2 Samuel - Commentaries by Samuel Ridout

King Saul: The Man After The Flesh: Being Notes on 1 Samuel, 2 Sameul 1:17-21: David's Lament Over Saul and Jonathan

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BY the death of Saul, all barriers to the accession of David to the throne were removed; at least, all which David was in any way bound to recognize. There are, no doubt, deeply important typical lessons to be gathered from the passing of the crown from the house of Saul to the son of Jesse. We have already dwelt upon that which is largely personal in the life of Saul, as representing the excellence of the flesh in its best form. We need not repeat these lessons here, save to remember that they should be indelibly written upon our hearts.

It is a fact that this man of the flesh is put upon the throne. That gives us another typical lesson, of great importance. His kingly authority suggests the setting up of those “powers that be,” of government, which God has established. There can be no question of this in our mind and it is ever the mark of an obedient Christian to recognize this authority, fearing its judgment, and deserving its praise (Rom. 13:1-8). Since the days of Noah, God has established government upon the earth. It is suggestive that when He called out His people Israel to be a peculiar nation for Himself, he did not set a king over them, but showed that His own government was that under which they ought to have rejoiced. They desire, however, a king like all the nations, and their choice is given to them: “I gave them a king in Mine anger and took him away in My wrath.” That is, God would teach men that governmental authority must finally rest in His hands—the hands of Him who is “God manifest in the flesh.”

In the history of Saul, therefore, we may say we have the history of human government and kingly authority under its most favorable aspects, so far as man is concerned. The end, we have seen, is self-destruction. The whole course of prophetic history as outlined in the book of Daniel, confirms all this, while the New Testament reiterates the same solemn lesson. God must “overturn, overturn, overturn,” all power “until He come whose right it is.” We find therefore in the setting aside of Saul, typically the setting aside of mere human government. Christ is the only One upon whose shoulders the government can be placed and rest securely. He whose name is “Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God,” is also “the Father of Eternity” and will finally, in His own blessed person, merge the millennial kingdom of the Son of Man, where evil is kept in restraint, into that eternal state where government ceases to have the character of restraint and passes into the wider, deeper, fuller and therefore the eternal fact that God is “all in all.”

We have, in the passing of Saul, the close typically of human government committed to the hands of man. Prophecy furnishes many details of judgment, of which, perhaps, the wars of David with his enemies are the type; but in the accession of the son of Jesse, we have the foreshadow of that kingdom which rests in the hands of One who will never fail.

Bearing these two thoughts in mind—the refusal of the flesh and the setting aside of human government—we have in David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan, a most fitting and exquisite close to the sad life whose course we have been tracing. Personally, nothing could be more lovely than that David should put the crown upon the course of his own forbearance and lowliness in thus laying a wreath upon the grave of his bitter enemy. It was no formal act, no perfunctory or official threnody which he composed, but the outpouring of a tender and faithful heart which showed even at this time the love which he had evidently had for poor Saul throughout his entire history. Nowhere does the character of David shine out more clearly than it does in the subdued light of this elegy. Unselfishness, the ignoring of Saul’s evil, the entire absence of personal resentment and of the slightest note of triumph, all are here present. The love, too, for Jonathan, deeper and sweeter than could possibly be had for Saul, finds here fitting expression. The very brevity of the elegy shows all the more its beauty.

But we remember that David is a type of his Son and Lord, and this reminds us of a deeper sorrow than that felt by the son of Jesse. When we think how our Lord looked, for instance, upon the young man who turned away from Him because he had great possessions; when we see Him as He beheld the city which was so soon to ring with cries for His blood, with mockery too, yet weeping over the beloved city,—no resentment, no bitterness against those who thus were bringing their own destruction upon themselves, only sorrow for the shame of Israel—we see the perfection of divine compassion and pity. And, too, as our thoughts go forward to the last great day, when He shall sit upon the Great White Throne, and heaven and earth shall flee from His presence, we may be sure that He who pronounces the awful doom upon those who have refused His salvation, mocked at His entreaties and persistently identified themselves with all that was wicked, will have no feeling of triumph, but one of infinite, divine sorrow.

We dare not intrude beyond what God has revealed, but we know Him whose judgment is His “strange work,” and who would fain warn men from that judgment. Over the abode of the lost, there will rest, we may be sure, in the heart of Him who was once the “Man of sorrows,” even in all His glory, no thought but that which is consistent with those tears which He shed over Jerusalem. How hopeless, then, must be that state which can call forth only divine sorrow!

Little remains to be said of David’s elegy in detail. “The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen.” The flower of Israel was its king, one who had stood out in personal beauty above all his fellows. The heights of Israel should have been strongholds which no power of the enemy could assail; but how have the mighty fallen! All the power, and the beauty, and the greatness of men was here laid in the dust. As he thinks of this overthrow, David would fain draw the curtain over the scene, and hide from the gloating eyes of their enemies this scene of desolation: “Tell it not in Gath; publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.”

Faith would ever remember that even judgment on Saul will bring no victory to other evil doers. The enemies of God shall gain no real triumph from the overthrow of human righteousness or excellence.

The mountains of Gilboa, where Saul and Jonathan fell, are to be cut off from all future blessing; neither dew nor rain are to fall upon them, nor are there to be fields which are to yield their flocks as offerings. It was the scene of death and judgment, an Aceldama, we may say, the

place for the burial of strangers. For was it not here that the shield of the mighty was cast away—a shield without the oil of the Spirit’s power.

There is remembrance of Saul’s prowess in battle. He had indeed slain his thousands, and his sword had not returned empty from his conflict, as over Ammon, for instance. There is thus the recognition of what he had done, coupled with the bow of Jonathan. Then a sweet word follows; all, alas, that could be said that was common in the lives of Jonathan and Saul. They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, the link between father and son was not broken. Filial affection remained, even when Jonathan was compelled to refuse the conduct of his father, and in their death they were not divided. Losing sight for the time, of Jonathan’s sharing in the defeat which we may be justified in connecting with what some have called a course of neutrality, David singles out this one point that he and his father fell together. He has only words of praise for their swiftness and courage in fight.

Then the sweet singer turns to the daughters of Israel who have suffered in the loss of their king. They must not forget that it was he who protected them and made possible their festive garments and other delights, their gold and apparel. There is just a glimpse at all this, and then again the dirge falls back to its theme: “How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!”

But now, the eye of love turns to his own dear friend, the one whom he loved as his own soul. Jonathan had been slain in his high places. The one who had so valiantly climbed up into the high places, single-handed, to meet the whole proud host of the Philistines, is here a victim. As he thinks of him, David’s heart gushes out with fresh sorrow. What exquisite beauty in these words: “I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me; thy love to me was wonderful.”

Thank God, love remains, and this love of David to Jonathan has not upon it the cloud of hopeless sorrow which rests over his father. It is that which has lived throughout the ages, which has furnished a model of human friendship stronger than that of Damon and Pythias, a love tenderer than that of lovers, sweeter than that of women, the love of two strong, manly hearts, sanctified by a divine love ; and to think that all true Christian friendship, even though for the time it be called to weep, has in it a perpetuity which can never be lost; and above all, how good it is that He of whom David was type is not ashamed to own His beloved people as friends; how surpassing, how wonderful, how tender is His love ! Thank God, we shall never be called to mourn over the cessation of that!

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