

THE MAN AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART

"And when he had removed him, he raised up unto them David to be their king; to whom also he gave testimony, and said, I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will." Acts 13:22.

Most of the great characters of sacred history had some distinguishing trait in which they stood out above their fellows. Abraham was great in faith, Moses was great in meekness, and Job was great in patience. David, however, was probably pre-eminent in more lines than any other person mentioned in the Old Testament.

When David was a shepherd boy, he defended his flock just a little more courageously than the other herdsmen around Bethlehem. The sling, which was just a plaything of the other boys, became in his hands a conquering weapon. The harp was found in many homes, but no player among them coaxed such exquisite music from its strings.

Bacon said, "Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." This threefold excellence belonged to David, the son of Jesse. All the elements of greatness were inherent in his nature. His birthright was manifold: the soaring genius, the courage that arose to meet emergencies, the princely qualities of leadership, and the magnetism that knit men to him with hooks of steel, as it were--all these belonged to his wondrous personality.

David achieved greatness. His exploits were of the highest order. His slaying of Goliath in a time of inaction on the part of the army gave him at once the hearts of Israel. His sudden leap into fame by one daring deed is a fireside story wherever the Bible is read. He was the builder of the Israelitish kingdom. Before David's day, they were a group of loosely-knit tribes, but he wove them into an empire. His military campaigns were of high order, and he extended the borders of the nation beyond any before or after him. He became the national hero. There were thousands of men in Saul's army stronger of body and better armed than David, but they did not slay the Philistine champion and become the idol of the nation. Israel had no other king who was so uniformly victorious over her enemies.

Greatness was thrust upon David when the nation in a pivotal hour chose him most enthusiastically as its ruler. The whole nation gathered at Hebron, and with great demonstrations crowned him King of all Israel.

All these things combined to make the ruddy-cheeked boy, whom Samuel had anointed, one of the very greatest of Israel's illustrious sons. He was the helmsman who steered the people through troubled waters into a place of strength and power--the mighty strategist who repelled their enemies, and brought safety and stability to the hitherto loosely-knit people.

David does not appear to have been of commanding stature, but he was eminently handsome. He was distinguished by a fair and ruddy complexion, and the beauty of his eyes is particularly noticed. In them the fire of genius shone, and from them beamed that enchanting expression of kindness and generous warmth, by which the hearts of men and women were drawn to him as by a charm. The eyes of men rested on his engaging and happy countenance with pleasure, and withdrew from it with regret. The rare combination in him of all that was gentle, tender, and mild, with a most exalted enthusiasm, the most noble aspirations, the most generous sentiments, the most manly deportment, the most heroic daring, and the most invincible prowess--joined to his invariable consideration for others, his open-heartedness, his humility, and the entire absence of all pretension in him, made men feel better when they looked upon him. And

it also exalted their hearts to know that they were sharers of the nature which, under divine grace, became capable of such impressive development. He was known to be a man of God, and to be much in communion with Him.

As a shepherd, keeping his father's sheep, the sense of responsibility to another was powerfully called into exercise. The flock was not his own. In keeping it, he was acting merely as his father's servant. He was bound in his whole management to have regard to his father's will.

Amid the quiet flocks and silent hills of Bethlehem was the man whom God had chosen to lead the nation through its day of peril into long and glorious repose. The welfare of his people was his constant aim. His vigilant eye kept watch over all that tended to their real good. Their physical welfare was not a matter of indifference to him; their intellectual welfare was not overlooked; while, high above all, their religious welfare was most anxiously and unweariedly promoted, and every means used to persuade them to regard the favor of God as the fountain-head of every real blessing, and the indispensable condition of all true prosperity.

David's simple rule, in keeping God's guidance, was to meet the present duty as it came. He was sent to feed the sheep. He did it well. He was called to be anointed as the future king. He received his anointing, and as God opened the way no further, he went back, without complaint, to his simple shepherd life. Whatever God laid on him he cheerfully undertook. He did not urge his claims. He was not troubled that his merits for a while should go unrecognized. He had no anxiety to precipitate the promotion divinely promised. He was content to await God's time. He had a modest and praiseworthy ambition to equal the demands made on him. He never ran from responsibility. If wild beasts attacked his sheep, he met them. If Goliath of Gath shook his ponderous spear over cowering Israel, David, when others failed, faced the insolent Philistine. If Saul appointed him a military chief and challenged him to dangerous expeditions, he would not refuse. David did his duty well, in that he did it unselfishly. He was faithful to his trust, and stood in his lot until God permitted him to retire. He was tried in the early years of his life and found faithful. Before he was put in power, it was proved whether he could obey.

I. David Had a Great Capacity for Friendship.

This was one of the qualities which made him love men and made men love him and follow him to the death. His friendship for Jonathan flowered in rare beauty athwart the background of hate and suspicion in which it bloomed.

His memorial song at the death of Saul and Jonathan reveals the spirit which made his fame enduring. Its divine forgetfulness lends a tragic glory to the name of his bitterest enemy. There is an immortal beauty in his tribute to the love of Jonathan, a love "passing the love of women." The story of the three heroes who risked life and limb to bring their beloved leader the water from the well by Bethlehem's gate sets forth the spirit that made him the idol of his followers. He loved and was loved as few men who have ever lived.

Under his leadership, the worship of Jehovah came into its place in the organic life of the state. The glory and majesty of the God of Abraham gripped and mastered the soul of David, and there was no taint of idolatry in his career. He never bowed at any heathen shrine, and he gave to the God of his fathers a whole-hearted devotion unequalled by any other ruler of the chosen people. To say that one walked in the way of David was the loftiest encomium which could be placed upon any of his successors. He marked out the way of obedience and righteousness.

II. David Was a Great Poet.

All that has come to us from his pen are his spiritual songs which have never been surpassed. Possibly no poem in the long roll of such productions has gripped the heart of the world like the Twenty-third Psalm. Its simple yet profound words speak the language of the heart and express the experiences of the soul which has sought and found the rest which is the goal of seeking humanity. The Fifty-first Psalm is the classic of penitence and contrite confession for all the ages.

III. David Was a Great Lover of Music.

Being a great lover of music, he brought it into its place in the worship of Jehovah. A study of the services which he arranged for the tabernacle shows a most elaborate musical program. He was himself a musician of no mean ability. It was the harp of David which broke the gloom and dissipated the shadows which gathered around the closing days of defeated Saul.

Of all the benefactors that we meet in this world there are few that render so great a service as the courage bringer. There is no finer art than that of putting heart into people who have become discouraged. There is no more splendid service that we can render than that of relighting the candle of hope and expectancy in the darkened lives of those about us. We are intensely interested in David because he was an encourager. If you want to help where help is most needed, learn how to encourage people.

IV. David Was a Great Sinner.

Alexander of Macedon used to be painted with his hand resting on his face, as if in reverie. But the real purpose was to hide the scar on his cheek. The Bible paints men just as they are; no scar, birthmark, or deformity, however odious or hideous is left out.

Probably there was no sudden breakdown in David's character, but, as is often the case, it was the last step in a long decline toward evil. We doubt not that his communion with God, about which he could sing so sweetly, had been interrupted before the time and the occasion of his fall. The sin of David shows the way in which one sin suggests, and sometimes demands, another.

His fall came as a result of an idle hour upon the roof of his palace, when he ought to have been at the head of his army at the siege of Rabbah. It was also due in part to his failure to put what he saw out of his mind at once. We are not responsible for the temptations which come to our doors, but we are responsible for entertaining them. As Luther put it, "I can't keep the birds from flying over my head, but I can keep them from building their nests under my hat."

David was an absolute monarch, and as such could take into his harem whom he pleased and kill whom he desired. He put no restraint upon the appetites of the flesh. His adultery with the wife of Uriah and the murder of her gallant husband stand out black and ugly in the record of his life. The worst part of his sin was not in connection with Bathsheba, but in connection with her husband, the loyal and upright Uriah. When the frank and upright Uriah, through his affection for and loyalty to the king, cannot be entrapped into the king's plot then David plans for his death, not by his own hand, but by the hand of the enemy in battle. He told Joab, captain of the host, to set Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle that he might be slain. Joab carried out the plan and Uriah fell. When a decent period of mourning was over, David married Bathsheba. "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." II Samuel 11:27.

It seems hard to reconcile these things with the lofty spiritual aspirations of many of his psalms. This much may be said in palliation, the virtues of David were far beyond the day in which he lived, and his sins were the everyday deeds of the monarchs all about him. To take the life of any man who stood in their way, or to possess the person of any woman who appealed to their carnal lusts, was the almost universal custom of oriental despots. It may well be said of David that his faults were those of his age, and his virtues immeasurably above his surroundings. God, however, did not allow these considerations to mitigate his punishment, nor did David in the hour of his contrition make any such claim.

During the time between the consummation of his crime and the coming of the prophet to denounce him, we are not to think of David as altogether happy, and totally indifferent to his sin, and altogether without piercings of conscience. But, regret is not repentance. However much, David suffered, he did not repent. "Then the Lord sent Nathan unto David." A minister's most difficult mission is not to break the news of death, but to do what Nathan did, namely, speak with one about his sin. Never did a man have a more difficult sermon to preach. David was not only Nathan's friend, but his king. Now Nathan must rebuke him for his sin. Never was more tender and yet more severe sermon preached by mortal lips. Nathan's plan was to have David to pass sentence upon an imaginary case, and then show him that he had denounced himself. He made his appeal to David's sense of justice and pity, and the thing which he stressed was his heartlessness and selfishness. Selfishness is the root of all evil. David took his only wife, and then his life.

V. He Was a Great Sinner Saved by Grace.

David saw what Nathan meant. He exclaimed, "I have sinned against the Lord." There is no resentment against Nathan, no foolish effort to exonerate himself, no denial of his transgression, but simple, sincere, unreserved confession. His penitence was sincere, and his sorrow deep and pungent. God had no leniency for his sin, but He understood the true repentance which turned from it with loathing and horror. Wonderfully forgave him, yet temporal penalties upon his sin were not remitted. Because his repentance was genuine, his forgiveness was immediate and beautiful. If he warns us against sin, he also shows us how to repent. He taught transgressors God's ways.

David was a great sinner; but we love him in spite of his sins, and because in his sins, he so greatly repented and was forgiven and forever teaches transgressors God's ways. We do not love David because he was an adulterer and a cruel murderer, but because his nature was generous, open, kind, magnanimous, devotional, reverent, thankful, and in his deep sin, he repented and was forgiven.

There is no discounting the greatness of David. He was cast in a big pattern, and his life was keyed to a lofty pitch. Great, even in the sports of boyhood, dazzling the multitude by his youthful heroism, he gleams upon the records of Israel. The days of his outlawry are aglow with deeds of daring, as well as acts of magnanimity and chivalry. The years of sovereignty were marked by conquest and statesmanship. His zeal for God, his clear concepts of holiness, and his deep spiritual experiences stamp him as one of the heaven-born leaders of the religious world. His poetic genius and seraphic imagination abide in the heart messages of his wonderful psalms.

It would seem that God wanted to show His people, through the example of David, that the loftiest sainthood does not save them from temptations, nor free them from the laws of retribution. Intensely human, versatile in gifts, courageous, magnanimous, resplendent in imagination, rich in spiritual life, ugly and sensual in his sins, he stands before us. He was manly in his saintliness, and saintly in his virile manhood.

His psalms thrill us, while his transgressions startle us. His words of seraphic heavenliness woo us, while his sins repel us. To know David we must know his reckless daring, his faithful friendships, his kingly rule, his military ability, his hours of inspiration, his fleshly temptations, his tragic fall, and his bitter and sorrowful repentance.

Worn out by his strenuous life, tired of the burdens which his mistakes had heaped upon him, David went from the shadows of sin to the refuge of the everlasting mercy. He holds his place in the drama of God's unfolding purposes, revealing to us the heights to which a sinner may be raised and the depths to which a saint may sink. Only those may claim a like place who have triumphed with his valor, worshipped with his fervor, praised with his holy ecstasy, sinned with his abandon, and repented with his deep contrition.

It was the story of the death of a lamb, only a little innocent lamb, that broke David's heart and showed him how great a sinner he was and brought him to repentance. So it is nothing more, and nothing less, than the story of the death of a Lamb, God's Lamb, the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world, that brings men to repentance, shows us how great our sin is, and how great is God's forgiveness. O Lamb of God, that takest away the sins of the world!