2 Samuel - Commentaries by John Gifford Bellett

Absalom, Absalom: Part 2

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“The fool hath said in his heart, No God!”

But acceptance into God's favor always puts us into one interest with God's honor in the World; and, from the moment of our acceptance through His grace, we are to be the servants of His glory. The moment we rest as sinners, we begin our labor as saints. By faith we rest as sinners knowing the virtue of the blood of Jesus for the full repose of the conscience before God: but from thence we labor as only in the prospect of the rest that is ours as saints. We become the servants of God's glory when we are made free through God's grace. And so here: David had been just led to his rest as a sinner— “The Lord has put away thy sin;” but now he must serve God's glory as a sinner brought near. As the name of God had been reproached through David, David must now bear the reproach too; and God will show His entire separation from the sin of His servant, and before all men, He must measure his former work into his bosom. The child that Bathsheba had borne him must die; as his sword had slain Uriah, the sword now shall not depart from his house; and that which he had done to the shame of others, and done it secretly, others should now do to his shame in the sight of the sun.

It is in connection with all this that Absalom is introduced to us. He is to be made the rod in the Lord's hand for the chastening: of David—a rod, too, taken out of his own stem, his own child; as the Lord by Nathan had just said to him, “behold I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house.” Absalom meant not so, like the Assyrian afterward (Isa. 10:7). The Assyrian was to have a commission from the Lord against the hypocritical nation, but in his heart he thinks only of the spoil and the prey. Absalom is now to serve his own lusts, but God will use him for the renewing of His servant in holiness.

We need not particularly consider the circumstance which is made to introduce Absalom to us. The sin of Aninon, and the sorrows of Tamar, had their purpose, and could well have been used in God's grace to keep poor David in lively recollection of his own sin and sorrow. It was a voice “in his own house” that must have spoken in thunder to him. Blood and uncleanness were staining his own children under his own eye. Tamar's virgin garment was now rent, a sore remembrance of the stain upon himself; and Amnon's blood was shed, awakening the voice of 17riah's blood in his ear from the earth. But we need not more particularly look at this. Absalom was Tamar's brother, and the son of David by a daughter of the king of Geshur (2 Sam. 3:3) but we have nothing of him till now, when he appears at once before us as the subtle and willful one, whose heart and eye were full only of their own devices and objects to reach which appears to be all his care. Amnon's wrong to his sister had raised a deadly fire in his heart, which two full years had no power to quench; but his crafty soul must find the happiest way to let out his rage on its victim. The fire burns as though it had been kindled but yesterday, and his subtlety devises a sure passage for it. It is all of Satan. The guile of the serpent ministers to the furl of the lion, and Absalom plots the matter of the sheepshearing that he may get the blood of Amnon. David has some misgivings. How indeed could it be otherwise? Must he not, after all that he had done and all that the prophet had said to him, have feared every stir in the house? For one of his own house was to bring the evil upon him. He does not like this sheepshearing feast which Absalom proposes. But he is pressed about it, and Amnon then goes, and falls before the treachery and sword of his brother. (xiii.)

Absalom by this had defiled the land, and forfeited his life. (Num. 35:33.) All that he can now do is to fly to strangers, for the land had no city of refuge for such an one. The avenger of blood might claim him of Bezer or of Kedesh. He had shed his brother's blood, and this cried for vengeance. But David was a man of affection. He had a heart that sought its indulgence in the relations and sympathies of human life, and, being the man after God's own heart, he would have found his joy rather in the ministrations of grace than in the exactions of righteousness. But Absalom had fled, for he was now debtor to that law of which David was the guardian, for David held his throne on the terms of reading the law continually. (Deut. xvii.) What then can now be done? David may mourn for the son slain, and for the son banished, but are not both equally lost to him?

Now Joab was, in modern language, a consummate politician. He was nephew to the king, and thus the king's honor was in some sense his honor, and that he knew and valued and sought to retain; and therefore he never seeks to disturb the throne as now settled in the house of Jesse, his grandfather. He was content to be the second in the kingdom, for that his worldly wisdom told him he might be in safety, but more than that he knew he could not seek without hazard. He could get both Abner and Amasa out of his way, when he thought they were intruding into that place which he had eyed for himself; but the first place he would leave with David, and therefore never conspires against him, but is ever watchful of his interest, ever ready to let David take the principal post of honor (xii. 28), and is even quicker than David himself (xxiv.) to discern and provide for the stability of the throne.

Such an one could not but be busy at such a moment as this. He knew the softness of David's heart, and easily calculated that any device to help him to bring back his banished child would be acceptable; and to do this acceptable service to the king, and thus to have a fresh claim to be the second round his throne, sets Joab in motion now. He did not much care for Absalom's exile, but in some sense “he carried the bag and bare what was put therein.”

But the case was a very difficult one; for David, as I have said, might love his son and desire his return. But David was guardian of that law to which his son had exposed himself, and it was hard for Joab to contrive a way whereby David might let “mercy rejoice against judgment,” and thus bring back his banished one.

“A wise woman” of Tekoah is, therefore provided, whom Joab instructs in this matter. Perhaps we may not know the proper sense of that description of her, but it will shortly appear that she was wise indeed, and that too in the secrets of God Himself. She feigns herself a mourner, and comes to the king with just such a tale of sorrow as must at once have caught his affections, and brought his own sorrow fully to mind. She tells him of her two sons, how one had slain the other in a quarrel in a field, and that the kinsman was out against the manslayer,

threatening to leave her a withered stump in the earth. David is surprised. Such matters should lie with the proper judges to determine between the avenger and the manslayer. (Num. 35) But David is surprised—nature speaks in him too quickly—the yearnings of nature move him, and he gives her a pledge three times assured that nothing shall befal her son. Then, armed with this pledge, she more distinctly assails the heart of the king. She is willing to let the pledge be to Absalom the king's son, and not to her son, and would have it known that she had been all the while pleading for David's sorrow and not for her own.

But “wise woman” as she was, she had deeper resources than even these. She had reached David's heart, and got a pledge from the desire and heat of human affection; but she seeks now to reconcile his conscience to all this, and to let him learn that he had a title in God Himself to let “mercy rejoice against judgment” to the guilty. as his soul desired, and as his lips had pledged. For all would be imperfect without this; for the king, as we have seen, was debtor to the law, and none could set it aside but He who established it. Samson, it is true, may marry a Philistine harlot, though the law denied all such commerce with any Gentile, when he has a dispensation from the Lawgiver. Gideon or Manoah may sacrifice on a rock, though the ordained place is elsewhere, if the Angel-Jehovah will stand by; and David himself may forsake the altar at Gibeon even for the threshing-floor of a Jebusite, when the God of grace meets him there. Now it is this principle of truth which the “wise woman” now brings to bear on the conscience, as her tale of woe had lately borne on the heart, of the king. She pleads with David in behalf of Absalom the very mercy of God in the gospel. She tells the king that he should fetch home his banished one; for says she, “we must needs die, and are as water spilled on the ground (i.e. good for nothing see: 1 Sam. 7:6), which cannot be gathered up again, neither doth God respect any person, yet doth He devise means that His banished be not expelled from Him.” Here she brings God's own way before David. She pleads that law of liberty (James 2:12) which expresses even the heart of God Himself in His dealings with poor sinners, the gospel of God's grace in which. He righteously refuses to hear the law, and is just while the justifier of the guilty, having devised a way by which His banished ones return to him. Thus she pleads with his conscience, as she had before pleaded with his affections, and what can David do? Must he not give an answer in peace? Is he not satisfied? If the light of the gospel be thus by this wise woman brought to shine on him, must he not walk, and act in the light of it? Can he refuse to reflect it? This seems to be the way of her wisdom, and indeed it is strange and blessed. What a testimony this is! What a telling of the wonders of grace! That which is no better than water spilled on the ground is gathered up to be brought home to God Himself. (xiv.)

This that we are meditating on is somewhat a neglected scripture. But it shows us that we may ofttimes find some stray and rich kidneys of wheat in the distant corners of the Lord's granary. And this gospel in the mouth of this unknown widow, the “wise woman of Telioah,” further shows us that Israel, even in their infant dispensation, had sweet truths to feed upon. From the beginning indeed the joy has been but one. “The woman's seed” was the king's highway cast up under the eye of faith, the known and published good news, whereby God hath devised to fetch home His banished ones.

The king, however, seems not to be quite at ease. The pleading of our wise woman was as wise as it could have been. Nothing in its season could have been more perfect. But the king was the guardian of the law, and the softness of his heart had betrayed him into an act of grace by which he had undertaken to set the law aside, but the thought seems to be lurking there, that he was debtor to the law. However, according to the king's word, Absalom is brought home, but it is on terms of not seeing the king's face; and so he dwells two full years in Jerusalem apart from David.

But he is still Absalom; wherever or however we see him, he is himself. His taste remains in him, and his scent is not changed, even though he had now returned from captivity. (Jer. 48:11.) He comes home the willful Absalom still, the servant of his own passions and of them only. “Who is lord over us?” is the language of all his actings. His tongue was his own. “No God,” says he, in his heart continually. All that can be said in any way of commendation is, like Saul before him, of his comeliness in the flesh. “In all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty. From the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him:” we have no account of him beyond this of his beauty. His acts from first to last are enough to give him his right name and place before us; for in his own personal character, and in all in which it displays itself, Absalom is still the willful one. He is the Saul of his day, or the apostate seed of the serpent, and the agent of the dragon, the usurper, the proud one who consults only his own will, which most surely carries him forth into full and constant resistance of God and His people. Even favors have but little claim on him He may send to Joab to whom he owed everything a second time, but beyond that small courtesy his heart owns no debt to him