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**"IS THE YOUNG MAN ABSALOM
SAFE?"**

A SERMON

**PREACHED IN THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY MAGDALENE, STOKE BISHOP,
ON SUNDAY, JULY 19TH, 1885;**

BY
DAVID WRIGHT, M.A.,
VICAR.

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SERMON.

2 SAMUEL xviii. 29.

"IS THE YOUNG MAN ABSALOM SAFE?"

The touch of nature comes out strongly here. And it is this touch of nature appearing always in the Old Testament stories which gives to them their reality. The writer of ordinary histories has for the most part his favourites. These are the heroes of his imagination, and the history of their doings is unconsciously tempered by this partiality. And there are others whom he holds in disfavour. And the figure of these on his page is darkened accordingly. And the book of another historian passes over the same ground. But his sympathies are all the other way; and the lineaments are altered; and the heroes are displaced; and forms which are not heroes stand where they had stood. And so the readers of history are mystified. They *do* get at events. But the actors in them wear no fixed shape. Their form varies.

It is not so with the figures in the Old Testament. It is true they are seen upon that page only. No second historian of the least authority has any place in those scenes. But yet the narrative shows its faithfulness apart from any such test. There are no signs anywhere of favour or of disfavour interfering with fidelity. It is not certain who the author was of the Books of Samuel. But whoever he may have been he was certainly an admirer of David. That illustrious king stood on a pedestal of his own before all the nation. And this writer tells the principal events with which David's life and reign were mixed up. But we can discover without a critical eye that he tells them with rigid and inexorable adherence to nature and to fact. One of the very darkest transactions belonging to that life, or indeed to any other life in those past ages, is related point by point with no attempt at alleviation: only with this comment at the end: "But the thing which David had done displeased the Lord." If the pen of the writer who tells the story of Absalom's rebellion had been guided by favour or flattery, the fact would have been suppressed or at least toned down, that the King's first word to the breathless messenger who brings tidings of the victory which has saved his crown is this, "Is the young man Absalom safe?" It is natural, it is human, it is fatherly, it is pathetic and beautiful, but it is not heroic.

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This young man Absalom comes upon the page a few chapters back, and gathers upon his name quickly the dark stain of murder. It is true he has received most awful provocation, and the victim of that crime has little of our sympathy. But there is no sign of penitence or of sorrow in the mind of Absalom for this deep offence, by which he has violated God's most holy law. His course runs on; it is a selfish, wilful, violent, and graceless course, unredeemed, as far as we can see, by any trace of better things. And it ends in base rebellion against the throne and life of the father who had shown to this son more favour and affection than to any of the rest. And the king fled before Absalom and went over Jordan, and the rebel host followed, and there was a great battle. And the servants of David conquered in that fight; and we know the fate of Absalom. But who shall tell the king of this? He was lodged in a stronghold called Mahanaim not far from the field of battle; and had taken his place in the chamber between the inner and the outer gate. And a watchman on the roof of this chamber kept watch.

Who shall tell the king of what has happened? Two messengers ran—one following the other—the first the shorter way by the hills; the second the longer way by the plain. But this one outran the other, and the eye of the watchman on the roof of the chamber caught sight of this single figure hastening over the plain, and then of the second in the farther distance; and it did not need the sagacity of king David to know that both of these brought tidings. And how would the tidings be given in these days? "We have won the battle," or words like that. And how were the tidings given in those days? "Blessed be the Lord thy God, which hath delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king." The difference is worth observing.

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But we are looking upon the king and listening to his word. The messengers have told the good tidings, and the king is speaking to them very eagerly. "In what state is the army? Was the slaughter great? Have any of the captains fallen?" He is not asking these questions. The king of the people—the commander of the hosts—might be expected to ask such questions. And David was both these. But David was *the father of Absalom*, and all things besides gave way to the yearning of the father's heart. "Is the young man Absalom safe?" The first messenger cannot answer: or rather he evades the answer, for he does know the fact. And then quickly comes up the second messenger. And again the king is forgotten, and the interests of the nation are forgotten, and everything else is forgotten, and the voice of the *father* speaks out again, "*Is the young man Absalom safe?*" We remember the answer. It is gently said, but very finely, "The enemies of my lord the king, and all that rise against thee to do thee hurt, be as that young man is."

We shall not need to follow the history further now. We are listening to this same word from the lips of the fathers of the earth, and the mothers of the earth, and all whom care for young men and young women chiefly touches and most nearly concerns. Are they safe? We bring the question down from the watch tower of Mahanaim, or from the chamber between the walls, and give to it shape and interpretation after the times in which we live. From the mouth of David it meant I think only, Does Absalom still live? Is he not among the slain? We are not to anticipate the revelation of later ages and say, as some have said, that it was the thought of the future for his son after death which moved the king of Israel so deeply. It was just the sorrow of another father at an earlier time, also in the first throes of its bitterness: "I will go down unto the grave unto my son mourning." And yet I think that without anticipating any revelation, the man whose thoughts about God and holiness were those which the Psalms of David disclose, cannot have lost his best-loved son in the very act and deed of direful guilt, without an aggravation of his anguish because of this sad thing. If Absalom in the midst of upright walking and works of righteousness had been stricken by disease and had died in his bed, the tidings of this when it reached the father might and would no doubt have moved him to deep sorrow. But I think we should not have heard that wail of grievous lamentation from the roof of the chamber, "O my son Absalom, my

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son, my son Absalom, would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

We sometimes hear of the world growing old. Brethren, the world can never grow old. If by the world is meant the generations of men, it can never grow old. Its seed is in itself; while it decays it germinates; as it withers, it grows. The elders fall off, but their place is filled and more than filled. The world is and must be while things remain as they are now, for ever young. But of what kind is its youth? That is the awful and tremendous question. Shall the Absaloms abound? or the Josephs and the Josiahs? [7]

The elders have much to say to this. We bring no charge against the father of Absalom. He was not fortunate indeed as to any of his sons, of whom any record remains. Even of Solomon it can only be said that he began well. But the ways of an Eastern court are past our knowledge and judgment. We have to do with English homes. The youth of the world, that which is now its youth and is keeping it from growing old, of what kind is the influence upon it which they are bringing to bear with whom the influence lies? And not the influence only, not that only which comes from example and (as it were) unconscious agency, but from counsel, from authority, from particular guidance? This must of course vary according to the age. The young man or the young woman does not brook the treatment which is fitting for the child. And the attempt to enforce it will surely show itself wrong. Just as setting the child on the footing of the young man or the young woman is mistaken also; and that too will appear. As to the mode of treatment, discretion, and (if I may use the word, for there is no other which answers to it) *tact*, must decide upon this. But as to the principle of it, as to that which should be the governing purpose of all treatment of the young, its intention and its end, let us take from the lips of the father of Absalom his word "safe." If it meant only in that case, is he alive? still the word is to be noted: Is he safe? Or is it well with him? It is the safety of the young—its being well with them—which all who have their interests in charge should to the utmost of their power care for.

And what do we mean by their safety? We know there are some in these days who ask the question—"Are you saved?" meaning by that, "Have you the eternal salvation?" It is a presumptuous question, and if answered at all is answered presumptuously. It is forestalling the everlasting things. Safety as we speak of it is not that. But—peril tracks the course of the young, peril in some way perhaps of deeper hazard than our fathers knew. There is that peril as old at least as Solomon, and which he expressed in this way: "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth: and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes." Follow, that is—putting the poetry aside—follow the life of selfish pleasure and indulgence to which thou art inclined. There has always been that peril. It has run upon the courses of the world's youth all down the ages. But now its lines are darker—at all events than they were in the days of the writer of Ecclesiastes—"Know thou," *he* said, "that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment." And we may say this too. But there is a large number of young persons now who will answer: "We do not know this: we know nothing about God: who He is, or *whether* He is. If we are not to walk in the ways of our heart and the sight of our eyes, to please ourselves and care for nothing else, you must say to us something beyond this, that God will bring us into judgment." [8]

Brethren, here is the greatest peril of this age. We may find one here and another there who, with atheism at his heart, is still upright in life. But break down the belief in God, and what the morals of the people shall be, let that nation answer which set upon her altars now nearly a hundred years ago the image of the goddess of reason. Let faith in God fall out of the young man's heart or the young woman's heart, and with it all fear of God, and what shall you put in its place? What instead of this shall keep them straight in their way? shall hold them safe? [9]

There is reputation. But this is a shifting authority. It changes with conditions. It has no fixed standard. It depends on opinion. That which makes the young in the most disastrous sense of the word *unsafe*, may in no way interfere with their reputation—but quite otherwise—with those among whom they live.

Then there is what some have called the enthusiasm of humanity. We cannot form any estimate of this as a power over men, because we have no sort of understanding what it means.

And there is civilization. Is it civilization which makes laws or admits of laws and finds accommodating administrators of laws, under the action of which the most sacred charge of a State—its helpless and innocent childhood—is left a prey to vile associations of men and women, from whose soul within them is obliterated all that was Divine, and all which is not devilish?

Civilization goes on its soft way, and takes under its smiling protection persons who walk upon the earth's higher places, and finds for them kind excuse and screens them from harsh frown, as they pass from their pleasures back to its silvery paths, leaving behind them as the price of their pleasures misery and ruin of which we may not speak in this place. No fouler crimes debased old Rome in its worst days than the crimes which the civilization of England's metropolis condones. But the heart of the people does not condone them: and if a great voice does not say this, we shall wonder and be sorry. In the mean while let the parents and guardians of the young, and let the young themselves, shrink back from civilization as a guide to their way and as a power for keeping them safe, in the place of the Living God.

And our closing word shall be to the young. I said just now that the world could not grow old. And because of the world having within it the seeds of a ceaseless vitality, that is true. The world as it now is cannot grow old. But a nation may grow old, may decay, and die. And the youth of a nation—its young people—carry with them its destinies. If there is in these more of wilfulness, of selfishness, of slothful and luxurious bias—less of energy, of gentleness, of kindness, of manliness, of purity—than there was in those who were young twenty—thirty years ago, then [10]

decrepitude is growing upon the nation. It is sinking. The sap of its life is drying up.

But the young are not likely to think much of what they do or of what they are, as it concerns the nation. Let them think of it as it concerns themselves. My younger brethren, shall the life that you are living be a blessing to you and not a curse? Shall it be to those around you a blessing and not a curse? Then hold fast your faith in the Living God. Is it drooping in some minds? Do they ask where they shall find Him? The Jews of old time wore fringes on the borders of their garments, and upon these were written some words of the law. It was an ordained thing. "And ye shall look upon this fringe," it is said in a noble passage of the book of Numbers, "it shall be to you for a fringe, and ye shall look upon it, and ye shall remember the commandments of the Lord your God, and do them, that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, but that ye may remember, and do all my commandments and be holy unto your God."

We wear no fringes on the borders of our garments. But the law is written in every heart. Look upon it, young men and young women, and remember—*That is God*: not a stream of tendency or any such vague and fantastic shadow. But, *That is God*—the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in Him your Father.

Are you astray from Him? not fulfilling His word? We are all astray. But is your eye towards Him, and your heart and your foot moving that way? We see no messengers running with tidings in their mouth, one over the hills and the other over the plain. The father of the son who is astray waiteth not in the chamber between the walls until he may ask of the messengers who come, Is my son safe? But the Father *runs Himself*: "when he was yet a great way off his father ... *ran*." The distance between these two is lessening hour by hour. Let the son who was and is still astray, bend his steps with earnest will on the track by which the Father comes; and—it is not my word—it is the greatest of all words which has been spoken upon this earth, the Father shall receive him "*safe* and sound."

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I.E. CHILLCOTT, STEAM PRESS, BRISTOL.

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