2 Kings - Commentaries by James Lampden Harris

Present Testimony Papers, 2 Kings 8:13

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The Lord hath showed me that thou shalt be King over Syria.

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings." The doctrine of "the desperate wickedness of the heart," as a truth of universal application, is the verdict of divine Omniscience, however questioned by individual experience. Every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has doubted it in his own case, till he has been taught it by God Himself. But after this lesson so taught of God, and acquiring depth by increasing experience, it is another lesson to learn practically the deceitfulness of the heart. The reception of this doctrine in the power of it, helps to keep the believer humble and watchful. Thus, "the Lord keepeth the feet of His saints," putting "His fear in their hearts." And being in the fear of the Lord all the day, they are kept from many an outbreak of desperate wickedness, the common result of walking in self-confidence. "For he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool."

Elisha, "the man of God," is at Damascus, and Benhadad the king of Syria was sick; and in his sickness he honors the prophet of the Lord -true picture of man, driven by necessity at last to that God whom he has all along despised. He sends his servant, or prime minister, Hazael, with a costly present, to inquire of the prophet, "Shall I recover of this sickness?" "And Elisha said unto him, Go, say unto him, Thou mayest certainly recover: howbeit the Lord hath showed me he shall surely die." There was nothing mortal in his disease, and there was no natural sagacity in the prophet; but the Lord before whom all things are open and naked, told him he should surely die. This deeply affected the prophet, and gave, so speaking, a cast to his countenance, that Hazael could neither understand nor endure his gaze. "And he [Elisha] settled his countenance steadfastly until he [Hazael] was ashamed: and the man of God wept; and Hazael said, Why weepeth my Lord? And he answered, Because I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel: their strongholds wilt thou set on fire, and their young men wilt thou slay with the sword, and wilt dash their children, and rip up their women with child. And Hazael said, But what, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" He did not think himself a dog. He was ready to resent the imputation. The thought of such deeds might have been abhorrent alike to his judgment and feelings. He was not aware of the deceitfulness of the heart. The prophet does not accuse Hazael of perfidy or of hypocrisy, but simply replies: "The Lord hath showed me that thou shalt be king over Syria." Hazael was ignorant both of the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of the heart. He knew not how many checks there are in the things around us, and from the position in which we are to hinder the outbreak of the desperate wickedness of the heart, which is unsuspected; because it lies, as it were, dormant, till aroused by circumstances. Hazael, as a prime minister, had tasted power, but the sickness of his master now presented the opportunity of passing from the responsible power of a minister to the irresponsible power of a usurper; and did he know or suspect the way to crime thus opened before him? Does the slave, groaning under the yoke of the oppressor, suspect that oppression is in his own heart; and, if he changed places with his oppressor, it would break forth into action? Do we suspect, that the most sanguinary wars which have spread devastation over the fairest countries, and rendered whole populations miserable, spring from the same lusts which involve two individuals in personal altercation. "From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members!" Is persecution peculiar to some particular form of religion, or the necessary result of attempting to bind the consciences of others by laws of our own, so that fealty to the "one Law-giver" becomes a crime? Did the suffering Puritans, driven by episcopal persecution to seek for shelter in the wilds of a new country, suspect that they carried into exile the principle of persecution in their own breasts, ready to burst forth against those who submitted not to them when they should be in circumstances to exercise authority? The heart is so deceitful as to hide from itself what is in it, so as to be taken by surprise at the outbreak of evil.

But it may be said, that Hazael being ignorant of God was ignorant also of his own heart. Let us turn, therefore, to the case of one who had known God in repeated mercies and marvelous deliverances.

The reign of Hezekiah affords relief to the spirit after the history of "that king Ahaz." At the outset, Hezekiah evinced very godly jealousy in breaking in pieces the brazen serpent, because that ancient symbol of divine mercy had robbed the Lord of the glory due to Him alone. Hezekiah had experienced, that the Lord's ear was open to the cry of His people, to his own cry as well as that of the prophet Isaiah, for deliverance from the proud Assyrian. He had also cried unto the Lord in the extremity of his sickness; and the Lord heard him and sent him word of recovery by the prophet Isaiah, and confirmed his word by a marvelous sign.

Hezekiah was not insensible of all these marked mercies and deliverances. He pours out his heart to God in grateful acknowledgment. "What shall I say? He hath both spoken unto me and himself hath done it I shall go softly all my years in the bitterness of my soul." But did he go softly? In a little moment the scene is changed, and an occasion afforded for the manifestation of vain-glory, which Hezekiah had not suspected to be in his heart, and for the which the trials of his eventful life had not hitherto afforded scope. But now, Hezekiah, instead of being laid low in sickness, is in the enjoyment of health; instead of groaning under the oppressor, he is himself an object of admiration -ever dangerous to the soul of the saint. "At that time Berodach-baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present unto Hezekiah: for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick. And Hezekiah hearkened unto them and showed them all the house of his precious things... there was nothing in his house nor in all his dominion, that Hezekiah showed them not." "And many brought gifts unto the Lord to Jerusalem, and presents to Hezekiah, king of Judah: so that he was magnified in the sight of all nations from thenceforth." "In those days Hezekiah was sick to the death, and prayed unto the Lord: and he spake unto him, and he gave him a sign. But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up: therefore there was wrath upon him, and upon Judah and Jerusalem." For fourteen years he had walked humbly with God, and magnified him. But on his recovery he was himself first magnified by others, and then he magnified himself, taking the honor to himself as the man for whom the Lord had wrought a miracle. Men are readily attracted by something marvelous; but they fix their wonder on some object short of God Himself. They regard the wonder and the subject of the miracle, not the God

who has wrought the wonder. "Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled." "Hezekiah rendered not again to the Lord according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up." He had thought in his own heart, that if the Lord recovered him, it would be for him "to go softly" all his days. "Howbeit, in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to inquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart." Many a heart, besides that of Hezekiah, has been deceived by the thought of carrying into recovery the deep realities which occupied the soul on the bed of sickness. Many a one, besides Hezekiah, raised up in answer to prayer with the honest intention of glorifying God by "going softly," has glorified God indeed, but in another way, by learning what was in his heart, justifying God in his sayings, bowing before him, and saying, "Good is the word of the Lord." Yet it is good when it does its painful office of "piercing even to the dividing asunder of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart." Good, O how good! when it reveals the grace of God abounding over the sin it has detected. "Good is the word of the Lord which thou lust spoken. He said, moreover, For there shall be peace and truth in my days." Had Hezekiah died when the Lord bid him "set his house in order," he would have departed in the judgment of men as blameless; but he would have died in much ignorance of his own heart. Who does not see how much safer it is to leave "our times in the hands of the Lord," than to have life prolonged for fifteen years. The Lord in His wisdom generally allows His saints to live long enough to show that they are in themselves "men of like passions" with others, that He alone makes them to differ" from others, that they have nothing but that which they have received, and that they are what they are only by the grace of God.

Hezekiah's restoration taught him in one way, that which "the thorn in the flesh" taught the apostle Paul in another, that (such is the deceitfulness of the heart) we are prone to turn the highest favors which God bestows to self-exaltation. The spirit of grace and supplication vouchsafed to Hezekiah in his sickness and so remarkably answered, was not persevered in on his restoration. The Lord left him. He rested upon his recovery; but we can only "stand by faith." If self-righteousness is an abomination before God in all men, what must it be in His saints, and yet he is little exercised in his own soul who has not detected the subtlety of his own heart, to be proud of any distinguishing grace which the Lord has given him. "And thy renown went forth among the heathen for thy beauty: for it was perfect through my comeliness, which I had put upon thee, saith the Lord God, but thou didst trust in thine own beauty." Our God is the only wise God, and His manifold wisdom, which was shown forth in Hezekiah's recovery, and in Paul's thorn in the flesh, is shown in others in sickness and in health, in imprisonment and enlargement, in abounding and suffering need; all these circumstances furnish occasions -to us, to know what is in our hearts; to God, to unfold the inexhaustible store of His grace.

Let us turn to the frank, open-hearted, upright apostle Peter. Fervent in his love to Jesus, he was ignorant of the deceitfulness of the heart. The Lord's eye could look on Peter in the midst of a scene in which he had not yet been placed, even as the same Lord had shown Elisha that Hazael should be king over Syria. The daily companion of Jesus, witness of His miracles, partaking of His more secret instruction, when he expounded to His disciples His parables, experimentally knowing the care of Jesus in providing for him and His companions, when he had sent them forth without purse or scrip; -Is he such a dog? Shall he deny Him? The thought is repelled with honest indignation. "Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee." It was to Peter that the Father had made a special revelation of the glory of the person of the Lord, that He was the Christ the Son of the living God. And when the Lord Himself, witnessing the turning back of many who had followed Him to a certain point, challenged the twelve: "Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God"? What, shall Peter deny his own confession, and the honor put upon him in the revelation made to him of the Father -impossible, he thought others might he offended because of Jesus, but surely not Peter. "Though all should be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended." Now the error of Peter and of all of us, is to take for granted that we know our hearts as well as the Lord knows them. We act on our own estimate of our intentions, instead of the Lord's warning. We watch not -we pray not for special keeping, where not only the Lord, but our own experience also has shown us our weakness. We trust to the integrity of our intentions; and we "enter into temptation," unaware that we are brought into the place where the strength of our resolutions or the integrity of our intentions is to be tested. Let the scene be changed. Peter is sleeping in the garden when the Lord is in agony; "He could not watch with the Lord one hour." The Lord could draw the line, which Peter could not, and which it would be dangerous for His disciples to attempt to draw in their own case. "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Weak in reality, although strong apparently; for Peter, aroused from his slumber to fleshly confidence, "stretched out his hand, drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest and smote off his ear." Brave action to fight single handed against a multitude -"But the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God," and to watch and pray, and to have no confidence in the flesh, is far harder. Jesus is deserted by His disciples; despised and rejected of men. Will Peter now stand by Him? Will he lay down his life for Him? Will he stand by his former confession? No. He equivocates, denies, curses, swears, "I know not the man." The Lord had now shown that He knew Peter's heart better than Peter knew it himself. He restores him with a look; but Peter went out and wept bitterly.

The history of Peter shows us the connection between the deceitfulness and desperate wickedness of the heart. Little did he know that cursing and swearing were there ready to burst forth on the occasion being opened. Is there a Christian of any experience who does not know the shame of confessing Jesus before men to be more powerful than the most upright resolution? How deceitful are our hearts in making us willing to pass as one of the company in which we are, instead of maintaining our vantage ground of confession unto Jesus. It is comparatively easy when we are among many who acknowledge Jesus also to acknowledge Him; easy to fall in with the common-place religious conversation, but for Christ to be the only object, for the Lord to be always before us, necessitates the cross. if we do not take it for granted on the authority of Him who knows what is in man," that our "hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately wicked," so that we are led to watch and pray, we shall enter into temptation and make the experiment to our own cost, although it may lead us to "justify God in His sayings, and clear Him when He is judged." Let us rather marvel that any are kept (for what can keep but the faithful power of God) than at Peter's fall. "If any man thinketh that he standeth, let him take heed lest he fall." "The flesh is weak," by no means consciously weak, but the reverse; strong, bold, and confident. "Let not the mighty man glory in his might." Many are the instances of undaunted human resolution. But human resolution is not the spirit of him who is the witness of Jesus. It has need to be broken, and to know that it is but weakness. "Simon Peter said unto him, Lord, whither goest thou? Jesus answered him, Whither I go thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterward. Peter said unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake." Had the Lord rushed armed to battle at the head of His followers, in all likelihood Peter would have followed Him reckless of danger. But such boldness is weakness; for the path of faith, instead of following. Jesus to battle, has to follow Him unto rejection. Such was the path of the Master. "Ought not Christ to suffer,... and to enter into His glory." Such is the path for the servant, the way to glory is only through the cross. But when Peter had learned that the Lord knew him better than he knew himself, when he had learned to suspect the deceitfulness of his heart, so that he would rather the Lord should read it than he himself; -when Peter had learned the true secret of turning the Lord's omniscience to a practical personal account -"Lord, thou

knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee" -then no longer prepared to glory in his "wisdom" or in "his might," the Lord could "signify to him, by what death he should glorify God," and say unto him, "Follow me." What Peter could not do in his own time, and way, and strength, the Lord enabled him to do in His time, His way, and His strength.

"What, then, shall we say to these things"? First, a Christian is "a truth-doer, and should habitually come to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest that they are wrought in God." This will prevent not only his acting a character, but also that subtle snare of using the character he has among others as a blind to conceal his own faults. Secondly, we must remember, that God's end and object is to glorify not us, but His own Son Jesus Christ. This is ever the object of the Holy Ghost, and when He "writes up" the names of the Lord's people, he hesitates not to record their sins, failings, and blemishes, sometimes even without comment, that we may learn the impossibility of any flesh glorying before the Lord. Of the best it can only be said, "to the praise of the glory of His grace"; and if that is but very imperfectly learned here, it will be very evident when we shall know even as we ourselves are known. But lastly we are taught, both historically and doctrinally (it may be experimentally), that such is the deceitfulness of the heart, that no gifts of the highest order, no graces received out of the fullness of Jesus, no honest zeal for His name, no devotedness of past service, no activity of present service are a safeguard against it. We can only be "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation." And the unrescinded rule prescribed for our safety by Jesus is, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." The flesh in the saint is shown in its fearful evil, by its very contiguity to the Spirit. But the heart deceitfully thinks that it needs not to be continually guarded against, and it readily gives new names to old lusts and passions; but the verdict remains unrepealed, "the flesh profiteth nothing." While watchfulness and prayer are ever needed, he only will be blameless, and shameless, and without offense, who walks in the solemn conviction that he has to fear the outbreak of the foulest sins; and unless his soul be occupied with Jesus. The sin from which his heart would recoil, if deliberately presented, may be the very one into which he is insensibly led from one step of temptation to another. "Now unto Him that is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. To the only wise God, our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen."

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