

SERMONS

BY THE

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SERMON XVIII.

THE FALL AND PUNISHMENT OF DAVID ILLUSTRATED.

2 SAM. XII. 7.

And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.

IT is a circumstance worthy of notice in the Sacred Historians, that, in their accounts of the servants of God, they record their vices as well as their virtues: they represent them in their real character, and attempt neither to palliate their faults nor to exaggerate their excellencies. The history of David is in this respect remarkable. He is represented, on the one hand, as zealous in the service of God, attached to his worship, in no instance giving way to idolatry, the prevailing sin of the times, and as honoured for these qualities with the high title of “the man after God’s own heart.” On the other hand, his character is described as stained with some gross offences; and both these offences, with all their aggravations, and the exemplary punishment which followed them, are faithfully recorded.

These sins of David, to which the words of my text refer, and the effects which followed them, are the subjects I would propose for our consideration on the present occasion; in order to which, I shall examine in detail several parts of his history.

I. The *circumstances of David previous to his fall* deserve our attention.—For several years he had been in a state of great trouble. Even his life had been often endangered. He was hunted by Saul like a partridge upon the mountains, and compelled to take up his residence in the caves of the desert. But it was not in this state of trial and affliction that he offended. During this period, we see him exercising, in a remarkable degree, the faith, the resignation, the humility, the patience, the meekness of the servant of God. But now God had brought his troubles to a close. He had bestowed on him, first, the crown of Judah, and afterwards that of Israel. He had blessed him with prosperity on every side, and had given him “the necks of his enemies.” For some years he had been the most powerful monarch in that quarter of the world. These were his circumstances when he fell. Now it would be too much to affirm, that these circumstances were the direct causes of his sin. They may, however, have tended indirectly to it, by inducing that state of the heart in which it is least qualified to encounter temptation. Such is often the effect of prosperity. It cherishes a worldly and sensual taste. It indisposes the soul for self-denial, watchfulness, and humility; graces not called into exercise in prosperity. It relaxes our application to the Throne of Grace; for where there

is a fulness of enjoyment, there is likely to be little ardour in prayer; where the soul is satisfied with earthly blessings, it does not aspire to such as are spiritual and heavenly. Perhaps prosperity thus operated upon David. Perhaps he had become less watchful, less fervent in secret prayer, less afraid of sin, more vain, more confident, more disposed to the enjoyment of sensual pleasures. And thus temptations, not formidable in adversity, at once overwhelmed the soul disordered and enervated by prosperity.

Surely this statement may teach us to recognize and lament the depravity of human nature. The very mercies of God are made the occasions of sin. Such is man, that he would probably be less guilty if God were less compassionate. This statement also may serve to reconcile us to the afflictions which prevail in the world. Perhaps the removal of these might tend, more than any other cause, to the increase of sin; and thus, in the end, to the final increase and aggravation of misery.

II. Consider, next, *the peculiar temptation which is suffered to present itself to David, and the way in which he encountered it.*—This, my brethren, is a world of trial. Christ himself was tempted; and it is in the order of Divine Providence, that no one should wholly escape it. Temptation indeed has its uses, as well as its dangers. Perilous as it is, the Lord can and will overrule it for good, to those who humbly and devoutly call upon him.—But let us follow David through his trial. The temptation arose—a temptation sudden and great. Now then was the trial, in what manner he would act; and doubtless there had been times innumerable when this servant of God would at once have fled from the temptation, and thus have broken its spell. He would have “resisted the devil,” and the “devil would have fled” from him. But now, alas! he gives way to the seduction. He calmly descends from his palace with a determination to bring the evil of his heart into act, and to perpetrate the crime which the tempter had suggested to him. This we may conceive to have been the turning point in David’s career. No man can altogether resist the approach of unsolicited temptation. No man can, perhaps, entirely prevent such temptation laying hold of the imagination and feelings. But to parley with it, this is a voluntary act. And it is in this, in its being a voluntary act, that the guilt of sin consists. Thus, in the case of David, “lust conceived, and brought forth sin.” The “anointed of the Lord” is “taken in the snare of the ungodly,” and goes “like an ox to the slaughter, not considering that it is for his life.”

Oh! had David paused but for a moment; had he retired awhile to deliberate upon his conduct; had he but put up one prayer for Divine help; had he passed on even to the duties of his kingly office, so as to divert his thoughts into a different channel; the snare might have been broken, and he have escaped. But, alas! David is left a melancholy monument of what the best man

may become when he forsakes his God, and when his God, in consequence, abandons him.

III. Observe, thirdly, *the state of David after his first sin, and his progress to new offences.*—What must David have felt after the perpetration of the first crime? Immediately the sense of the Divine presence, the inspiring hope of Divine favour and eternal glory, would withdraw from him. Did he at the hour of prayer, according to custom, go up to the temple of the Lord? Methinks the holy rites and the sacred place would reproach him, and say, “We are pure.” Perhaps his own sweet Psalms might upbraid him with that emphatic question, “Who shall go up to the house of the Lord? who shall ascend his holy hill? Even he that hath clean hands and a pure heart.”—Does he retire to his closet, and there touch the sacred harp? Alas! his heart would be in no tune for the songs of Zion.—Would he join those with whom he once “went in company to the house of God, and took sweet counsel in Divine things?” The sense of guilt would leave his tongue dumb, and his heart hard.—How could he meet his servants, or converse with those whom he used to reprove or exhort? Alas! their looks, intently fixed upon him, and meaning more than could be uttered, would confound him.—Does he join his partner in sin? The guilty hours spent with her would be embittered by reflections on the ruin he had brought upon her soul.—But let us return to his history. The consequences of his crime were becoming visible, and the once noble and generous David now resorts to low artifices to conceal his guilt. He sends for the injured husband. He treats him with a subtilty unworthy both of himself and of his loyal subject, endeavouring to impose upon him a spurious offspring. How must the noble refusal of the brave warrior to sleep in his bed while the “ark of God was abroad,” and the armies of Israel were encamped to fight the battles of his beloved though treacherous sovereign, have stung him to the heart! And doubtless this was but one of many daggers which his crime had planted in his bosom. When deceit, however, could not prevail on Uriah, a fresh crime must compel him; a crime at which the pure spirit of the monarch would once have shuddered. But neither would this avail: the faithful soldier, even when overcome with wine, refuses to yield to the royal tempter. What could be done? Crime leads on to crime. David, therefore, urged by a dread of detection (though what was human detection to a man already judged of God!), determines to add murder to adultery; to destroy one of the most faithful of his servants; to murder him even whilst shedding his blood in his own defence; to murder him by an act of perfidy of the basest kind!

Here let us pause to consider what David once was, and what he is now become. Once, he was the leader of the Lord’s people, the first in the sanctuary, the zealous restorer of Divine worship, the sweet singer of Israel. Who,

that had once heard his pious melody, his devout addresses to God, could have conceived that he would so fall? Had it been predicted, would the prediction have been credited? Who shall not tremble for himself, when he contemplates the fall of David?

IV. But let us next pass on to a more advanced stage of his history.—*The criminal schemes of David had now taken effect*, and Uriah could no more disturb the bed of the seducer and murderer. But when there remained no obstacle to enjoyment, the Divine hand suddenly arrested him in his guilty career. God sent Nathan the prophet to convince him of his guilt.

Let us praise God, my brethren, who was pleased thus graciously to interpose, to save his servant from everlasting destruction. It doubtless was an act of the Divine mercy by which he was rescued; for would a heart so hardened, a conscience so seared, a soul so habituated to sin, have returned spontaneously to God? It is however, perhaps, allowable to conceive that his former prayers might come up as a memorial before God, and plead for him who now could not plead for himself. In prayer, we often cast in the seed of a harvest which will be reaped, perhaps, at some remote period. Who can say, when he prays to be delivered from temptation, of which he does not now discern even the distant approach, how greatly such a prayer maybe needed, and how immediately and mercifully it may be answered?

But to return—The mode in which it pleased God to touch the heart of the offender is remarkable. To the claims of justice and the feelings of generosity, David, though greatly fallen, was not entirely lost. Therefore, in a parable constructed so as to touch him at these yet accessible points, the prophet addresses his conscience, and rouses him even to pass sentence on himself in pronouncing a severe verdict on a supposed criminal. What self-deceit is there in the human heart! David kindles with indignation against the man who takes a lamb from his poor neighbour, and yet remains insensible to the flagrant iniquity of seduction and murder. At length, however, he opens his eyes upon his guilt; his heart is softened; he stands self-condemned before the prophet. The account, especially of this part of the transaction, given by the sacred historian, is very brief. It might hence appear, that the penitence of David was comprised in the single expression, “I have sinned against the Lord;” and that the prophet immediately answered, “The Lord also hath put away thy sin.” But it is not unusual in Scripture to represent one event as immediately following another, when in fact a considerable time intervened. And this is probably the case here. There may have been two visits of Nathan to David, at a considerable interval of time;—one, in which the judgment was denounced; the other, in which the message of mercy was communicated to the penitent. However this may have been, we shall perceive, by comparing this history with the language of David himself, in the

Psalms, that his repentance was sincere, and his grief profound. In the Fifty-first Psalm, a psalm of penitence for this transgression, we find the most humbling confession of guilt and misery, and the most fervent supplication for mercy. In the Thirty-second Psalm, written, as it would appear, on the same occasion, we find him speaking of his “bones waxing old through his weeping all the day long,” and of the hand of the Lord being so heavy upon him that his “moisture was turned into the drought of summer.” In any case, we know that neither David nor any other sinner could return to God but by the path of deep humiliation and unfeigned repentance.

V. We come, finally, to notice the dreadful *consequence of this transgression*.—Where God forgives, he does not always wholly spare. He may so pardon the sin as not to inflict upon the sinner eternal condemnation, and yet punish him severely. And such was the case of David. Besides the wound his soul had sustained, and which, perhaps, might never afterwards be entirely healed, we find the remainder of David’s life harassed by perpetual sorrows. He had acted perfidiously to his servant; and his own son acts perfidiously to him. He had committed adultery with Uriah’s wife, and Absalom committed adultery with his wives; David indeed secretly, but Absalom in the sight of the sun. He had exposed Uriah to the sword of his enemies; and behold he himself is driven from his throne before his enemies, and his palace is defiled with blood. Indeed, from that time “the sword departed not from his house;” but violence, and dissension, and blood, rendered the remainder of his life wretched: so that the inhabitants of Jerusalem, acquainted with his sin, would doubtless discover the hand of God in his calamities, and say, “This hath God wrought,”—for they would perceive that it was his work.

Having thus passed through the several stages of this affecting history, I shall beg, in conclusion, to found upon it a few practical observations.

1. In the first place, it may teach us to *guard against declension in grace, and watch against temptation*.—If temptation is urgent, my brethren, flee from it, and think of the fall of David. Alas! where is the man that may say, “I shall stand,” when David fell? Indulge no presumptuous security. He who at any preceding period should have predicted the fall of David, would have been charged, perhaps, with predicting impossibilities. Alas! our strength is in the consciousness of our weakness, and in earnest prayer to God for help and support. Let no man rely upon his early virtues—David the inspired Psalmist fell.

2. A second lesson to be learned from the fall of David, is that of *charity and tenderness in judging of those who fall*.—Call them not, my brethren, as the world are too apt to call them, hypocrites. David was no hypocrite—but

David fell. And where is the man, who, if solicited by strong temptation, and unrestrained by Divine grace, might not fall to lower depths than David?

3. Finally, let us *beware of employing the fall of David as a plea for sin*, and of presuming that *such a restoration as his to favour and holiness will be granted to ourselves*.—Before we can build upon the hope of a restoration such as his, our circumstances must be those of David. To sanction such hopes, we should resemble him in his zeal and love, in the prayers by which we have supplicated, and the songs by which we have glorified, our God. And, even then, have we any security for pardon, any promise of mercy, any right to expect that a prophet should be sent to rouse us to a sense of our condition? Was such a restoration due to David? Is God bound or pledged to bring the sinner back who wilfully departs from him? Nor is this all: should the pardon be granted, as in the case of David, and the restoration to God take place, consider, if your restoration resemble his, it is no unqualified blessing. His sorrow was acute. All the billows of the Divine indignation seemed to pass over him. The arrow of God pursued him. The “iron entered into his soul.”

Thus, whatever encouragement the story of David may supply to the real penitent, (and to him, blessed be God, it does give encouragement,) it affords none to the sinner who, presuming upon the Divine mercy for restoration and pardon, daringly violates the Divine commandments.

In a word, the whole of this history exactly harmonizes with every other part of the Sacred Record. It displays to us the fallen and destitute condition of man—his exposure to temptation—his rapid progress in sin, if left to himself—his immeasurable obligation to God, if restored and saved—and, finally, the unchangeable character of God as a hater even of that sin which he may ultimately pardon.