

## Chapter 23

### Saul and David

SAUL PROVED an unfaithful king. What that means will be discerned by those who understand the difference between faithfulness in its common acceptance and faithfulness towards God. A man is faithful in the common acceptance who performs what he undertakes as between man and man; but a man faithful to God is one who aims at carrying out the appointments of God for no other reason than that they are the appointments of God. Such a man has such an aim, because he discerns, and is deeply impressed with the fact, that all things belong to God, and that God only has the right to appoint what is to be done. Because he so discerns, and because the wisdom and excellence of God are lovably manifest in him, he “delights in the law of God after the inward man,” as Paul expresses it. “I delight to do thy will, O my God,” as David has it. Such a man is faithful to God, because his first consideration is, “What is the will of God? What is His appointment?” In this sense, Paul informs us that Christ was “faithful to him that appointed him” ([Heb. 3:2](#)). This also was the distinguishing excellence of Moses as a servant, as Yahweh Himself pointedly declared ([Num. 12:7–8](#)). More or less, it is the characteristic of every accepted son or daughter in every age. This, in fact, is the faithfulness of the faithful to be manifested and acknowledged in the day of account: a controlling susceptibility in reference to the divine will: an anxiety to know it; a zealous readiness to do it.

The Saul class are by no means distinguished in this way. They are governed by their own impressions and feelings as natural men. They are unsusceptible of solicitude towards God. They conceive of things, and do things merely as creatures possessing a certain power of observing facts and reasoning on them. They have no active sense of God’s prerogative; no tender zeal for His will: no jealousy for His rights or regard for His name. Nay, they have not even a practical sense of His existence. The things they see and the things they feel form the boundary line of their philosophy. They are insensible to the higher aspect of things as the embodiment of the Father’s power for the Father’s purposes. They are strictly creatures of sense—“common sense,” as it is called—which is all very well for the regulation of matters that are to be discerned only by the ear and eye: but out of place when applied to things that we can only know by revelation, such as the will of God and the nature of duty.

Saul showed himself a thoroughly natural man in these respects on more than one occasion. One case may suffice to illustrate all. He was sent to destroy the nation of the Amalekites. His instructions were specific, very precise, and thorough: “Go and smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and women, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.” We will not stay to discuss the humanitarian view of these words—the view, namely, that they are inhuman, barbarous, bloodthirsty words—words by no possibility divine. This view has been sufficiently disposed of several times over by the exhibition of the truth that the Creator as the Proprietor may, when He sees fit, with righteousness become the Destroyer of men; and that a man who receives a command to destroy in such circumstances, performs a work of righteousness in performing the commanded work of destruction, as Joshua did in the utter extermination of the Canaanite population that came into his hand, and as Christ and the saints will do when they “execute the judgment written” and destroy the wicked from the

earth. Saul, not realising the divine point of view in the case, only partially executed his commission. He and the people spared the king of the Amalekites, and also “the best of the sheep and of the oxen, and of the fatlings and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy THEM, but *everything that was vile and refuse*, that they destroyed utterly” ([1 Sam. 15:9](#)).

This was acting the part of the natural man as distinguished from the spiritual man. To destroy the “vile and the refuse” was to destroy because vile and refuse, and not because God had commanded. To save “the best of the sheep and oxen” was directly to disobey God—not perhaps out of a desire to disobey, but from a natural sense of the desirability of preserving “the best of the sheep and oxen.” When Samuel, on Saul’s return, found fault with this, Saul sought to palliate his offence with a plea which made matters worse. “The people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen *to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God*: the rest we have utterly destroyed” ([1 Sam. 15:15](#)). Samuel’s rejoinder touches the pith of the matter: “Wherefore did’st thou not *obey the voice of Yahweh?*” ([1 Sam. 15:19](#)). Saul repeated that he had obeyed, and that what had been preserved had been preserved for God’s own service in sacrifice. Samuel’s answer shuts Saul’s mouth: “Hath Yahweh as great delight in burnt offerings as in obeying the voice of Yahweh? Behold, to OBEY is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams . . . Because thou hast rejected the word of Yahweh, Yahweh hath rejected thee from being king.” Upon this Saul revealed the true secret of his proceeding. “*I feared the people*, and obeyed their voice.” He confessed he had sinned in the matter, but it was the confession of a man who finds himself in the custody of the law—caught in the act. It was the withdrawal of the crown that brought him to his knees. When left to act without compulsion, he acted from merely natural considerations—the fear of man and the desire to possess eligible spoil. He did not act from a recognition of the sacred and terribly binding obligation of the divine commandment. He acted exactly as Adam and Eve did; disobeyed from good motives as such are reckoned by the merely natural man. In this is to be found the answer which those need who say they cannot see in what way Saul was so bad a man. He was not a bad man according to the human standards of action. He was a bad man according to the divine standard, which is the eternal standard. He did not recognise the divine will as the rule of action, but acted from human impression of what was nice, and convenient, and useful, which is all very well where the divine will has neither prescribed nor prohibited, but which is the reverse where God has commanded. On this same principle, we may easily discern how it is that many men are “good” men according to human estimate, but not good according to the divine estimate. The first ingredient of goodness towards God, without which goodness has not begun, is obedience, springing from knowledge which generates love and fear. It was in this sense that Saul (though a tall man, “a goodly man to look to,” and an amiable good-natured sort of man that would be popular with the world) was by no means a man after God’s own heart, as his successor was.

It became necessary, in the circumstances narrated, to choose his successor: and, in the choosing, we have the hand of God made visible. It was no mere operation of Providence that elevated David from the sheep-fold to the throne, though Providence afterwards co-operated in the process. The finger of God visibly pointed him out. Samuel received direct command thus: “Fill thine horn with oil and go, I will send thee to Jesse, the Bethlehemite: for I have provided me a king among his sons” ([1 Sam. 16:1](#)). “And Samuel did that which Yahweh spake, and came to Bethlehem.” Arrived at Jesse’s house, he would have been helpless in the selection without the visible hand of God. He called the sons of Jesse one by one. The first to stand before him was Eliab, the first-born, tall, and of good countenance. Samuel, impressed by his appearance, concluded that this was Saul’s successor. Samuel, without the directing voice of God, external to

himself, was as incapable of divine discernment as any other natural man. “Yahweh said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, nor on the height of his stature: because I have refused him, for Yahweh seeth not as man seeth, for *man looketh on the outward appearance, but Yahweh looketh on the heart.*” So another of the sons was sent for, and Abinadab stood before Samuel, but with the same result: “Neither hath Yahweh chosen this.” The third was sent for, and a like declaration refused him. The whole seven passed in this way, and none chosen. Samuel was at a loss. He enquired of Jesse: “Are here all thy children?” The answer revealed a “youngest”—too insignificant to have been thought of—a boy keeping the sheep. Imperative command of Samuel brought him into the house. As he came in, “ruddy, withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to,” Yahweh said to Samuel, “Rise, anoint him, for THIS IS HE.” Samuel did so: and the Spirit of Yahweh came upon David from that day forward. Thus was the visible hand of God employed in the nomination and anointing of the founder of that royal house, which is the basis of God’s everlasting arrangements on earth; for the house of David was afterwards by covenant made the house of the Kingdom of God, on the throne of which, when rebuilt in the earth, the Son of David will reign for ever, surrounded by all his brethren, including David himself, and probably several of his interim successors, such as Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, Josiah, etc.

Saul reigned several years after David’s nomination to the kingdom. They were years of chagrin, envy, and mortification to Saul. Naturally so to such a man. Had he been sensitive to the divine will, it would have been otherwise: for such a man would have recognised and acquiesced in the appointment of David with alacrity, and even zeal. But a man who has not God before his eyes, but finds enjoyment in a position or occupation of honour in itself, is the man that is unfit to fill it for God, and certain to become the subject of consuming jealousy of others. A man who seeks to do the will of God is not liable to be affected in this way: for it is his joy to see the work of God done, by whomsoever, so that it be the work of God, and not the work of the devil under a guise, as it is always liable to be in this age of the devil’s supremacy—a mere ministering to self-gratification, instead of the doing of those things that are well-pleasing to God. Saul was a merely natural man, and therefore he “eyed David from that day forward,” and “sought to slay him.” Saul’s malady was aggravated by a divine interference with his tranquillity: “an evil spirit from Yahweh troubled him.” In this is another glimpse of the visible hand of God at work—a negative and not blessed form of work for Saul, but almost the only form in which he was permitted to know it henceforward; for “when Saul enquired of Yahweh, Yahweh answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets,” the divers manners in which he signified his mind supernaturally in that age ([1 Sam. 28:6](#)). In this distress, he had recourse to a necromancer. “the witch of Endor,” through whom also the hand of Yahweh was negatively operative towards him. Necromancy was an imposture in the sense in which spiritualism is, and astrology. There was a certain kind of reality in it, but the nature of this reality was so misunderstood as to become the basis of claims and pretensions utterly groundless. The necromancers professed to rouse the dead and make them appear, whereas they but mirrored, on natural principles, the images existing in the minds of those applying to them, and reflected these impressions as in a dream—the reflection appearing a reality because seen and reported to them by another who, on ordinary principles, could not be supposed to know. Samuel was dead, and Saul, having no longer access to divine guidance, wanted to get at him for a word of counsel in the straits he felt in the presence of a formidable army of the Philistines. He therefore had recourse to a woman to whom popular rumour ascribed the power of bringing back the dead.

What happened is commonly believed to justify the popular impression, and to prove the

popular doctrine of the death state. It is commonly believed that Samuel *appeared*—not bodily, yet really and apparently, that is, in a form objective to the eyes of anyone who had been there. If this was so, why did not Saul, as well as the witch, see Samuel? Saul had to ask the woman what sort of a person was coming, showing that the perception was limited to the woman as a practiser of the necromantic art, and, therefore, that the Samuel which appeared was not an apparition of the order of popular theory, which would have been seen by both: but a vision subjective to the woman herself. Again, the person seen was an old man, with a mantle, by which Saul identified him as Samuel: do “spirits” of the apparitional order have the shape of the bodies they leave? and when a spirit or ghost leaves the body, does it take away a ghost of the clothes the body wears? Samuel’s ghost in this case had a ghost of Samuel’s clothes, which is intelligible enough in view of the nature of the apparition as the spectral impression of Samuel in the woman’s brain reflected from that of Saul. On the same principle, we see friends in dreams with their clothes. The difference in this case was that the impression was borrowed or reflected from the brain of Saul, and made abnormally visible to the woman in a waking state through her peculiar constitution. But how is the ghost of the clothes to be explained on the supposition that Samuel was really there? Furthermore, Samuel said (through the woman) “Why hast thou disquieted me to bring me *up*?” which is inconsistent with the view that brings Samuel “down” from paradise. Finally, Samuel said, “Tomorrow shalt thou and thy sons be *with me*,” which must be a difficulty with those who believe that while Samuel is in heaven, Saul and his sons went to hell. The fact is, the whole performance was a feat of necromancy, in which there is no raising of the dead or miraculous performance whatever but merely the exercise of brain and nervous power in an unusual way. But, doubtless, Saul was permitted, through this medium, “to get his answer of doom.” That is, the mere spectralities of a necromantic operation were supplemented by divine information of a prophetic character, to the effect that Saul’s final calamity was about to overwhelm him. This was doubtless done on the principle frequently enunciated throughout the holy oracles, that God chooses or employs the delusions of the wicked to their own confusion.

Saul’s death on the field of battle the following day left the field clear for David, in whose case the hand of God was visibly shown on several occasions. We pass over the conflict with Goliath, which, though doubtless a case of God’s direct cooperation, is not so manifestly supernatural as to be serviceable for the illustrations of the subject in hand. Cases of the supernatural are, in fact, not numerous in the case of David, except in the sense that his whole life was a development of the everpresent Spirit of Yahweh, which came upon him on the day of his anointing by Samuel in the house of his father Jesse, and inspired his pen as well as guided his sword, till the day of his “last words,” when he testified that “the Spirit of Yahweh spake by him and His word was on his tongue” ([2 Sam. 23:3](#)). In this sense, his whole life was a blaze of supernatural light and guidance, but as regards what may be called the scenic exhibition of the miraculous, the cases are few. One marked the inauguration of his career as actual king. The Philistines, hearing that David had ascended the throne of Judah, assembled their forces and invaded the land. David enquired of Yahweh what he should do, and received the directness of answer refused to Saul. Yahweh said: “Go up: I will doubtless deliver the Philistines into thine hand.” David went up and overthrew the invading host. But the Philistines rallied and came into the country a second time. David again enquired of Yahweh as to his course, and was very precisely advised: “Thou shalt not go up (that is, not in a direct manner to Rephaim, where they had assembled), but fetch a compass behind them and come upon them over against the mulberry trees” (exact spot indicated; but even here he was to wait a signal—a divine signal!). “Let it be, when thou hearest the sound of a going in the tops of the mulberry trees, that *then thou shalt*

*bestir thyself*, for then shall Yahweh go out before thee to smite the host of the Philistines.” And David did as directed, and the result was an entire rout of the Philistines—a very important event for David at that time, in the very depressed state of Israel consequent on the Philistine victory over Saul’s host, and the very weak and sapling condition of the kingdom of David in the presence of an old established and strong power like the Philistines. It required a very direct divine taking of David by the hand in the way indicated to save the new and young kingdom from total annihilation.

The next case was of a different order. David having repelled the attacks of his enemies, proceeded to consolidate his kingdom, with which view he arranged to bring the ark from the resting place it had found for twenty years in the house of Abinadab, at Kirjathjearim, after its destructive peregrinations as a captive in the lands of the Philistines. He made the ceremony of its removal an occasion of great public joy and feasting, on which, however, a cloud was thrown by the exhibition of the visible hand of God in an unfriendly form. In the midst of the rejoicings, while the procession was wending its way in the direction of the city of David, headed by David and a host of musicians and dancers, Uzzah, one of the men in charge of the ark, was smitten dead in the act of handling it. The cause was that the oxen drawing the cart containing the ark stumbled, and Uzzah, afraid apparently that the ark might fall out of the cart, “put forth his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it.” The incident affected David most painfully: “David was displeased because Yahweh had made a breach upon Uzzah ... And David was afraid of Yahweh that day, and said, How shall the ark of Yahweh come to me? So David would not move the ark of Yahweh unto him unto the city of David: but David carried it aside unto the house of Obededom, the Gittite” (2 Sam. 6:8, 10). To this incident, the remarks already made on the slaughter among the rejoicing inhabitants of Bethshemesh on the arrival of the ark in their midst from the land of the Philistines, are entirely applicable. The explanation of the occurrence is to be found in the breach of Yahweh’s appointment in the law, which David afterwards recognised (1 Chron. 15:13). The truth of the occurrence is evident from its mere record, for the record of such a thing could not be accounted for on any hypothesis short of its truth. And from the fact of its occurrence follows the divinity of the entire history of Israel, and, therefore, of the apostolic testimony of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

The next case of miraculous interposition was likewise of an untoward character. It is not the next in order. It is, perhaps, the last in this sense. Strictly speaking, we ought to look, before it, at the covenant communicated to David, through the prophet Nathan, concerning the perpetual stability of his throne in the hands of a Son who should reign for ever. This was the visible hand of God in the life of David, in its most important form in one sense; as also was the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit with him, which made his glowing psalms the effusions of prophecy, and which exalted to the dignity and authority of an oracle, his “last words” concerning the “everlasting covenant ordered in all things and sure.” But these most precious exhibitions of the visible hand of God are all in the nature of revelation by inspiration, to which attention has already been given early in these chapters. They do not, therefore, now call for that specific consideration which the miraculous destruction of nearly a hundred thousand men naturally challenges.

David, in a moment of human complacency, had the number of his fighting men enumerated. “And God was displeased with this thing.” And God sent this message to David: “I offer thee three things: choose thee one of them, that I may do it unto thee ... Either three years’ famine, or three months to be destroyed before thy foes, while that the sword of thine enemies overtaketh thee, or else three days the sword of Yahweh, even the pestilence in the land, and the angel of

Yahweh destroying throughout all the coasts of Israel” ([1 Chron. 21:10–12](#)). Concerning this also, the remark so frequently suggested by these narratives has to be made, that the occurrence of such a passage in the national archives of the house of Israel is inexplicable on any other hypothesis than its truth. If God were not in the matter, it is inconceivable that the numbering of the people should have come to be considered an offence: for on no principle natural to men left to their own thoughts would such a thing be regarded in that light. To glory in one’s greatness is universal among natural men—a thing done and accepted as the right thing to be done in all countries, and in all ages of which history furnishes any record. Even boasting is not viewed as a crime; and as to ascertaining the exact extent of your resources, the idea of its being a censurable thing would be scouted in every land—in every age. A mere affair of innocent statistics! But here it is put down on record as a crime against God. That the king should be represented at all in the national records as falling into an error is conclusive evidence of truth, in view of the universal disposition of courtiers of all sorts to be flatterers, and, at least, to be smooth spoken, and say nothing about the king’s faults. But that such a thing should be represented as a punishable offence is not at all to be accounted for on the notion that we are dealing with an invented narrative. No man could suggest even a plausible notion of how such a narrative could come to be put on record if it were not true. Its truth admitted, all is clear as noonday.

David is greatly embarrassed by the fact of his having sinned in the matter (“I have sinned greatly because I have done this thing ... I have done very foolishly.”) But much more is he embarrassed by the choice of evil offered him. “I am in a great strait,” he says. He ends the strait by a choice which is also very eloquent of many things. “*Let me fall now into the hands of YAHWEH, for very great are His mercies: let me not fall into the hand of man.*” Here is a distinction very real and practical to David in a moment of great trouble—1, falling into the hands of Yahweh; 2, falling into the hands of man. How came David to make the distinction, and to choose the former in preference to the latter? According to the view which is so very popular today, and becoming daily and rapidly more and more so, there was no “falling into the hands of Yahweh” to choose. That was a mere illusion, and any choice of that sort must have ended in nothing. If so, how came it on this great state occasion to be a practical alternative offered to David—by whomsoever? The thing offered him was not that God in providence should go against him; in such a case as that, it might be supposable that a merely human occurrence might be erroneously and superstitiously described as falling into the hands of Yahweh. The thing offered him was offered in contrast to that: he might have that if he liked—discomfiture before his enemies or famine; but the third thing offered and which David chose, was a thing out of the order of natural occurrence altogether, and beyond the power of any priests or conjurers to manipulate, that an angel should go through the land with ravaging pestilence for three days. And the question pressingly returns and returns; how came such an alternative to be offered to David, and David to choose it, unless the matter were a matter of fact and truth, and no illusion at all? David expressly stipulated that he should “not fall into the hand of man.” Is not this evidence of a very practical discrimination on the part of David? He had experience of man, as we all may have; and he found, as we may all have found, that man in power is unmerciful and false. Here is no roseate idealising of human nature—so common to human books, but so foreign to the one divine book on earth, which Carlyle calls “the truest of all books.” Here rather is the fiat colourless record of truth—that man was not to be trusted as the administrator of punishment. “Let me fall now,” exclaims David, “into the hands of Yahweh.” He gives his reason: “Very great are Yahweh’s mercies.” How came he to make such a choice for such a reason if he had had no practical experience of the thing lamented by Jonah on a certain occasion, that Yahweh is

“gracious and merciful, and slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth of the evil?” ([Jonah 4:2](#)). Ah, but he had had practical experience of it, and Israel before him for hundreds of years, and, therefore, he chose as he did—and wisely. “So Yahweh sent pestilence upon Israel, and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men. And God sent an angel to Jerusalem, to destroy it, and as he was destroying, Yahweh beheld, and he repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, It is enough, stay now thine hand ... And David lifted up his eyes and SAW *the angel of Yahweh stand between the earth and the heaven*, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders of Israel, who were clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces. And David said unto God, is it not I that commanded the people to be numbered? Even I it is that have sinned and done evil, indeed; but as for these sheep, what have they done? Let thine hand, I pray thee, O, Yahweh my God, be on me and on my father’s house, but not on Thy people that they should be plagued.” Then followed certain directions from the angel, concerning the sacrifices suitable to the awful manifestation of the visible hand of God that had taken place. With these directions, David complied with great and humble alacrity, offering on a neighbouring (indicated) threshing floor occupied by one, Ornan, which afterwards became the site of the temple—offering there instead of before the tabernacle, because the way to the tabernacle (at that time at Gibeon) was barred by the interposing and sword-bearing angel of Yahweh ([1 Chron. 21:18–30](#)). With the offering of the appointed sacrifices, the terror-inspiring episode came to an end, and David proceeded to arrange for the building of the temple—afterwards erected by Solomon.