the Lord: and have not forsaken my God, as the wicked doth. For I have an eye unto all his laws: and will not cast out his commandments from me. I was also uncorrupt before him: and eschewed mine own wickedness. Therefore shall the Lord reward me after my righteous dealing: and according unto the cleanness of my hands in his eyesight. With the holy thou shalt be holy: and with a perfect man thou shalt be perfect.'

Faith, again, it is, to turn from David's highest to his lowest phase—faith in God it is which has made that 51st Psalm the model of all true penitence for evermore. Faith in God, in the spite of his full consciousness that God is about to punish him bitterly for the rest of his life. Faith it is which gives to that Psalm its peculiarly simple, deliberate, manly tone; free from all exaggerated self-accusations, all cowardly cries of terror. He is crushed down, it is true. The tone of his words shews us that throughout. But crushed by what? By the discovery that he has offended God? Not in the least. For the sake of your own souls, as well as for that of honest critical understanding of the Scriptures, do not foist that meaning into David's words. He never says that he had offended God. Had he been a mediæval monk, had he been an average superstitious man of any creed or time, he would have said so, and cried, I have offended God; he is offended and angry with me, how shall I avert his wrath?

Not so. David has discovered not an angry, but a forgiving God; a God of love and goodness, who desires to make his creatures good. Penitential prayers in all ages have too often wanted faith in God, and therefore have been too often prayers to avert punishment. This, this—the model of all truly penitent prayers—is that of a man who is to be punished, and is content to take his punishment, knowing that he deserves it, and far more beside. And why? Because, as always, David has faith in God. God is a good and just being, and he trusts him accordingly; and that very discovery of the goodness, not the sternness of God, is the bitterest pang, the deepest shame to David's spirit. Therefore he can face without despair the discovery of a more deep, radical inbred evil in himself than he ever expected before. 'Behold, I was shapen in wickedness: and in sin hath my mother conceived me;' because he could say also, 'Thou requirest truth in the inward parts; and shalt make me to understand wisdom secretly.' He can cry to God, out of the depths of his foulness, 'Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence: and take not thy holy Spirit from me. O give me the comfort of thy help again: and stablish me with thy free Spirit. Then shall I teach thy ways unto the wicked: and sinners shall be converted unto thee.' He can cry thus, because he has discovered that the will of God is not to hate, not to torture, not to cast away from his presence, but to restore his creatures to goodness, that he may thereby restore them to usefulness. David has discovered that God demands no sacrifice, much less self-torturing penance. What he demands is the heart. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit. A broken and a contrite heart he will not despise. It is such utterances as these which have given, for now many hundred years, their priceless value to the little book of Psalms ascribed to the shepherd outlaw of the Judæan hills. It is such utterances as these which have sent the sound of his name into all lands, and his words throughout all the world. Every form of human sorrow, doubt, struggle, error, sin; the nun agonising in the cloister; the settler struggling for his life in Transatlantic forests; the pauper shivering over the embers in his hovel, and waiting for kind death; the man of business striving to keep his honour pure amid the temptations of commerce; the prodigal son starving in the far country, and recollecting the words which he learnt long ago at his mother's knee; the peasant boy trudging a-field in the chill dawn, and remembering that the Lord is his shepherd, therefore he will not want—all shapes of humanity have found, and will find to the end of time, a word said to their inmost hearts, and more, a word said for those hearts to the living God of heaven, by the vast humanity of David, the man after God's own heart; the most thoroughly human figure, as it seems to me, which had appeared upon the earth before the coming of that perfect Son of man, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.

It may be said, David's belief is no more than the common belief of fanatics. They have in all ages fancied themselves under the special protection of Deity, the object of special communications from above.

Doubtless they have; and evil conclusions have they drawn therefrom, in every age. But the existence of a counterfeit is no argument against the existence of the reality; rather it is an argument for the existence of the reality. In this case it is impossible to conceive how the idea of communion with an unseen being ever entered the human mind at all, unless it had been put there originally by fact and experience. Man would never have even dreamed of a living God, had not that living God been a reality, who did not leave the creature to find his Creator, but stooped from heaven, at the very beginning of our race, to find his creature.

And a reality you will surely find it—that living and practical communication between your souls, and that Father in heaven who created them. It will not be real, but morbid, even imaginary, just in proportion as your souls are tainted with self-conceit, ambition, self-will, malice, passion, or any wilful vice; especially with the vice of bigotry, which settles beforehand for God what he shall teach the soul, and in what manner he shall teach it, and turns a deaf ear to his plainest lessons if they cannot be made to fit into some favourite formula or theory. But it will be real, practical, healthy, soul-saving, in the very deepest sense of that word, just in proportion as your eye is single and your heart pure; just in proportion as you hunger and thirst after righteousness, and wish and try simply and humbly to do your duty in that station to which God has called you, and to learn joyfully and trustingly anything and everything which God may see fit to teach you. Then as your day your strength shall be. Then will the Lord teach you, and inform you with his eye, and guide you in the way wherein you should go. Then will you obey that appeal of the Psalmist, 'Be ye not like to horse and mule, which have no understanding, whose mouths must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they fall upon thee. Great plagues remain for the ungodly. But whoso putteth his trust in the Lord, mercy embraceth him on every

side.’

For understand this well, young men, and settle it in your hearts as the first condition of human life, yea, of the life of every rational created being, that a man is justified only by faith; and not only a man, but angels, archangels, and all possible created spirits, past, present, and to come. All stand, all are in their right state, only as long as they are consciously dependent on God the Father of spirits and his Son Jesus Christ the Lord, in whom they live and move and have their being. The moment they attempt to assert themselves, whether their own power, their own genius, their own wisdom, or even their own virtue, they *ipso facto* sin, and are justified and just no longer; because they are trying to take themselves out of their just and right state of dependence, and to put themselves into an unjust and wrong state of independence. To assert that anything is their own, to assert that their virtue is their own, just as much as to assert that their wisdom, or any other part of their being, is their own, is to deny the primary fact of their existence—that in God they live and move and have that being. And therefore Milton’s Satan, though, over and above all his other grandeurs, he had been adorned with every virtue, would have been Satan still by the one sin of ingratitude, just because and just as long as he set up himself, apart from that God from whom alone comes every good and perfect gift.

Settle it in your hearts, young men, settle it in your hearts—or rather pray to God to settle it therein; and if you would love life and see good days, recollect daily and hourly that the only sane and safe human life is dependence on God himself, and that—

Unless above himself he can
Exalt himself, how poor a thing is man.

SERMON III. DAVID’S ANGER

Psalm cxliiii. 11, 12. Quicken me, O Lord, for thy name’s sake: for thy righteousness’ sake bring my soul out of trouble. And of thy mercy cut off mine enemies, and destroy all them that afflict my soul: for I am thy servant.

There are those who would say that I dealt unfairly last Sunday by the Psalms of David; that in order to prove them inspired, I ignored an element in them which is plainly uninspired, wrong, and offensive; namely, the curses which he invokes upon his enemies. I ignored it, they would say, because it was fatal to my theory! because it proved David to have the vindictive passions of other Easterns; to be speaking, not by the inspiration of God, but of his own private likes and dislikes; to be at least a fanatic who thinks that his cause must needs be God’s cause, and who invokes the lightnings of heaven on all who dare to differ from him. Others would say that such words were excusable in David, living under the Old Law; for it was said by them of old time, ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy:’ but that our Lord has formally abrogated that permission; ‘But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and do good to those who despitefully use you and persecute you.’ How unnecessary, and how wrong then, they would say, it is of the Church of England to retain these cursing Psalms in her public worship, and put them into the mouths of her congregations. Either they are merely painful, as well as unnecessary to Christians; or if they mean anything, they excuse and foster the habit too common among religious controversialists of invoking the wrath of heaven on their opponents.

I argue with neither of the objectors. But the question is a curious and an important one; and I am bound, I think, to examine it in a sermon which, like the present, treats of David’s chivalry.

What David meant by these curses can be best known from his own actions. What certain persons have meant by them since is patent enough from their actions. Mediæval monks considered but too often the enemies of their creed, of their ecclesiastical organisation, even of their particular monastery, to be *ipso facto* enemies of God; and applied to them the seeming curses of David’s Psalms, with fearful additions, of which David, to his honour, never dreamed. ‘May they feel with Dathan and Abiram the damnation of Gehenna,’ [\[285\]](#) is a fair sample of the formulæ which are found in the writings of men who, while they called themselves the servants of Jesus Christ our Lord, derived their notions of the next world principally from the sixth book of Virgil’s *Æneid*. And what they meant by their words their acts shewed. Whenever they had the power, they were but too apt to treat their supposed enemies in this life, as they expected God to treat them in the next. The history of the Inquisition on the continent, in America, and in the Portuguese Indies—of the Marian persecutions in England—of the Piedmontese massacres in the 17th century—are facts never to be forgotten. Their horrors have been described in too authentic documents; they remain for ever the most hideous pages in the history of sinful human nature. Do we find a hint of any similar conduct on the part of David? If not, it is surely probable that he did not mean by his imprecations what the mediæval clergy meant.

Certainly, whatsoever likeness there may have been in language, the contrast in conduct is most striking. It is a special mark of David’s character, as special as his faith in God, that he never avenges himself with his own hand. Twice he has Saul in his power: once in the cave at Engedi, once at the camp at Hachilah, and both times he refuses nobly to use his opportunity. He is his master, the Lord’s Anointed; and his person is sacred in the eyes of David his servant—his knight, as he would have been called in the Middle Age. The second time David’s temptation is a terrible one. He has softened Saul’s wild heart by his courtesy and pathos when he pleaded with him, after letting him escape from the cave; and he has sworn to Saul that when he becomes king he will never cut off his children, or destroy his name out of his father’s home. Yet we find Saul, immediately after, attacking him again out of mere caprice; and once more falling into his hands. Abishai says—and who can wonder?—‘Let me smite him with the spear to the earth this once, and I will not smite a second time.’ What wonder? The man is not to be trusted—truce with him is impossible; but David still keeps

his chivalry, in the true meaning of that word: 'Destroy him not, for who can stretch forth his hand against the Lord's Anointed, and be guiltless? As the Lord liveth, the Lord shall smite him, or his day shall come to die; or he shall go down into battle, and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should stretch forth my hand against the Lord's Anointed.'

And if it be argued, that David regarded the person of a king as legally sacred, there is a case more clear still, in which he abjures the right of revenge upon a private person.

Nabal, in addition to his ingratitude, has insulted him with the bitterest insult which could be offered to a free man in a slave-holding country. He has hinted that David is neither more nor less than a runaway slave. And David's heart is stirred by a terrible and evil spirit. He dare not trust his men, even himself, with his black thoughts. 'Gird on your swords,' is all that he can say aloud. But he had said in his heart, 'God do so and more to the enemies of David, if I leave a man alive by the morning light of all that pertain to him.'

And yet at the first words of reason and of wisdom, urged doubtless by the eloquence of a beautiful and noble woman, but no less by the Spirit of God speaking through her, as all who call themselves gentlemen should know already, his right spirit returns to him. The chivalrous instinct of forgiveness and duty is roused once more; and he cries, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me; and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from shedding blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand.'

It is plain then, that David's notion of his duty to his enemies was very different from that of the monks. But still they are undeniably imprecations, the imprecations of a man smarting under cruel injustice; who cannot, and in some cases must not avenge himself, and who therefore calls on the just God to avenge him. Are we therefore to say that these utterances of David are uninspired? Not in the least: we are boldly to say that they are inspired, and by the very Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of justice and of judgment.

Doubtless there were, in after ages, far higher inspirations. The Spirit of God was, and is gradually educating mankind, and individuals among mankind, like David, upward from lower truths to higher ones. That is the express assertion of our Lord and of his Apostles. But the higher and later inspiration does not make the lower and earlier false. It does not even always supersede it altogether. Each is true; and, for the most part, each must remain, and be respected, that they may complement each other.

Let us look at this question rationally and reverently, free from all sentimental and immoral indulgence for sin and wrong.

The first instinct of man is the *Lex Talionis*. As you do to me—says the savage—so I have a right to do to you. If you try to kill me or mine, I have a right to kill you in return. Is this notion uninspired? I should be sorry to say so. It is surely the first form and the only possible first form of the sense of justice and retribution. As a man sows so shall he reap. If a man does wrong he deserves to be punished. No arguments will drive that great divine law out of the human mind; for God has put it there.

After that inspiration comes a higher one. The man is taught to say, I must not punish my enemy if I can avoid it. God must punish him, either by the law of the land or by his providential judgments. To this height David rises. In a seemingly lawless age and country, under the most extreme temptation, he learns to say, 'Blessed be God who hath kept me from avenging myself with my own hand.'

But still, it may be said, David calls down God's vengeance on his enemies. He has not learnt to hate the sin and yet love the sinner. Doubtless he has not: and it may have been right for his education, and for the education of the human race through him, that he did not. It may have been a good thing for him, as a future king; it may be a good thing for many a man now, to learn the sinfulness of sin, by feeling its effects in his own person; by writhing under those miseries of body and soul, which wicked men can, and do inflict on their fellow-creatures.

There are sins which a good man will not pity, but wage internecine war against them; sins for which he is justified, if God have called him thereto, to destroy the sinner in his sins. The traitor, the tyrant, the ravisher, the robber, the extortioner, are not objects of pity, but of punishment; and it may have been very good for David to be taught by sharp personal experience, that those who robbed the widow and put the fatherless to death, like the lawless lords of his time; those like Saul, who smote the city of the priests for having given David food—men and women, children and sucklings, oxen and asses and sheep, with the edge of the sword; those who, like the nameless traitor who so often rouses his indignation—his own familiar friend who lifted up his heel against him—sought men's lives under the guise of friendship: that such, I say, were persons not to be tolerated upon the face of God's earth. We do not tolerate them now. We punish them by law. We even destroy them wholesale in war, without inquiring into their individual guilt or innocence. David was taught, not by abstract meditation in his study, but by bitter need and agony, not to tolerate them then. If he could have destroyed them as we do now, it is not for us to say that he would have been wrong. And what if he were indignant, and what if he expressed that indignation? I have yet to discover that indignation against wrong is aught but righteous, noble, and divine. The flush of rage and scorn which rises, and ought to rise in every honest heart, when we see a woman or a child ill-used, a poor man wronged or crushed—What is that, but the inspiration of Almighty God? What is that but the likeness of Christ? Woe to the man who has lost that feeling! Woe to the man who can stand coolly by, and see wrong done without a shock or a murmur, or even more, to the very limits of the just laws of this land. He may think it a fine thing so to do; a proof that he is an easy, prudent man of the world, and not a meddling enthusiast. But all that it does prove is: That the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of justice and judgment, has departed from him.

I say the Spirit of God and the likeness of Christ. Instead of believing David's own statement of the wrong doings of these men about him, we may say cynically, and as it seems to me most unfairly, 'Of course there were two sides to David's quarrels, as there are to all such; and of course he took his own side; and considered himself always in the right, and every one who differed from him in the wrong;' and such a speech will sound sufficiently worldly-wise to pass for philosophy with some critics; but, unfortunately, he who says that of David, will be bound in all fairness to say it of

our Lord Jesus Christ.

For you must remember that there was a class of sinners in Judæa, to whom our Lord speaks no word of pity or forgiveness: namely, the very men who were his own personal enemies, who were persecuting him, and going about to kill him; and that therefore, by any hard words toward them, he must have laid himself open, just as much as David laid himself open, to the imputation of personal spite. And yet, what did he say to the scribes and Pharisees: 'Ye go about to kill me, and therefore I am bound to say nothing harsh concerning you'? What he did say was this: 'Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?'

Yes; in the Son of David, as in David's self, there was, and is, and will be for ever and ever, no weak, and really cruel indulgence; but a burning fire of indignation against all hypocrisy, tyranny, lust, cruelty, and every other sin by which men oppress, torment, deceive, degrade their fellow-men; and still more, still more, remember that, all young men, their fellow-women. That fire burns for ever—the Divine fire of God; the fire not of hatred, but of love to mankind, which will therefore punish, and if need be, exterminate all who shall dare to make mankind the worse, whether in body or soul or mind.

But David prays God to kill his enemies. No doubt he does. Probably they deserved to be killed. He does not ask, you will always remember, if you be worthy of the name of critical students of the Bible—he does not ask, as did the mediæval monks, that his enemies should go to endless torments after they died. True or false, that is a more modern notion—and if it be applied to the Psalms, an interpolation—of which David knew nothing. He asks simply that the men may die. Probably he knew his own business best, and the men deserved to die; to be killed either by God or by man, as do too many in all ages.

If we take the Bible as it stands (and we have no right to do otherwise), these men were trying to kill David. He could not, and upon a point of honour, would not kill them himself. But he believed, and rightly, that God can punish the offender whom man cannot touch, and that He will, and does punish them. And if he calls on God to execute justice and judgment upon these men, he only calls on God to do what God is doing continually on the face of the whole earth. In fact, God does punish here, in this life. He does not, as false preachers say, give over this life to impunity, and this world to the devil, and only resume the reins of moral government and the right of retribution when men die and go into the next world. Here, in this life, he punishes sin; slowly, but surely, God punishes. And if any of you doubt my words, you have only to commit sin, and then see whether your sin will find you out.

The whole question turns on this, Are we to believe in a living God, or are we not? If we are not, then David's words are of course worse than nothing. If we are, I do not see why David was wrong in calling on God to exercise that moral and providential government of the world, which is the very note and definition of a living God.

But what right have we to use these words? My friends, if the Church bids us use these words, she certainly does not bid us act upon them. She keeps them, I believe most rightly, as a record of a human experience, which happily seems to us special and extreme, of which we, in a well-governed Christian land, know nothing, and shall never know.

Special and extreme? Alas, alas! In too many countries, in too many ages, it has been the common, the almost universal experience of the many weak, enslaved, tortured, butchered at the wicked will of the few strong.

There have been those in tens of thousands, there may be those again who will have a right to cry to God, 'Of thy goodness slay mine enemies, lest they slay, or worse than slay, both me and mine.' There were thousands of English after the Norman Conquest; there were thousands of Hindoos in Oude before its annexation; there are thousands of negroes at this moment in their native land of Africa, crushed and outraged by hereditary tyrants, who had and have a right to appeal to God, as David appealed to him against the robber lords of Palestine; a right to cry, 'Rid us, O God; if thou be a living God, a God of justice and mercy, rid us not only of these men, but of their children after them. This tyrant, stained with lust and wine and blood; this robber chieftain who privily in his lurking dens murders the innocent, and ravishes the poor when he getteth him into his net; this slave-hunting king who kills the captives whom he cannot sell; and whose children after him will inevitably imitate his cruelties and his rapine and treacheries—deal with him and his as they deserve. Set an ungodly man to be ruler over him; that he may find out what we have been enduring from his ungodly rule. Let his days be few, and another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children beg their bread out of desolate places. Let there be no man to pity him or take compassion on his fatherless children—to take his part, and breed up a fresh race of tyrants to our misery. Let the extortioner consume all he hath, and the stranger spoil his labour—for what he has is itself taken by extortion, and he has spoiled the labour of thousands. Let his posterity be destroyed, and in the next generation his name be clean put out. Let the wickedness of his father and the sin of his mother be had in remembrance in the sight of the Lord; that he may root out the memorial of them from the earth, and enable law and justice, peace and freedom to take the place of anarchy and tyranny and blood.'

That prayer was answered—if we are to believe the records of Norman, not English, monks in England after the Conquest, by the speedy extinction of the most guilty families among the Norman conquerors. It is being answered, thank God, in Hindostan at this moment. It will surely be answered in Africa in God's good time; for the Lord reigneth, be the nations never so unquiet. And we, if we will read such words rationally and humanly, remembering the state of society in which they were written—a state of society, alas! which has endured, and still endures over a vast portion of the habitable globe; where might is right, and there is little or no principle, save those of lust and greed and revenge—then instead of wishing such words out of the Bible, we shall be glad to keep them there, as testimonies to the moral government of the world by a God and a Christ who will surely avenge the innocent blood; and as a Gospel of comfort to suffering millions, when the news reaches them at last, that they may call on God to deliver them from their tormentors, and that he will hear their cry, and will help them.

SERMON IV. DAVID'S DESERTS

2 Samuel i. 26. I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

Passing the love of woman? How can that be, we of these days shall say. What love can pass that, saving the boundless love of him who stooped from heaven to earth, that he might die on the Cross for us? No. David, when he sang those words, knew not the depth of woman's love. And we shall have a right so to speak. The indefeasible and Divine right which is bestowed by fact.

As a fact, we do not find among the ancient Jews that exalting and purifying ideal of the relations between man and woman, which is to be found, thank God, in these days, in almost every British work of fiction or fancy.

It is enunciated, remember always, in the oldest Hebrew document. On the very threshold of the Bible, in the very first chapters of Genesis, it is enunciated in its most ideal purity and perfection. But in practice it was never fulfilled. No man seems to have attempted to fulfil it. Man becomes a polygamist, lower than the very birds of the air. Abraham, the father of the faithful, has his Sarah, his princess-wife: but he has others beside, as many as he will. And so has David in like wise, to the grief and harm of both him and Abraham.

So, it would seem, had the majority of the Jews till after the Captivity; and even then the law of divorce seems to have been as indulgent toward the man as it was unjust and cruel toward the woman. Then our blessed Lord reasserted the ideal and primæval law. He testified in behalf of woman, the puppet of a tyrant who repudiated her upon the most frivolous pretext, and declared that in the beginning God made them male and female; the one husband for the one wife. But his words fell on unwilling ears. His disciples answered, that if the case of a man with his wife be such, it is not good for a man to marry. And such, as a fact, was the general opinion of Christendom for many centuries.

But of that, as of other sayings of our Lord's, were his own words fulfilled, that the kingdom of God is as if a man should put seed into the ground, and sleep and wake, and the seed should spring up, and bear fruit, he knew not how.

In due course of time, when the Teutonic nations were Christianised, there sprang up among them an idea of married love, which showed that our Lord's words had at last fallen on good ground, and were destined to bear fruit an hundredfold.

Gradually, with many confusions, and sometimes sinful mistakes, there arose, not in the cloister, not in the study—not even, alas! in the churches of God, as they were then; but in the flowery meads of May; under the forest boughs, where birds sang to their mates; by the side of the winter hearth; from the lips of wandering minstrels; in the hearts of young creatures, whom neither the profligacy of worldlings, nor the prudery of monks, had yet defiled: from them arose a voice, most human and yet most divine, reasserting once more the lost law of Eden, and finding in its fulfilment, strength and purity, self-sacrifice and self-restraint.

That voice grew clearer and more strong as time went on. It was purged from youthful mistakes and youthful grossnesses; till, at the Reformation, it could speak clearly, fully, once and for all—no longer on the ground of mere nature and private fancy, but on the ground of Scripture, and reason, and the eternal laws of God; and the highest ideal of family life became possible to the family and to the nation, in proportion as they accepted the teaching of the Reformation: and impossible, alas! in proportion as they still allowed themselves to be ruled by a priesthood who asserted the truly monstrous dogma, that the sexes reach each their highest excellence only when parted from each other.

But these things were hidden from David. One can well conceive that he, so gifted outwardly and inwardly, must have experienced all that was then possible of woman's love. In one case, indeed, he was notably brought under that moral influence of woman, which we now regard, and rightly, as one of the holiest influences of this life. The scene is unique in Scripture. It reads like a scene out of the Middle Age.

Abigail's meeting with David under the covert of the hill; her turning him from his purpose of wild revenge by graceful compliments, by the frank, and yet most modest expression of her sympathy and admiration; and David's chivalrous answer to her chivalrous appeal—all that scene, which painters have so often delighted to draw, is a fore-feeling, a prophecy, as it were, of the Christian chivalry of after ages. The scene is most human and most divine: and we are not shocked to hear that after Nabal's death the fair and rich lady joins her fortune to that of the wild outlaw, and becomes his wife to wander by wood and wold.

But amid all the simple and sacred beauty of that scene, we cannot forget, we must not forget that Abigail is but one wife of many; that there is an element of pure, single, all-absorbing love absent at least in David's heart, which was present in the hearts of our forefathers in many a like case, and which they have handed down to us as an heirloom, as precious as that of our laws and liberties.

And all this was sin unto David; and like all sin, brought with it its own punishment. I do not mean to judge him: to assign his exact amount of moral responsibility. Our Lord forbids us positively to do that to any man; and least of all, to a man who only acted according to his right, and the fashion of his race and his age. But we must fix it very clearly in our minds, that sins may be punished in this life, even though he who commits them is not aware that they are sins. If you are ignorant that fire burns, your ignorance will not prevent your hand from suffering if you put it into the fire. If you are of opinion that two and two make five, and therefore spend five pounds while you only possess four, your mistake will not prevent your being in debt. And so with all mortal affairs.

Sin, ἀμαρτία, means first, it seems to me, a missing the mark, end, or aim of our existence; a falling short of the law, the ideal, the good works which God has prepared beforehand for us to walk in; and every such sin, conscious or unconscious, must avenge itself by the Divine laws of the universe, whether physical or spiritual. No miracle is needed; no intervention of God with his own laws. His laws are far too well made for him to need to break them a second time, because a sinner has broken them already. They avenge themselves. And so does polygamy. So it did in the case of David. It is a breach of the ideal law of human nature; and he who breaks that law must suffer, as David suffered.

Look at the latter history of David, and at what it might have been. One can conceive so noble a personage under such woman's influence as, thank God, is common now, going down into an honoured old age, and living together with a helpmate worthy of him in godly love and honesty to his life's end; seeing his children Christianly and virtuously brought up, to the praise and honour of God.

And what was the fact?

The indulgence of his passions—seemingly harmless to him at first—becomes most harmful ere he dies. He commits a crime, or rather a complication of crimes, which stains his name for ever among men.

I do not think that we shall understand that great crime of David's, if we suppose it, with some theologians, to have been merely a sudden and solitary fall, from which he recovered by repentance, and became for the time to come as good a man as he had ever been. Such a theory, however well it may fit certain theological systems, does not fit the facts of human life, or, as I hold, the teaching of Scripture.

Such terrible crimes are not committed by men in a right state of mind. *Nemo repente fuit turpissimus*. He who commits adultery, treachery, and murder, must have been long tampering, at least in heart, with all these. Had not David been playing upon the edge of sin, into sin he would not have fallen.

He may have been quite unconscious of bad habits of mind; but they must have been there, growing in secret. The tyrannous self-will, which is too often developed by long success and command: the unscrupulous craft, which is too often developed by long adversity, and the necessity of sustaining oneself in a difficult position—these must have been there. But even they would not have led David to do the deed which he did, had there not been in him likewise that fearful moral weakness which comes from long indulgence of the passions—a weakness which is reckless alike of conscience, of public opinion, and of danger either to earthly welfare or everlasting salvation.

It has been said, 'But such a sin is so unlike David's character.' Doubtless it was, on the theory that David was a character mingled of good and evil. But on David's own theory, that he was an utterly weak person without the help of God, the act is perfectly like David. It is David's self. It is what David would naturally do when he had left hold of God. Had he left hold of God in the wilderness he would have become a mere robber-chieftain. He does leave hold of God in his palace on Zion, and he becomes a mere Eastern despot.

And what of his sons?

The fearful curse of Nathan, that the sword shall never depart from his house, needs, as usual, no miracle to fulfil it. It fulfils itself. The tragedies of his sons, of Amnon, of Absalom, are altogether natural—to have been foreseen, but not to have been avoided.

The young men have seen their father put no restraint upon his passions. Why should they put restraint on theirs? How can he command them when he has not commanded himself? And yet self-restraint is what they, above all men, need. Upstart princes—the sons of a shepherd boy—intoxicated with honours to which they were not born; they need the severest discipline; they break out into the most frantic licence. What is there that they may not do, and dare not do? Nothing is sacred in their eyes. Luxury, ambition, revenge, vanity, recklessness of decency, open rebellion, disgrace them in the sight of all men. And all these vices, remember, are heightened by the fact that they are not brothers, but rivals; sons of different mothers, hating each other, plotting against each other; each, probably, urged on by his own mother, who wishes, poor fool, to set up her son as a competitor for the throne against all the rest. And so are enacted in David's house those tragedies which have disgraced, in every age, the harems of Eastern despots.

But most significant is the fact, that those tragedies complete themselves by the sin and shame of David's one virtuous and famous son. Significant truly, that in his old age Solomon the wise should love strange women, and deserting for their sakes the God of his fathers, end as an idolater and a dotard, worshipping the abominations of the heathen, his once world-famous wisdom sunk into utter folly.

But, it may be said, the punishment of David's sin fell on his sons, and not upon himself.

How so? Can there be a more heavy punishment, a more bitter pain, than to be punished in and by his children; to see his own evil example working out their shame and ruin? But do not fancy that David's own character did not suffer for his sin. The theory that he became, instantly on his repentance, as good and great a man as he was before his fall, was convenient enough to certain theologians of past days; but it is neither warranted by the facts of Scripture, nor by the noble agonies, however noble, of the 51st Psalm.

It is a prayer for restoration, and that of the only right and true kind: 'Take not thy Holy Spirit from me;' and, as such, it was doubtless heard: but it need not have been fulfilled instantly and at once. It need not have been fulfilled, it may be, till that life to come, of which David knew so little. It is a fact, it was not fulfilled in this life. We read henceforth of no noble and heroic acts of David. From that time forth—I speak with all diffidence, and merely as it seems to me—he is a broken man. His attitude in Absalom's rebellion is all but imbecile. No act is recorded of him to the day of his death but what is questionable, if not mean and crafty. The one sudden flash of the old nobleness which he has shewn in pardoning Shimei, he himself stultifies with his dying lips by a mean command to Solomon to entrap and slay the man whom he has too rashly forgiven. The whole matter of the sacrifice of Saul's sons is so very strange, so puzzling, even shocking to our ideas of right and wrong, that I cannot wonder at, though I dare not endorse, Coleridge's bold

assertion, that they were sacrificed to a plot of State policy, and the suspicion of some critics, that the whole scene was arranged between David and a too complaisant priesthood, and God's name blasphemously taken in vain to find a pretext for a political murder. And so David shivers pitiably to his grave, after a fashion which has furnished a jest for cynics and infidels, but which contains, to the eyes of a wise man, the elements of the deepest tragedy; one more awful lesson that human beauty, valour, wit, genius, success, glory, are vanity of vanities: that man is nothing, and God is all in all.

But some may ask, What has all this to do with us? To do with us? Do you think that the Scripture says in vain, 'All these things are written for our example'? As long as human nature is what it is now, and was three thousand years ago, so long shall we be tempted to commit the same sins as David: different in outward form, according to the conditions of society; but the same in spirit, the same in sinfulness, and the same in the sure punishment which they bring. And above all, will men to the end be tempted to the sin of self-indulgence, want of self-control. In many ways, but surely in some way or other, will every man's temptation be, to lose self-control.

Therefore settle it in your minds, young men, that the first and the last of all virtues and graces of which God can give is self-control; as necessary for the saint and the sage, lest they become fanatics or pedants, as for the young man in the hey-day of youth and health; but as necessary for the young man as for the saint and the sage, lest, while they become only fanatics and pedants, he become a profligate, and a cumberer of the ground.

Remember this—remember it now in the glorious days of youth which never will return, but in which you are sowing seed of which you will reap the fruit until your dying day. Know that as you sow, so will you reap. If you sow to the flesh, you will of the flesh reap corruption; corruption—deterioration, whether of health, of intellect, of character in some shape or other. You know not, and no man knows, what the curse will be like; but the curse will surely come. The thing which is done cannot be undone; and you will find that out before, and not merely after your dying day. Therefore rejoice in your youth, for God has given it to you; but remember, that for it, as for each and all of his gifts, God will bring you into judgment. And when the hour of temptation comes, go back—go back, if you would escape—to what you all were taught at your mother's knee concerning the grace of God; for that alone will keep you safe, or angel, or archangel, or any created being safe, in this life and in all lives to come.

SERMON V. FRIENDSHIP; OR, DAVID AND JONATHAN

2 Samuel i. 26. I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

Passing the love of woman! That is a hard saying. What love can pass that? Yet David doubtless spoke truth. He was a man who must have had reason enough to know what woman's love was like; and when he said that the love of Jonathan for him passed even that, he bestowed on his friend praise which will be immortal.

The name of Jonathan will remain for ever as the perfect pattern of friendship.

Let us think a little to-day over his noble character and his tragical history. It will surely do us good. If it does nothing but make us somewhat ashamed of ourselves, that is almost the best thing which can happen to us or to any man.

We first hear of Jonathan as doing a very gallant deed. We might expect as much. It is only great-hearted men who can be true friends; mean and cowardly men can never know what friendship means.

The Israelites were hidden in thickets, and caves, and pits, for fear of the Philistines, when Jonathan was suddenly inspired to attack a Philistine garrison, under circumstances seemingly desperate. 'And that first slaughter, which Jonathan and his armour-bearer made, was about twenty men, within, as it were, an half-acre of land, which a yoke of oxen might plough.'

That is one of those little hints which shews that the story is true, written by a man who knew the place—who had probably been in the great battle of Beth-aven, which followed, and had perhaps ascended the rock where Jonathan had done his valiant deed, and had seen the dead bodies lying as they had fallen before him and his armour-bearer.

Then follows the story of David's killing Goliath, and coming back to Saul with the giant's head in his hand, and answering modestly to him, 'I am the son of thy servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.'

'And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.'

'Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul.'

'And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David, and his garments, even to his sword, and to his bow, and to his girdle.'

He loved him as his own soul. And why? Because his soul was like the soul of David; because he was modest, he loved David's modesty; because he was brave, he loved David's courage; because he was virtuous, he loved David's virtue. He saw that David was all that he was himself, and more; and therefore he loved him as his own soul. And therefore I said, that it is only noble and great hearts who can have great friendships; who admire and delight in other men's

goodness; who, when they see a great and godlike man, conceive, like Jonathan, such an affection for him that they forget themselves, and think only of him, till they will do anything for him, sacrifice anything for him, as Jonathan did for David.

For remember, that Jonathan had cause to hate and envy David rather than love him; and that he would have hated him if there had been any touch of meanness or selfishness in his heart. Gradually he learnt, as all Israel learnt, that Samuel had anointed David to be king, and that he, Jonathan, was in danger of not succeeding after Saul's death. David stood between him and the kingdom. And yet he did not envy David—did not join his father for a moment in plotting his ruin. He would oppose his father, secretly indeed, and respectfully; but still, he would be true to David, though he had to bear insults and threats of death.

And mark here one element in Jonathan's great friendship. Jonathan is a pious man, as well as a righteous one. He believes the Lord's messages that he has chosen David to be king, and he submits; seeing that it is just and right, and that David is worthy of the honour, though it be to the hurt of himself and of his children after him. It is the Lord's will; and he, instead of repining against it, must carry it out as far as he is concerned. Yes; those who are most true to their fellow-men are always those who are true to God; for the same spirit of God which makes them fear God makes them also love their neighbour.

When David escapes from Saul to Samuel, it is Jonathan who does all he can to save him. The two friends meet secretly in the field.

'And Jonathan said unto David, O Lord God of Israel, when I have sounded my father about to-morrow any time, or the third day, and, behold, if there be good toward David, and I then send not unto thee, and shew it thee; the Lord do so and much more to Jonathan.'

Then David and Jonathan agree upon a sign between them, by which David may know Saul's humour without his bow-bearer finding out David. He will shoot three arrows toward the place where David is in hiding; and if he says to his bow-bearer, The arrows are on this side of thee, David is to come; for he is safe. But if he says, The arrows are beyond thee, David must flee for his life, for the Lord has sent him away.

Then Jonathan goes in to meat with his father Saul, and excuses David for being absent.

'Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said unto him, Thou son of the perverse, rebellious woman, do not I know that thou hast chosen the son of Jesse to thine own confusion, and unto the confusion of thy mother? For as long as the son of Jesse liveth upon the ground, thou shalt not be established, nor thy kingdom. Wherefore now send and fetch him unto me, for he shall surely die. And Jonathan answered Saul his father, and said unto him, Wherefore shall he be slain? what hath he done? And Saul cast a javelin at him to smite him; whereby Jonathan knew that it was determined of his father to slay David.'

He goes to the field and shoots the arrows, and gives the sign agreed on. He sends his bow-bearer back to the city, and David comes out of his hiding-place in the rock Ezel.

'And as soon as the lad was gone, David arose out of a place toward the south, and fell on his face to the ground, and bowed himself three times; and they kissed one another, and wept one with another, until David exceeded. And Jonathan said to David, Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the Lord, saying, The Lord be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed for ever. And he arose and departed: and Jonathan went into the city.'

And so the two friends parted, and saw one another, it seems, but once again, when Jonathan went to David in the forest of Ziph, and 'strengthened his hand in God,' with noble words.

After that, Jonathan vanishes from the story of David. We hear only of him that he died fighting by his father's side, upon the downs of Gilboa. The green plot at their top, where the Israelites' last struggle was probably made, can be seen to this day; and there most likely Jonathan fell, and over him David raised his famous lamentation:

'O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thine high places. I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!'

So ends the beautiful and tragical story of a truly gallant man. Seldom, indeed, will there be seen in the world such perfect friendship between man and man, as that between Jonathan and David. Seldom, indeed, shall we see anyone loving and adoring the very man whom his selfish interest would teach him to hate and to supplant. But still every man may have, and ought to have a friend. Wretched indeed, and probably deservedly wretched, is the man who has none. And every man may learn from this story of Jonathan how to choose his friends.

I say, to choose. No one is bound to be at the mercy of anybody and everybody with whom he may come in contact. No one is bound to say, That man lives next door to me, therefore he must be my friend. We are bound not to avoid our neighbours. They are put near us by God in his providence. God intends every one of them, good or bad, to help in educating us, in giving us experience of life and manners. We are to learn from them, live with them in peace and charity, and only avoid them when we find that their company is really doing us harm, and leading us into sin and folly. But a friend—which is a much deeper and more sacred word than neighbour—a friend we have the right and the power to choose; and our wisest plan will be to copy Jonathan, and choose our friends, not for their usefulness, but for their goodness; not for their worth to us, but for their worth in themselves; and to choose, if possible, people superior to ourselves. If we meet a man better than ourselves, more wise than ourselves, more learned, more experienced, more delicate-minded, more high-minded, let us take pains to win his esteem, to gain his confidence, and to win him as a friend, for the sake of his worth.

Then in our friendship, as in everything else in the world, we shall find the great law come true, that he that loseth his life shall save it. He who does not think of himself and his own interest will be the very man who will really help himself, and further his own interest the most. For the friend whom we have chosen for his own worth, will be the one who will be worth most to us. The friend whom we have loved and admired for his own sake, will be the one who will do most to raise our character, to teach us, to refine us, to help us in time of doubt and trouble. The higher-minded man our friend is, the higher-minded will he make us. For it is written, 'As iron sharpeneth iron, so a man sharpeneth the face of his friend.'

Nothing can be more foolish, or more lowering to our own character, than to choose our friends among those who can only flatter us, and run after us, who look up to us as oracles, and fetch and carry at our bidding, while they do our souls and characters no good, but merely feed our self-conceit, and lower us down to their own level. But it is wise, and ennobling to our own character, to choose our friends among those who are nearer to God than we are, more experienced in life, and more strong and settled in character. Wise it is to have a friend of whom we are at first somewhat afraid; before whom we dare not say or do a foolish thing, whose just anger or contempt would be to us a thing terrible. Better it is that friendship should begin with a little wholesome fear, till time and mutual experience of each other's characters shall have brought about the perfect love which casts out fear. Better to say with David, 'He that telleth lies shall not stay in my sight; I will not know a wicked person. Yea, let the righteous rather smite me friendly and reprove me. All my delight is in the saints that are in the earth, and in such as excel in virtue.'

And let no man fancy that by so doing he lowers himself, and puts himself in a mean place. There is no man so strong-minded but what he may find a stronger-minded man than himself to give him counsel; no man is so noble-hearted but what he may find a nobler-hearted man than himself to keep him up to what is true and just and honourable, when he is tempted to play the coward, and be false to God's Spirit within him. No man is so pure-minded but what he may find a purer-minded person than himself to help him in the battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

My friends, do not think it a mean thing to look up to those who are superior to yourselves. On the contrary, you will find in practice that it is only the meanest hearts, the shallowest and the basest, who feel no admiration, but only envy for those who are better than themselves; who delight in finding fault with them, and blackening their character, and showing that they are not, after all, so much superior to other people; while it is the noblest-hearted, the very men who are most worthy to be admired themselves, who, like Jonathan, feel most the pleasure, the joy, and the strength of reverence; of having some one whom they can look up to and admire; some one in whose company they can forget themselves, their own interest, their own pleasure, their own honour and glory, and cry, Him I must hear; him I must follow; to him I must cling, whatever may betide. Blessed and ennobling is the feeling which gathers round a wise teacher or a great statesman all the most earnest, high-minded, and pious youths of his generation; the feeling which makes soldiers follow the general whom they trust, they know not why or whither, through danger, and hunger, and fatigue, and death itself; the feeling which, in its highest perfection, made the Apostles forsake all and follow Christ, saying, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life'—which made them ready to work and to die for him whom the world called the son of the carpenter, but whom they, through the Spirit of God bearing witness with their own pure and noble spirits, knew to be the Son of the Living God.

Ay, a blessed thing it is for any man or woman to have a friend; one human soul whom we can trust utterly; who knows the best and the worst of us, and who loves us, in spite of all our faults; who will speak the honest truth to us, while the world flatters us to our face, and laughs at us behind our back; who will give us counsel and reproof in the day of prosperity and self-conceit; but who, again, will comfort and encourage us in the day of difficulty and sorrow, when the world leaves us alone to fight our own battle as we can.

If we have had the good fortune to win such a friend, let us do anything rather than lose him. We must give and forgive; live and let live. If our friend have faults, we must bear with them. We must hope all things, believe all things, endure all things, rather than lose that most precious of all earthly possessions—a trusty friend.

And a friend, once won, need never be lost, if we will only be trusty and true ourselves. Friends may part—not merely in body, but in spirit, for a while. In the bustle of business and the accidents of life they may lose sight of each other for years; and more—they may begin to differ in their success in life, in their opinions, in their habits, and there may be, for a time, coldness and estrangement between them; but not for ever, if each will be but trusty and true.

For then, according to the beautiful figure of the poet, they will be like two ships who set sail at morning from the same port, and ere nightfall lose sight of each other, and go each on its own course, and at its own pace, for many days, through many storms and seas; and yet meet again, and find themselves lying side by side in the same haven, when their long voyage is past.

And if not, my friends; if they never meet; if one shall founder and sink upon the seas, or even change his course, and fly shamefully home again: still, is there not a Friend of friends who cannot change, but is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever?

What says the noble hymn:—

'When gathering clouds around I view,
And days are dark and friends are few,
On him I lean, who, not in vain,
Experienced every human pain:
He sees my griefs, allays my fears,
And counts and treasures up my tears.'

Passing the love of woman was his love, indeed; and of him Jonathan was but such a type, as the light in the dewdrop is the type of the sun in heaven.

He himself said—and what he said, that he fulfilled—‘Greater love hath no man than this—that a man lay down his life for his friends.’

In treachery and desertion; in widowhood and childlessness; in the hour of death, and in the day of judgment, when each soul must stand alone before its God, one Friend remains, and that the best of all.

[\[285\]](#) From a charter quoted by Ingulf—and very probably a spurious one.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAVID: FIVE SERMONS ***

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