

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of II SAMUEL

The second book of Samuel continues the story of David from the point at which we left it at the end of the first book. The emphasis here however is different in a number of ways, and it is instructive to see the comparisons and contrasts between the two books. In 1 Samuel, for example, the three characters of Samuel, Saul and David tower over all the others, almost to their exclusion; but in 2 Samuel there is a much more varied canvas, almost like a mediaeval painting, with a richness of portraiture and characterisation that marks the golden age of Israel. And yet, paradoxically, in the midst of such a galaxy of character studies, it is unquestionably true that it is the story of David; and in this respect, the two books stand in the relation of preparation to fulfilment. What was promised in the first, is fulfilled in the second: in the one David is under training and, on the whole, it presents a uniform picture of the disciplines and testings that he was called to pass through. In the other, we see him coming into his own, and it is a David in the full flower of his genius as soldier, statesman, administrator, prophet, poet, sweet psalmist of Israel, that we see now. His reign divides naturally into two parts, the seven-and-a-half years in Hebron, and the thirty-two-and-a-half years in Jerusalem, over the united kingdom. In our study of it we shall see how the young David passed from training into service for the Lord, and how the earlier disciplines qualified him, and gave him capacity, for all he was called upon to be and do. And a great work indeed lay to his hand, no less than the rehabilitation of the land after Saul's long years of misrule.

I) 1:1-16

We have already made mention of the incident recorded in these verses (see Note on 1 Samuel 31:16), and suggested that the record of Saul's death given in 1 Samuel 31 is the true one, and that the Amalekite came upon Saul's dead body, robbed him of the crown and regalia, and bringing them to David as evidence that he had slain his enemy, in the hope of being rewarded by him. Never did he misjudge a situation more completely, and he paid dearly for his mistake. Whether the above interpretation of Saul's death is correct, or the Amalekite slew the king, the lesson is the same: the man who presumes to lay hands on the Lord's anointed even when he has become a castaway, will ever find it to be a costly and dangerous expedient!

David's grief reflects the large-hearted and generous humanity of the man, and this on first thoughts seems to stand in marked contrast to the rejoicing at the downfall of his enemies to which he frequently gives expression in the Psalms. But the contrast is only apparent and each attitude expresses a different aspect of the matter. David could not but be glad that Saul's enmity to the will of God had at last been brought to an end; but he could also, and did mourn the tragedy of that unhappy life, and think with pain and regret what might have been in a life that had been so richly endowed by God, yet so wantonly dissipated. To see this, as David must surely have done, could not but cause grief in any spiritually-minded man. This is why David mourned, and wept and fasted.

2) 1:17-27

What was said in the previous Note about David's grief is amply borne out when we read through these verses, which express it. It is one of the most moving elegies in any language, and it were almost an impertinence to seek to analyse something so intimate and sacred. There is no recrimination on David's part as he speaks of his bitter enemy; indeed, if we did not know the earlier part of the story, we would think that David was mourning a loyal companion's passing, full of the honours of battle. This speaks volumes to us, not so much about Saul as about David, for it shows a spirit devoid of bitterness and rancour, a truly royal and regal spirit, the spirit, indeed, of Christ Himself. Nor should we miss the force of his words in 20: he is not merely concerned with the shame of defeat by the Philistine, but also, and much more important, the shame of a man of God's failure becoming known and bandied about by wicked and malicious tongues. The danger was that the name of God be blasphemed among the Gentiles because of Saul's disobedience and sin. This is why David wanted to keep it a private matter. 'Tell it not in Gath', he cries in his grief. There is a great lesson for us here. We are so prone, when most sincerely distressed about them, to speak out about the failures and shame of erring brethren that they become the common talk of a fellowship or a community. David shrinks from the very thought of this. 'Tell it not; hide it from men, and mention it only to God'. Ah, we need to examine the nature of the impulse to tell it out. Whence does it come and what lurking motive drives us to do so? An honest facing up to this question would be so very revealing and a very painful experience for most of us!

3) 2:1-7

This chapter begins the story proper of David's reign as king, but we shall not read very far without realising that David's battles are by no means yet over. One marvels, indeed, how slowly David came into his inheritance as the Lord's anointed, for in fact his reign in Hebron for seven-and-a-half years was over part of a divided kingdom. First, he endured the long disciplines in the wilderness and in the strongholds as a fugitive from Saul's bitter jealousy, and this was followed, not by unhindered success, but by a very intermediate state. From the spiritual point of view, this bears witness that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God, and that Satan's opposition to the fulfilment of the divine will is fierce and unremitting. (One recalls Joseph's extra years in jail after the long disciplines of God had seemed to accomplish all that was needful in him.) This circumstance sheds light on the difficulties, delays and hindrances that men encounter in the work of the Lord, and should teach us to 'think it not strange' when the fruition of God's purposes seems to be unaccountably frustrated - or delayed. It also affords us a parable and picture of the work of grace in the soul, and of the contest of grace and corruption in the believer, with spirit lusting against flesh and flesh against spirit. Let us not, however, miss the sense of accomplishment and finality in the anointing of David as king of Judah in 4, or the first act of the new king in his generous acknowledgement of the action of the men of Jabesh (see 1 Samuel 31:11-13). It is somehow typical of this great-hearted servant of God that he should begin his reign with a benediction (6). In this, he is a type of his greater Son Who, when He ascended up on high, crowned and exalted, gave gifts unto men.

4) 2:8-11

These verses record a fateful decision made by Abner the Captain of Saul's host. We are told that he took sides against David and set up Ishbosheth, Saul's son, as a rival king over Israel. In so doing, he set up a king and a kingdom in direct defiance of the will and purpose of God. There are many lessons for us to learn here, of great and far-reaching importance. Abner was but one of the many colourful personalities that appear in the story at this time, a strong and powerful figure. In the nature of the case there were bound to be strong currents flowing in places of such eminence. When this is so, the great temptation is to be swayed by human passions and feelings and considerations. Abner was a great man, and the elements of greatness are plainly to be seen in his character. He was a redoubtable warrior, magnanimous and generous to his foes, an able military commander and organiser. But this can never be enough. The qualities seen in him are such as could be used for evil as well as for good. Who was to get these qualities? To whom was he to yield their allegiance? These were the questions. And Abner made a wrong decision, in setting up a rival kingdom against David. What lay behind his final decision? We must look for the answer to this in the realm of motive. There are several possibilities. It may have been the ambition to be the power behind the throne, for Ishbosheth was but a feeble and ineffective puppet. It may have been his assessment of the possibilities of the northern kingdom as against the smaller Judah. If so, it was a gamble that failed. At its highest, it may have been a sense of family loyalty, for he was of the family of Saul. But - and this is the all-important-point - David was the Lord's anointed king, and anyone with discernment should have seen that the Lord was going to establish him, and that opposing him would be to fight against God. Did Abner not see this? If not, it was a mistake in judgment - which was finally to cost him his life. If he did, then he acted in face of clear knowledge of the divine purposes, and against them. More of this in our next Note.

5) 2:8-11

Men often, in fact, let ambition keep them from doing what they know to be the will of God. And the same can be said about weighing up situations with a view to the advantages to be gained. Sometimes also, family loyalties keep a man from the will of God. Jesus said, 'What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' For Abner, the decision to ally himself with the cause of Ishbosheth was one that started him on a course which involved him more and more, and from which there was no returning. It is not too much to say that he schemed his own ruin, for when he would have, in the end, retrieved himself and given his allegiance at the last to David (see 2:12ff), he was too late: it was no longer permitted him to do so. His fateful choice had led him so far along the wrong road that it made a change of direction circumstantially impossible even when he wanted it. For while on that wrong road he had incurred the implacable opposition and enmity of Joab (see the next Note), and this alone, apart from any other consideration, would have made any suggestion of alliance with David futile. This is all very frightening. Abner was not allowed, in the end, to take part in the furtherance of God's purposes with His people. We cannot serve God when we like; it has to be when He likes, or not at all. And sometimes, by the wrong choices and wrong turnings that we make, and this is the solemn lesson we are taught here, we disqualify ourselves forever from His glad service.

6) 2:12-32

These verses give an account of the civil war, which was waged between the rival factions at this time. It would seem that a 'token' contest was decided upon (14), with twelve warriors from each side doing battle in a representative capacity, probably in order to prevent widespread bloodshed between tribes of a common parentage. But this expedient in fact settled nothing, and a regular battle followed between the two armies, in which Abner's forces were routed by David's well-trained and highly disciplined soldiers. Asahel, David's nephew, the youngest of Jeruiah's three sons, pursued the fleeing Abner, intent on pressing home the advantage gained and slaying the leader of the rebel kingdom. But alas, he was slain by a superior foe. It is interesting to see how unwilling Abner was to harm his opponent. As the text stands (22-24) the suggestion made is that Abner's unwillingness to kill Asahel was because of his extreme youth, but there may also have been some less worthy reasons. Abner recognised Asahel as Joab's brother, and Joab was a formidable foe. We can hardly think that 22b means that Abner was afraid of him, knowing the latter's calibre and prowess as a warrior, but it may well be that even then Abner was having second thoughts about the rebellion he was leading, and was contemplating the possibility of going over to David's side. If this was the case, then we can see how he was unwilling to harm Asahel, for to do so would certainly incur Joab's mortal and implacable hatred, and this would surely render any possibility of service in David's army very remote, if not unthinkable. If these were his motives for wanting to spare the young man, they were to no avail, for Asahel persisted in his pursuit, and Abner was obliged, for his own safety, to slay him.

7) 2:1232

Reference was made in an earlier Note to the wrong choice Abner made and to the chain of events which that wrong choice triggered off. We see something more of this dark fatefulness at work in the incident of Asahel's death here, in that Abner seems almost to have been compelled by force of circumstances, and against his will, to slay him, thereby ensuring the undying hatred of Joab against him and therefore the impossibility of any future acceptance of him into David's army. The impression one gets is of the mills of God grinding out the inevitable doom of a man who had set them in motion against himself by his own fateful choice in this connection. Abner's words in 26, in which he appeals for an end to the hostilities, are full of a grim irony, for in fact by his own action he had ensured that, whether the fighting stopped or not, it would be 'bitterness in the latter end' for him. He was already entangled in a web of his own weaving, and the more he attempted to extricate himself from it, the more entangled he became. The final movements of this tragic drama are unfolded in the next chapter, in which we read of Joab's swift and merciless revenge against the slayer of his brother. The whole story reminds us in a startling way of the personal feuds and animosities that can rage in the midst of the work of God's kingdom and of how they must inevitably touch and influence the mainstream of that work. David does not appear in the whole of the incident but he is inevitably drawn in at the end (2:28ff). It is always so. None of us lives unto himself, and private quarrels will inevitably have public implications in the end.

8) 3:1-5

The state of hostility between David and Ishbosheth continued over a period of years, during which time David's cause grew stronger and stronger, while Ishbosheth's grew correspondingly weaker. We learn from 1 Chronicles 12:22 that there were steady accessions of strength to him in the form of detachments from various tribes who doubtless recognised the signs of the times and realised that David was destined to rule the whole of Israel. It must have been a source of encouragement to David, after so long a time, to have seen the gradual but unmistakable signs that God's purposes were being brought to fruition for him, after the long years of discipline. There is a lesson here of another kind, however, in the chronicle of David's wives and children. The facts are stated without comment, and one has only to think for a moment of the events of the future associated with the names of his sons to realise that David's practice of polygamy was unhallowed and contrary to the divine will. It is not enough for us to seek to justify him by saying that he was a son of his age and that polygamy was the accepted practice in those times for, as Jesus Himself said, it was not so from the beginning. Polygamy represents a departure from the original divine standard as laid down in the book of Genesis, and every such departure is fraught with evil implications for the people of God. Amnon's great crime, Absalom's rebellion, Adonijah's revolt, constitute the harvest that David reaped from the sowing of his unbridled desires. 'Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after' (1 Timothy 5:24). And David's dogged his footsteps to his dying day.

9) 3:611

The unfolding of Abner's downfall is taken a further step in the sordid account of his quarrel and final rupture with Ishbosheth. It was a squalid situation, on any estimation of it, and Ishbosheth's querulous and craven spirit vies with Abner's arrogance and pride in the sense of distaste that the story leaves with us. We need not doubt that by this time Abner was realising only too keenly that he had backed the wrong man, and his sense of disappointment in, and irritation with, Ishbosheth flared up unmistakably when the personal slight was administered by the young and weak king. At the same time, however, we should learn here how unwarranted it is for a man who puts another deeply in his debt to assume that he thereby has attained an absolute and unqualified right over his person and his property. There is only One Who has put us infinitely in His debt and only One Who has an absolute claim upon us and even He does not 'lord it' over us, or trample callously upon us. His Lordship is of a very different order, and far from bludgeoning us, gives us back human dignity and personality. We never have so much as when we have given our all to Him; our wills are never so truly our own as when we have yielded them without reserve to Him. Abner's high and mighty attitude in 11, in 'determining' to transfer the kingdom to David, merely serves to emphasise the divine irony in the situation. God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, and Abner was being made use of in the fulfilment of the divine will in spite of himself, did he but know it and was to be crushed in the process. Ah, it does not do to be at odds with the will of God.

10)3:1221

It is difficult for us to know how to regard this story. On the one hand, it seems to be a straightforward (though secret) attempt by Abner to negotiate a settlement with David for the reuniting of the sundered tribes of Israel; on the other hand one cannot help but feel that there was something underhand and unworthy about the whole transaction and one wonders whether this in fact was God's way of giving David the kingdom or simply a case of a weary and impatient man snatching a sudden possibility presented to him. This tends to be confirmed in our minds when we think of the regrettable matter of Michal, Saul's daughter, and of the ruthless way in which Abner rode roughshod over Phaltiel's feelings. We can hardly think that God condoned such treatment. Scholars think that David's request for Michal may have been a political move made to strengthen his claim to the throne of all Israel. By reinstating the daughter of Saul as his queen he might commend himself to many in Israel and appear a more likely successor to the throne as Saul's son-in-law. If this be so, it further underlines the spirit of intrigue in the whole matter, and we should remember that the all-wise purposes of God are not well served by such human manipulations however well intended. We should learn from this to keep our hands off, and leave God to work as He will for our good. No, this story does not have the savour of a work of God; it does not ring true nor does it have the smooth 'flow' that a divine operation manifestly has. And since this is so, we shall not really be surprised when complications begin to develop presently.

II)3:2239

As was to be expected, Joab was furious when he learned that David had entertained Abner and had even thought of negotiating with him. His attitude to the king (24) makes it clear to us that he was almost as powerful a figure in David's court as Abner was in Ish-bosheth's, and in view of what David himself says in 39, it would seem that the commander-in-chief was becoming rather too powerful, and that David's readiness to negotiate with Abner may have been a diplomatic move calculated to offset Joab's influence. Ah, well, playing off people against one another is a risky pastime, ill-befitting a man who claims to be trusting in God for guidance and direction in his affairs. The picture presented in this passage of David is not a very creditable one. To speak of him as a mere pawn in a vast power-game played by two able and ruthless commanders would be to overstate the case, it is true; but he is certainly not the dominant figure at this point that we would have expected him to be, and the reason for this must surely lie in the fact that he descended to their tactics instead of leaning on God. This is always a fatal mistake. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual, and the employment of worldly expedients in the work of God will always be doomed to failure. This may serve to explain the perplexing failure on David's part to have Joab punished for the foul murder he committed. It was in his power as king to have at least dismissed him from his position as commander-in-chief. Was he afraid, then, to take stern measures against him? To be content with a mere protest (28, 29) at such a dastardly crime was scarcely a kingly attitude on his part. No, David does not show up well here.

12)3:22-39

In spite of the unfavourable picture of David suggested in the previous Note, due doubtless to his own acknowledged weakness (39) and inability to take effective measures against Joab's ruthlessness, we must concede that he did all in his power to make it clear to the people that he had no complicity in the foul deed. This was very necessary, since it may well be it had been assumed that Joab had acted on David's secret orders. To have allowed such a misconception to persist would have indeed been fatal for David's future, and this at least was cleared up when his genuine sorrow over Abner's death became known. David's words in 33, 'Died Abner as a fool dieth?' are striking and thought provoking; and reverent commentators have seen a reference in them to the old ordinance concerning the avenger of blood and the city of refuge (see Numbers 35:21). Joab was, according to the Law of Moses, the avenger of his brother Asahel's murder. This Abner knew, so that in returning to Hebron at Joab's request, he disregarded the danger in which he must certainly be placed. This was not wise. Furthermore, Abner met Joab at the gate of Hebron, which was one of the anciently appointed cities of refuge. A few steps and he would have been in safety. Thus, he neglected the provision God had ordained. This also was not wise. His hands were not bound, nor his feet in fetters (34), so that nothing prevented him from taking refuge. It was in the neglect of the provision at hand that he lost his life, and died 'as a fool dieth'. What a picture of the Gospel this gives us: for men die in their sins when only a step lies between them and Christ their refuge and salvation. Abner need not have died as he did; and it is true Gospel-wise that none need perish; all may live since Christ has died. As the old hymn puts it, it is 'only a step to Jesus'.

13)4:1-12

The turbulent and troubled days are not yet over and here is another brutal and hideous murder, in which the weak and tragic Ishbosheth loses his life at the hands of two of his captains. It is clear that Saul's son had little spirit in him, and when his mainstay Abner was slain, he seemed to crumple in utter discouragement (1, 5). But this is not a reason for murdering him, and we recoil in horror at the accounts of this very terrible deed. The one bright point in the story is David's reaction.

It is with a great sense of relief that we see David acting here as we feel he should have acted in the previous chapter. The attitude he adopts is exactly that of the earlier occasion when the Amalekites came with the report of King Saul's death (1:13ff). How glad we are that the real David re-asserts himself! Here is the generosity and magnanimity of spirit that marks him as a man after God's own heart; and even more important, here is his disavowal of all such unhallowed means of furthering the purposes of God for himself and for the kingdom, as if to say, 'I refuse to allow my reign over Israel to be established on such butchery; better not reign at all than reign by this method'. This is the David who withheld his hand from harming Saul in the cave when he had him at his mercy, willing to trust God implicitly to establish him in His own time. Is it not an encouragement to see the true values of the spiritual nature gaining the ascendancy after having been overshadowed and obscured for a time, and does not this act as a spur to us, urging us to follow suit?

14)5:1-5

These verses record the final unification of Israel under the kingship of David. The tribes enumerate three reasons for yielding their loyalty to him - their common descent (1), the fact that David, even in Saul's reign, had been their commander (2a) and the realisation that he was the Lord's anointed (2b). Thus a civil war, which had looked as if it might last for long years, was effectively brought to a close. It is doubtless true that the murders of Abner and Ishbosheth were contributory, perhaps decisive, factors in this, but one wonders how much more simply and smoothly the divine purposes would have been accomplished if human scheming and intrigue had been left out. One of the lessons that we sometimes only painfully learn in the spiritual life is that our clumsy manipulation of people and circumstances and our meddling with what is not our concern serve to hinder and frustrate, rather than further, the purposes of God for our lives. An interesting and valuable commentary on this passage is found in 1 Chronicles 12:23-40. The Chronicler's comments are highly revealing. The men of Issachar (32) had 'understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do'; the men of Zebulun (33) were able to 'keep rank; they were not of double heart'; the men of Asher (36) were 'expert in war' all (38) 'were of one heart to make David king'. It does not need much comment to bring out the spiritual application of these qualities to the warfare of the Gospel, and to see the lesson that we who are engaged in Christian service need to learn.

I 5) 5:6-12

After the enthronement of David, the next step was the establishment of a worthy capital for the United Kingdom, and Jerusalem seemed to be the obvious place. Jerusalem however, although it lay in the territory assigned to the tribe of Benjamin (Joshua 18:28) was still held by the Jebusites, a Canaanite tribe that had never yielded up the city to its God-appointed inheritors. The reason for this was of course that Jerusalem was set on natural fortifications, especially the fortress on Mount Zion, and the Jebusites felt themselves secure in this rocky fastness. When David and his men approached the Jebusites, they replied in terms of 6, a rather mysterious verse. Its meaning seems to be something like this: 'Thou shalt not come hither, for our fortress is well-nigh impregnable, so that even a handful of blind men and cripples would be well able to keep you out.' In other words, this was a mocking taunt to David, from men who were very confident of their position, and felt that nothing could oust them from it. David was naturally angered by these taunts, and invited his men to attempt the impossible task of storming this citadel. This they did, by entering the fortress through the 'gutter', i.e. the tunnel or watercourse just outside the walls of the fortress, which the Jebusites had made to secure supplies of water from outside into their hold. This daring venture won the day and Zion was captured. We are not meant to take 8 as meaning that David slaughtered the blind and crippled - it seems better to take it as meaning that David, in his anger against them said, 'I'll show them who are the blind and the lame', and his victory proved the Jebusites to be 'the blind and the lame' who were powerless to resist his manoeuvre (see also 1 Chronicles 11:4-9).

16)5:13-16

The sacred-historian again mentions, without comment, David's practice of polygamy, and it seems that his accession to the throne of the united kingdom was the signal to take more wives to himself. It would be easy to interpret this as the sign of David's increasing power and prestige, a considerable harem being one of the prerogatives of eastern monarchs. It is certainly true that other eastern rulers followed this practice, and that the increasing number of wives marked increasing power; but we should remember that Israel was called to be different from other peoples, and certainly this was meant to apply also to her rulers. The teaching of the Word of God is quite explicit about this, as also about monogamy (see Deuteronomy 17:17), and this can only be interpreted as one of David's blind spots. It may be that his accession to power brought the temptations to indulgence along this line, although it is true to say that even in his days of fugitive existence this was one of his darker characteristics. One has only to think of the grave and distressing problems that arose in his family life through the sons born of these unhallowed unions to realise how serious this weakness in him proved to be, and how deadly its effect on the kingdom as a whole. If the later years of David's reign are any indication, we may well believe that he lived to regret his earlier alliances. He learned the hard way that we transgress divine laws to our own confusion and loss.

17)5:17-25

The Philistines were not long in coming to the attack; this was surely to be expected, whenever there is an enthronement, the evil one begins to retaliate. And in the spiritual life, every man's Pentecost is a signal for Satan to gird himself. But David waited upon God, and there is never any need for misgiving when this happens. It is interesting and significant that the divine guidance was quite different the second time from the first (19, 23). This is doubtless written for our instruction. We must beware of assuming that God always works in the same way. Even the poet is able to tell us that 'God fulfils Himself in many ways, lest one good custom should corrupt the world'. The danger of so assuming is that it could lead to a mechanical 'rote', and the adoption of a 'technique' for obtaining the divine power and help that could dispense with God altogether. Such an attempt to 'pigeonhole' God and 'institutionalise' Him is ultimately destructive of true fellowship with Him, and we are bound to say that this is a danger from which we in our modern age are by no means free. To reduce salvation to a 'formula', as we so often have done, and the application of a 'technique' to the business of soul-winning, is to do despite to the Spirit of grace. One recalls in this connection the words spoken of Joseph and Mary in Luke 2:44 when they 'misaid' the boy Jesus: 'They, supposing Him to have been in the company, went a day's journey'. It is all too easy to 'suppose Him to be in' our cliché-ridden formulae and our confident, streamlined techniques, when in fact we have 'misaid' Him away back on the road. Is there not something for us to learn here?

18)6:1-5

This chapter represents an important milestone in the history of Israel. David has just restored political unity to the nation, and consolidated it by the establishment of his capital at Jerusalem. Now his object is to establish religious worship among the people, and for this he must restore the Ark to its proper place. The significance of the Ark was that it was the symbol of the covenant between Jehovah and Israel. Its loss to the Philistines (1 Samuel 1, 4) was rightly regarded as a disaster involving the loss of the divine favour. After its capture, and its subsequent return to Kirjathjearim, little is heard of it - a fact of considerable importance in relation to the failure of Saul's reign and the collapse of his house. It is clear that the Ark had an almost sacramental significance for Israel, and its presence was associated with the presence of the Lord with His people, and this is what explains David's desire to have it in the heart of his capital. His concern was, in fact, for a return to the things of God on a national level; it was an attempt to renew the nation in spiritual things. This is what gives the chapter such relevance for us today, for is not this what we are labouring to do, to rehabilitate the waste places of our land and restore lost heritages? The experience of David in this highly significant episode is written for our learning therefore, and we shall find that it has much to say to us about right and wrong ways of doing God's work.

19)6:6-8

When we remember the background of the story, given in yesterday's Note, and see today's verses in the light of David's worthy purpose and intention, the summary judgment of Uzzah seems at first sight to have been a hard and severe penalty. Surely it was a well-meant action on his part, to steady the trembling Ark? But in God's sight it represented a sin of presumption. One of Israel's greatest lessons was to learn the unapproachable majesty of the Holy One. The Ark was the symbol of His presence, and there were Levitical ordinances designed to secure the strictest reverence for it. It was to be carried by Levites (Numbers 4:5, 15, 19, 20), but not to be touched, on pain of death. The instructions were clear, and what happened on this occasion was a neglect and infringement of God's law. The return of the Ark was the first step in the inauguration of a new era of worship; but if breaches of the Divine Law were to mark this and these breaches left unpunished, where would it have led? To begin wrongly is to jeopardise all that follows. Not only so; the prevailing attitude indicated neglect and carelessness, not to say presumption, in the matter of returning to God. They were lacking in seriousness. The Ark had been neglected for long years by the nation, and now it was being casually treated. Viewed in this light, the divine reaction becomes not only reasonable, but also inevitable. We cannot turn back to God in a moment, casually, and resume intimate fellowship with Him as if there had been no estrangement. There is a cross set at the heart of history - that is what our estrangement cost God, and we may not lightly esteem it! An easy familiarity with holy things amounts to not much less than blasphemy, and angers the holy Lord of the Scriptures. This is the point at issue in these verses.

20)6:9-11

David's displeasure against the Lord turned to fear as he began to realise something of the reason for the Lord's judgment upon Uzzah. It is as well for men in this kind of situation to take second thoughts about the matter, for it is pointless, as well as dangerous, to be displeased with the Lord for what He does. He is always right in His reactions, and if we find ourselves at odds with Him, so much the worse for us. David's fear was probably due as much to the realisation of how wrong and presumptuous it was of him to be displeased with God as to the growing appreciation of why God had so signally judged Uzzah. And although it is just possible that there is still a trace of petulance in his refusal to deal further in bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, it is entirely a good thing that he should halt proceedings for a time and take stock of the situation, and seek to learn that God's work must be done in God's way, and by methods that will honour Him, and that a casual and careless, albeit well-meaning, approach to holy things was wholly unacceptable, indeed, offensive to the Lord. The fact that Obed-edom and all his household were blessed by the presence of the Ark in their midst would surely have made it clear to David that the judgment on Uzzah was no arbitrary visitation and that when men have a right attitude to the things of God His smile is ever upon them. 'Them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed' (1 Samuel 2:30).

21)6:12-22

There are two points in particular to note in the remainder of the story. The first is that David has now learned the lesson of the earlier presumption which had led to disaster, and this new attitude of reverence for the Ark enables him to restore it to its proper place in Jerusalem without further incident, amid the general rejoicing of the people, rejoicing that was all the more fervent, doubtless, in the consciousness that the Lord's anger was now turned away. The combination of holy fear and joy is not so paradoxical or contradictory as might at first appear. True spiritual joy is never either superficial or frivolous; it has 'body' in it, imparted by the fear of the Lord. Real merriment in the Christian sense is the very opposite of frivolity, and is possible only where men have taken God seriously. The second point really arises from this last consideration. Michal's attitude of contempt towards her husband barely conceals her resentment against his manifest devotion to God and the things of God. Whole-hearted devotion to Him is always a source of embarrassment to people who do not share common loyalties with us in the Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, there were those who were so antipathetic against real spiritual values that they mistook the infilling of the Spirit of God as drunkenness in the apostles. Then Paul made his impassioned plea before King Agrippa. Festus the Governor thought he was beside himself and that much learning had made him mad. It was so with Michal here! And her biting contempt in 20 must have cut the rejoicing David to the quick. Nothing is more hurtful to the saints of God than such an attitude. The fact is, she had neither part nor lot with David in the deepest loyalties and loves of his life, and was incapable of sharing them. The lesson this teaches is surely plain: for the man of God natural attraction and natural love can never be enough to ensure a true marriage. Community of interests and, above all, identity of loyalties must be seen to be essential, if the divine purpose and intention is to be fulfilled.

22)7:1-3

Following the establishment of the Ark in Jerusalem, David begins to think of building a house for the Lord worthy of His great Name. There is something very telling and significant about the circumstances in which this thought came to the king. The Lord had given him rest from his enemies. This, doubtless, was one of the several occasions when a time of respite came to him in his arduous battles against the Philistines and other foes. But we should recall that on the last occasion in which the Lord's blessing was said to have been upon him (5:10-16), David occupied himself in much less worthy ways, multiplying wives to himself, and we suggested (see Note) that accession to power had brought temptation to indulgence - as indeed power and security, with the accompanying affluence and ease, often do. Here, however, we find him much more usefully and profitably employed, all honour to him. It is something when a man is detached enough from earthly glory and fame to give his thoughts to the furtherance of the work of God. Nathan the Prophet's reaction was immediate and natural, believing that David's desire was according to the will of God, and he exhorted him to do all that was in his heart. It was only later that God revealed that His will was otherwise. There is an important lesson on guidance here. The natural and obvious conclusion come to by a mind or minds sanctified by God's grace may be generally assumed to be the right one, and we ought to have confidence in proceeding along the way that such a conclusion indicates: for God wills to use sanctified minds in guiding His children in the way they should take. If otherwise, however, God will certainly make it unmistakably plain. And sometimes, as in this case, the supernatural intervenes to overrule what seemed to be the obvious leading. But when this happens, we are never left in doubt. Nor does this invalidate the other as a normal vehicle of the divine guidance, but merely indicates the freedom of God. He is sovereign, and we must learn to trust Him.

23)7:4-17

The divine directive comes to Nathan by night, in dream or vision, and it is made clear that David is not to proceed in his intention. This is a fascinating passage, and there are a number of points that we must note. It is interesting to see that no reason is directly given why David is not to build a house for the Lord, beyond the divine observation that He had never, in all the years of His dealing with Israel, spoken a word about a house being built for Him (7). What follows this intimation is very significant. The Lord rehearses His dealings with David, as if to show the pattern of His purposes in having called and anointed him as king of Israel. Then comes the striking statement in 11b, 'The Lord...will make thee a house'. This makes it clear then, that the Lord and David are in fact thinking in quite different ways about spiritual life. The real Temple, God is saying to him, is not a building, but a house not made with hands, a habitation of God through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22); not sticks and stones, but people. This is very wonderful, to find such an emphasis in these early days. One wonders just how much David apprehended of the divine revelation at the time. It is certainly true that a basic lack of understanding of this fundamental insight led directly to the corruption of Israel's religious life and the barren legalism associated with the Temple which persisted right down to our Lord's own day, and indeed is to be found today wherever the Church tends to become 'institutionalised' and loses the free life of the Spirit, and where the 'place' becomes more important than the 'people'. How needful for us to remember that what God is doing is to 'call out a people for His Name' (Acts 15:14).

24)7:4-17

It is interesting to note that although no express reason is given in these verses for the divine prohibition, David himself assigns one elsewhere. See 1 Chronicles 22:8 and 28:3, where he tells us that it was because he was a man of war and had shed much blood that he was not allowed to build the Temple. This is very solemn, for it teaches us that the lives we live condition the service we are able and allowed to render to God. We recall how Moses spoke inadvisedly with his lips, and for this was disqualified from leading Israel into the Promised Land. 'Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? He that hath clean hands and a pure heart. This may have a much wider application than we had realised, and may serve to explain some otherwise inexplicable mysteries of withholding in spiritual life. Sins may be forgiven, but service may be affected by past sin. There is a law of cause and effect at work here. Some have also seen in these verses, particularly from 12 onwards, the suggestion that another reason was that the time was not yet ripe for the building of the Temple, because of the unsettled state of the kingdom and the fact that it was not as yet sufficiently established to allow of this work to be done. This may well be, and if so, it bears witness to the reality in the idea of a divine strategy at work. God has His times and they are often not our times. This is one of the harder lessons for impetuous spirits to learn, but the need for discernment to see what God wills at any particular time is a very great one in the life and experience of the Church.

25)7:18-29

The wonderful thing about this story is that although David's desire was not granted or permitted, something far more wonderful and far-reaching than he could ever have imagined was revealed and unfolded to him. This also is sometimes the reason why God does not permit what we so much desire, and we may take the words in Hebrews 11:40, 'God having provided some better thing for you', and see how wonderfully relevant they can be in such a situation. It is clear from these verses which record David's prayer to the Lord that any natural disappointment he may have felt at the divine prohibition was more than offset by the glorious unfolding of God's purposes for his house in generations to come. The spirit of wonder and worship is very evident in David's reaction; it would not be too much to say that he was overwhelmed by what he had heard, and overawed by the magnitude of God's purpose with him and through him. But should not we also be gripped by an even greater sense of awe as we contemplate what it means to have been caught up in the purposes of the Gospel and given a part to play in the grand redemptive design of the ages? It is a measure of our superficial thinking that we so often seem to take such glory and benediction for granted, as if it were merely one interesting experience among others in life. The loss of a sense of worship has surely been an immeasurable impoverishment for the life of the Church in our time.

26)7:18-29

We should not fail to note David's faith responding to the divine promises. It has two characteristics, a simple, childlike trust in the trustworthiness of God's word to him, and an utter submission of heart to it. It is surely true to say that a sense of wonder and worship and a simple trust in God go together. There is little room for doubt in a heart that has been ravished by the greatness and glory of the divine revelation. The age - and the experience - of doubt is usually most evident where worship is most at a discount. It is wonderful to be able to speak, like a little child, as David does in 25 - 'Concerning the word that Thou hast spoken establish it for ever, and do as Thou hast said'. Nor is David's submission to the divine word any less striking. It is as if he were saying, as his descendant said in the same connection centuries later, 'Be it unto me according to Thy Word'. We find the heart of the matter expressed in 27. God had revealed His purposes to His servant, and David found it in his heart to pray this prayer, that is, he consented and submitted his heart and will to the good and perfect will of God. Divine initiative and human response come together, and thus His will is furthered and fulfilled. This underlines once more one main lesson which we learned in 1 Samuel, in George Campbell Morgan's words, 'The sovereignty of God presses into His service all souls that are loyal to His will, and they will share in the rapture of His victory. He presses also into the service of His ultimate victory all souls that are rebellious against Him, and they will share in the wrath of His victory'. The great difference between Saul and David was that Saul resisted the divine will and was crushed by it, whereas David submitted and welcomed it, as a man after God's own heart, and shared in the glory of the divine fulfilment.

27)8:1-18

A first glance at this chapter reveals a summary of David's campaigns, with not a great deal in the way of spiritual illumination to take from it. But the context in which it is set gives it significance that we must not miss. We should bear in mind that there is one overmastering purpose running through the entire Old Testament - the fulfilment of the promise, and part of that promise was the establishment of the chosen people in the land God had given them. It is in this light that we are to view these wars and campaigns - they were the Lord's battles, and they were fulfilling in part His redemptive purposes in and through His people. David had just received a mighty word from the Lord about the future - his future, and the future of his house and family - and could see, perhaps more clearly than he had ever done, what part he himself would play in it. Nathan's prophecy in chapter 7 had touched the deeps of his soul and provided the motivating power and the inspiration for his warfare for the Lord. With this understanding of the situation, the chapter gleams with light. David knew what he was doing, and where he was going. Like Paul, he could have said, 'I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air' (1 Corinthians 9:26). This is an absolute essential in Christian service, to be clear on the issues involved and have an adequate idea of the great design behind our work and calling. If we know, if there has been a word from the Lord, if he has whispered in our ear concerning things to come, then we have a driving power that will keep us steadfast and unmovable, and an effective antidote to discouragement and despair. Above all, there will be the prevailing presence and protection of the Lord to uphold and provide (14). This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord (see Isaiah 54:17).

28)9:1-13

This simple, touching story of David's act of kindness to Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son, is rich in spiritual instruction, both in straightforward exposition and also in the illustration it gives of the Gospel. We should not miss the Holy Spirit's intimation to our hearts in the place He has given this story immediately after the account of David's wars; and therefore after the revelation of the divine purposes for himself and his house. On the one hand, as we saw in the previous Note, this gave David both motivating power and inspiration for fighting the battles of the Lord; on the other hand, it seems to have produced in him the true graces of spiritual character. The contrast thus presented between the warrior of God and the gentle courtesy of the generous benefactor is surely an authentic reflection of Him Who is both the Lion of the tribe of Judah and the Lamb of God, in Whom strength and tenderness combine in perfect harmony. Indeed, only the truly strong can show gentleness like this; it is the lesser breeds that are lacking in true tenderness and pity. We should note, then, the Christ-like spirit that animated David here. It was the kindness of God that he was to show Mephibosheth. But it is just as important to see the spirit of disinterestedness in which he acted. He put himself about to find someone to be kind to! We should not miss the significance of this, for this is one of the marks of spiritual maturity in the life of a believer - the ability to think of others. We think of the expression in the hymn, 'A heart at leisure from itself to soothe and sympathise', and reflect that many people never really escape from themselves sufficiently for this ever to be true of them. Chronic self-preoccupation makes it impossible for them to be really 'outgoing' in their interest in and concern for others.

29)9:1-13

The story of David and Mephibosheth also affords us a parable of grace, in that it reflects the yearning of God to do good to the lost and bring them into His kingdom. Mephibosheth was born in a palace, into a royal line, but now he was in exile, eking out a poor existence in Lo-debar, the land of no bread, in constant fear of discovery and death at the hands of the new king. Like the prodigal in the far country, his nobility was lost, and he was in want. In this sense David represents the seeking Saviour Who brings the restoration of lost privileges, and the assurance of continual feasting at the king's table (7, 9, 10). Few stories could illustrate better than this the royal favour bestowed in the Gospel upon those who have no claims to advance and no rights to plead; and perhaps the most telling point of comparison in the illustration is the personal relationship into which Mephibosheth entered with the king. This is the real essence of salvation - to be brought into fellowship with God, 'to dwell in Jerusalem and see the king's face'. Nor does the analogy stop here, for the story points to the duty, responsibility and privilege of showing kindness to others for Jesus' sake, seeking out the lost, the under-privileged, the halt and the lame, those without Christ and without hope, and communicating to them the kindness of God in the Gospel. 'Other sheep have I', said Jesus, 'which are not of this fold. Them also I must bring'. 'Lovest thou Me? Feed My sheep!'

30) 10:1-12

This story is a companion piece to that of the previous chapter, yet stands in marked contrast to it. The common factor in both is the desire David had to show kindness, but in this instance the response is very different. Again we see the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in placing these two incidents close to each other, for together they teach us, by implication, some necessary lessons about Spiritual life. For one thing, we are shown here that it is false to suppose that kindness will always win. One has only to read the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 to realise that 'peacemaking' will sometimes lead to reviling and persecution instead of gratitude and thankfulness. Think of the experience of the early Church - When they came preaching the kindness of God they met with opposition and persecution, and every kind of indignity. As Paul puts it in I Corinthians 4:9ff, they were made 'the off-scouring of all things unto this day'. It is also false to suppose, in the work of the Gospel, that simple preaching will win simple acceptance. The parable of the Sower as taught by Christ makes it clear that we must expect discouragements and disappointments in the work of the Gospel. As the hymn puts it,

'Some will hate thee, some will love thee,

Some will flatter, some will slight.'

The story of Hanun and the Ammonites is recorded to remind us of this possibility, to remind us too that to love at all is to be vulnerable. In the Christian life we must be prepared to face such a likelihood. It is unrealistic to suppose otherwise.

31) 10:1-19

There is another lesson here, however, on the strange perversity of human nature that makes it so difficult for some people to receive kindness. David's offer here was manifestly without ulterior motive, and made in the goodness of his heart, to repay a former kindness. And yet, all sorts of unworthy designs were imputed to him by the Ammonites. Sometimes it is in fact the fear of such ulterior motives that makes men suspicious of genuine and unfeigned goodness; sometimes it is the complicated processes of thinking that go on in our hearts and that finally make us incapable, it would seem, of accepting the simple truth when it stares us in the face. Christ's word about becoming as little children has a very real relevance in this connection. Sometimes also - and this is even more complicated - it is the mysterious and disintegrating workings of inferiority complex in the deeps of our being that make us distrustful of goodness and kindness offered to us, and tempt us to spurn it even when we most need it. And when we are courageous enough to examine this strange perversity within our hearts, we may learn to our dismay that it is more allied to a spirit of pride than we would care to admit. Because, of course, to receive means and involves taking the lowly place, and our secret hearts say, 'anything rather than that'. This is something that will bear thinking about.

The spiritual 'type' or illustration of acceptance or rejection of the Gospel is surely plain from this and the previous chapter. In 9, acceptance of kindness led to restoration and a place at the king's table. Here, in 10, its repudiation led to swift and summary judgment. It is ever so; the God men encounter 'outside' His kindness revealed in Christ is ever an angry God. In Christ, God's holiness is seen to be mercy and grace; outside Christ, that holiness is wrath.

32) 11:1-4

This dark chapter divides the reign of David into two decisive parts. From this point onwards things are different with David and troubles and distresses dog his footsteps for the rest of his days. It is a story that should strike terror into the hearts of good men, for it is something that happened to a good man, a man who has come down in history as 'a man after God's own heart'. It stands as a great and tragic blot upon his life, a stain of ugly and sinister colour. How could such a thing have happened? One recalls the repeated mention (without comment) of David's taking many wives to himself, and we are doubtless meant to realise that this is the bitter harvest of that evil sowing. Indiscipline lay at the heart of this weakness of David's nature, and long and repeated consenting to its imperious demands had sapped his moral fibre to the dangerous extent that when something he knew was wrong suddenly presented itself, he was incapable of resisting. This is the tragedy and terror of the situation. David made such a fall a practical certainty for himself, by the way he lived. No great fall ever happens without a long antecedent history leading up to it and making it in the end inevitable. All that is finally needed, when the seeds of evil have been sown and nurtured, is for temptation and opportunity to come together. And come they did. One sees with dawning horror the final, irrevocable step, which made this tragedy a certainty in the solemn words in 1, 'David tarried still at Jerusalem'. He should have been on the battlefield, for it was the time when kings go forth to battle; but he had become complacent and ease-loving. And Satan, waiting for his unguarded hour, struck mercilessly and with overpowering effectiveness. Oh, the perils of easy days! How often we wish for them, to escape from our disciplines and testings, but we are far safer under pressure than when at ease. David in the wilderness hunted by Saul was a much fitter man spiritually than David the conqueror!

33) 11:5-13

The fatal mistake, which forged the connecting link between temptation and opportunity, between unhallowed desire and unhallowed act, was to have taken himself out of God's protecting grace by being in the wrong place. Out of God's place and out of His will, we can commit the most grievous errors, and all sorts of disasters can follow. And what is worse, sin follows upon sin. One of the penalties of sinning is that we go on sinning. We cannot stop when we like. When David's foul deed was done, it was not finished with. James says, 'Sin when it is finished bringeth forth death', and this was literally true in this instance - Uriah's death, and he died, brave, generous-hearted soldier that he was, for no other reason than that he happened to be an inconvenient complication of a situation brought about by the lust of his king and his wife. Uriah was never greater in stature than when, all unconscious of the foul connivings of David, he acted the soldier and the man in face of what he deemed the national emergency of war, and David never more despicable than when he plotted, so horribly, to conceal his crime and sin. This, then, is how low sin brings a man, and how ugly it makes him appear. Nothing could show more clearly the debasing and disgusting effect of sin upon a man's life and character. Nor must we evade the plain implication of this by assuming that David was simply exposed here as a hypocrite; this is to miss the point, which is that it was his old nature - what the Fall had made him, and makes every man - that erupted in this disastrous way and brought him down with such an appalling crash, and that it had done so because he had failed to watch and pray, lest he should enter into temptation. And what we must recognise is that, but for the grace of God, there is no level to which a man will not descend. Look at Romans 1:18-32. Too awful, are we tempted to say? Well, Paul is describing not all human behaviour, but all human nature, and this is where human nature will go when left to itself. We need to realise that common grace shelters and protects us far more than we realise, and that what we often - and so proudly - boast of as our own unaided 'built-in' moral standards are really the effects of the common grace of God in our lives. And once the restraints of grace are removed, there is no depth to which a man may not sink. We have not read our hearts aright if we do not believe this.

34) 11:14-25

One reads these terrible verses with bated breath, as David reaches the depths of ugly and shameful intrigue, deliberately plotting a cold-blooded murder to serve his nefarious purposes and hide his sin. There is something particularly horrible and callous in the fact that David made Uriah carry his own death warrant back to Joab (14), and it is some evidence of the frightful deterioration of character that sin brings that he should have acted in such a dastardly fashion. Joab's fulfilment of his master's wish seems to indicate a major error in military tactics, for he was obviously concerned lest David's anger be kindled (19-21); but he hoped that his mistake might be passed over when news of Uriah's death reached the king. In this he was right, and David, military genius as he was, airily dismissed the blunder that on another occasion would certainly have cost Joab his command, in words which indicate only relief that Uriah was now dead and himself safe. 'The sword devoureth one as well as another', he said; and in this spirit he would have been prepared to sacrifice the whole army to conceal his adultery. But sin cannot be hid; the hidden things of darkness, even in kings, will be revealed, and David learned this to his cost; learned also, when it was too late, that the way of the transgressor is hard. This was David's darkest, ugliest hour, and we almost shrink from reading further, longing for an end to it. But alas, the end is not yet. Sin starts something that takes a long, long time to finish.

35) 11:26, 27

If we had hoped for some feeling of revulsion in David after this tragic chapter of sin and crime, the last two verses made it clear how vain such hopes were. It is here that we see that there are usually two sides to unhallowed relationships of this nature. Bathsheba, we are told, mourned for her husband; yes, but had she not appealed to David in the beginning (5) as if to place on him the responsibility of extricating her from her predicament? And if so, was she not involved in David's desperate actions? Furthermore, would not even a moderate sense of shame have kept her from going again to David after Uriah's death? Bathsheba, it seems clear, was far from worthy of the noble Uriah. As for David, he simply shrugs the matter off, as something highly unpleasant, to be forgotten as quickly as possible, and dismissed from the mind. After all, he had got his desire, and acquired yet another wife for his harem. He was content, with perhaps a token feeling of sorrow that it had involved so much unpleasantness, to close the matter, and go on as if nothing had happened. After all, most people have a skeleton in the cupboard, and he was the king of Israel, and in slightly different circumstances from other men. A certain laxity is allowed those in high places. So he seems to have thought. All the more ominous, therefore, are the words with which the chapter closes: 'The thing that David had done displeased the Lord'. The matter was by no means closed as far as He was concerned, and the silence of the long months that followed simply served to add to the drama of the confrontation that was to take place when the time of the divine reckoning came. We do not know whether David's conscience troubled him or not during this time - is it conceivable however that he should have been able to dismiss his sin entirely from his thoughts? But at all events he seems to have been able to live with it without too much discomfort, but this was only until God chose to deal with him. It was very different when Nathan the prophet came on the scene, as we shall see in the next reading.

36) 12:1-7

There was a lapse of possibly almost a year between David's sin and the challenge of the prophet Nathan, a year in which David was out of fellowship with the Lord, with his heart hardened and darkened by his mental rationalisations, so that he did not recognise himself in the parable of the ewe-lamb told him by Nathan. This is one of the perils of sin - under its influence one becomes insensitive and, worse still, unaware of the distance one has drifted from God. This was bad enough, but there is something even more serious, namely, the length of time David was out of touch with the Lord. It is true, as John says, that if we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, and that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, but what no man can guarantee is that, having sinned, he will want to confess his sins. It often takes a long time to 'get back'. God forgives on confession and repentance, but who can guarantee repentance? To sin is to become the servant of sin. That is to say, we put ourselves in its power, and are unable to set ourselves free. God has exalted Christ as a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance to His people, but what if He should withhold it? The hardening power of sin sets in very quickly, and we may be left in its clutches for longer than we had realised was possible. We should learn from this never to presume upon the grace of God. In Bunyan's Holy War, the inhabitants of Mansoul learned this to their cost when by carelessness they grieved away Emmanuel from their midst and found it was long e'er He could be wooed back. A year out of fellowship with the Lord is a long, long time.

37) 12:1-7

Nathan's simple parable was utterly devastating in its effect upon David, and the king is made to pronounce judgment upon himself in a way that left him defenceless and helpless before the anger of God. It is very significant that the thrust of Nathan's words is not primarily at David's lust, but at his meanness and selfishness towards Uriah. This is very important, for it tells us that the sin of impurity - and indeed any other sin as well - can be traced back to its evil root in an uncrucified self. This is why the real heart of the human problem is never in particular sins, whether gross or respectable, but in the nature from which they spring; and only a Gospel which can touch a man here is capable of dealing with his needs. It was not sufficient that David should be dealt with only on the level of his undisciplined desires. Doubtless his conscious thoughts had said, 'But I love Bathsheba', but what his heart said, 'I love me, and want her.' (All the difference between heaven and hell lies between these two statements). Consequently, Nathan challenged him at depth, exposing the huge tracts of his heart where self reigned supreme, thrusting home the bruising word of the Lord until David saw the enormity of the thing he had done and was broken down in horror, shame and contrition. It is said of the Prodigal in Luke 15 that 'he came to himself' - this is what happened to David that day as Nathan dealt faithfully with him. He saw himself as he really was in the sight of God. That for him was the beginning of the road back, and it is expressed deeply and most movingly in Psalm 51.

38) 12:7-12

The relentless indictment continues, and the unreasonableness of David's sin is underlined, and shown to be sin against the goodness of God to him. This is always what makes sin unreasonable, and therefore so serious. Who among all the saints of the old economy had been so blessed as David had been? And yet, he flew in the face of such goodness and acted thus. To whom much is given, said Jesus, much will be required. And thus, the punishment was decreed, and David was told that evil would rise up in his own house as a result of his sin - evil that was to dog his footsteps for the rest of his days, and bring his grey hairs down with sorrow to the grave. The sword never departed from his house, and the children of his unhallowed loves brought shame and dishonour upon his name. All this, Nathan points out, because he had despised the commandment of the Lord, and done evil in his sight. There are some major lessons to learn from all this, one of the most important of which we must leave for now. What we should however first consider is the severity of the judgment passed, for it teaches us that sin is deadly dangerous, especially in God's favoured ones. Nor must we allow for a moment the thought that it was almost too severe, for this would simply mean that we had not understood the seriousness of sin, and what a horrifying, blasphemous enormity it is in the sight of God, and how perilous and far-reaching it is in its consequences and entail. 'Sin, when it is finished...'. Ah, in one sense, but for the grace of God, it never finishes until it finds its home in hell.

39) 12:13, 14

David is brought to an end of himself, and in deepest contrition confesses his sin, and such is the tender mercy of God that he finds immediate forgiveness (13). But - and here is the most important lesson of all - forgiveness does not mean the removal of the consequences of sin, nor does it cancel retribution. David was to pay very dearly for his sin. This does not mean that the consequences of sin, when it is once committed, are outwith God's control, and that He is powerless to prevent or cancel them. This cannot be true; He can both forgive and annul every consequence of sin also. But sometimes He does not choose to do so, and does not do so, when such consequences fulfil His gracious disciplinary purposes in our lives. It was necessary for David's spiritual well-being, and indeed for his further usefulness and usability in God's service, that the consequences of his wilfulness should linger with him. We shall see, later in the story, the effect they had for good on his character. The long-term consequence of his sin was that trouble and distress should mark his way for the rest of his days, but its first, and most immediate consequence was that the child born to Bathsheba was to die. This was a punishment, as Nathan said, because of the great occasion given to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme. Ah, what concern this ought to give us for the honour and glory of God's great Name, and what a restraint it should put on our careless attitude to sin. For sin drags that Name through the mud and mire of the world, and this, to all except the utterly reprobate, should be an intolerable thought.

40) 12:15-19

Psalm 51 is a necessary accompaniment to this chapter, for in it David expresses his heart-rending penitence in words that have echoes in countless human hearts ever since. He sinned a great sin but he repented with a great and moving repentance. And yet, to read these words here is to be conscious of a certain perplexity, for David seems intent on trying to alter the divine pronouncement about the child that had been born. Even when every allowance is made along the line of natural affection and the affection David had developed for the child is taken into consideration, there does seem a certain presumption on his part, as if he were trying to force his own will upon God, and showing even then a determination to have his own way. Ah, how unwilling we are, even in the context of deep, heart-sore repentance, to accept without demur the pronouncements of God, and how partial, even at its deepest, is the repentance we show under the convicting of the Spirit of God. It behoved David, after such an exposure as he had experienced, to walk softly and very submissively, instead of pleading in helpless anguish for something that God had already declared was not to be. We cannot think that God is impressed with that kind of earnestness in prayer, and it was of His mercy that the divine anger did not break afresh upon him for his ill-considered presumptuousness. We need to make very sure that the sacrifices of repentance we bring to God come from spirits and hearts that are truly broken and contrite.

41) 12:20-23

We would like to include the following comment on these verses from the Notes of the Rev William Still: 'When someone is in a state of suspense, we sometimes say, 'No news is good news!' meaning that if news comes it will be bad. We question the truth of this. Certainly suspense is worse for the mind than even the worst news. With news may come rest, even if it is the rest of prostration, and who would deny that after a state of suspense bad news has come almost as a sense of relief, with soothing tears and all the natural accompaniments of grief that relieve the tension of the mind. One is often surprised at the calmness and almost exaltation of watchers and tenders of the sick when their loved one has passed away, and often it is misunderstood for callousness. One such when remonstrated for her poise and composure said 'I could never suffer as much in losing her as I have suffered in fighting for her; she is at rest now, and so am I'. The words of 23 contain a blessing for the Christian mourner. Let us savour their consolation fully'. And from the Notes of the Rev George M. Philip, the following: 'We must recognise the dignity of faith in 22, 23. David was now at rest in the presence of death that touched the heart of his family, and he was able to worship (20). In spite of all the complications of his personality, and aberrations from spiritual integrity, David was a man who valued the will of God more than anything else in life. This is why he survived all the battles and emerged a holier and more integrated man'.

42) 12:24-31

Now we come to a more graceful part of the story, which bears testimony to God's power to turn evil to good. David names the new son of Bathsheba, Solomon, which means 'Peace', and doubtless the significance of this is that it marks David's now restored sense of fellowship with God, after the terrible year during which he was out of touch with Him. But not only does David name the child significantly, God does so also, calling him, through the prophet Nathan, Jedidiah, which means 'Beloved of the Lord'; and this signifies, not only the Lord's reconciliation to His servant, but also that His sovereign purposes with David and his seed had not been abrogated because of his great sin. As with Jonah so long after, the word of the Lord came to David, as it were, a second time. Nothing could underline more wonderfully than this the royal grace of God with sinful men. David's sin is recorded for our learning, that none might presume; his restoration is also recorded, so that none need despair!

In 26 we have the account of the siege of Rabbah (see 1 Chronicles 20:1-3, where it is made clear that the Bathsheba tragedy must have taken place during the course of that particular campaign). The reading here seems to indicate that David put the Ammonites to hard labour, but the Chronicles version would suggest that they were tortured and slain. Here again we come up against the vexed question of the barbarities of the Old Testament times, and once more we must remember that it was the Lord's battles David was waging, and that he was His instrument of judgment upon nations who by their own sins and degradation had filled up their cup of wrath to the uttermost. We do not try either to excuse or justify the barbarities; Israel did not get off with any of her deviations from the divine will, as we learn in her later history, any more than the godless nations did for their excesses. We may safely assume that the judge of all the earth does right, always.

43) 13:1, 2

There is no more terrible chapter in all Scripture than this, in which dark, foul deeds issue from dark and foul hearts. One almost hesitates to make comment on such a dastardly deed, but it is recorded for us, with the following chapters also, to give us accounts of the misfortunes that befell the house of David as a result of his great sin. This is, in fact, the beginning of a long catalogue of misfortune and sorrow in his family. One recalls the solemn word in Psalm 99:8, 'Thou wast a God that forgavest them, though Thou tookest vengeance of their inventions'. Never was a word more truly fulfilled than this, in David's experience. Amnon was David's firstborn (2 Samuel 3:2), born of Ahinoam the Jezreelitess in Hebron (see Note and comment on that passage). Absalom and Tamar were children of Maacah, daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur, whom David married when he fled from Saul and took refuge among the Philistines (1 Samuel 27), thereby taking himself out of the will and protection of God. It is only now, years later, that the bitter fruit of his lapse ripens and is reaped, brought to harvest as an immediate consequence of his most recent fall from grace. The mills of God grind slowly, as the saying has it, but they grind surely nevertheless, and now David's past mistakes were beginning to catch up with him. All this tragedy, recorded in the ensuing verses, arose out of the conditions obtaining in David's own household - his polygamy. Alexander Whyte, of Free St George's, once said, 'Polygamy is Greek for dunghill', and it proved so with a vengeance in David's case. Everything comes home to roost. His own sin with Bathsheba was the flash point - as indeed his own sin was also the pattern - for the sins of his family. He was immoral and murderous, and immorality and murder came to his own hearth. Whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

44) 13:3-14

The dark story speaks for itself, and the foul, nameless deed was committed in obedience to the imperious demands of a lust that would not be denied. There is little need of comment, but there are two things to be noted. The first is that solicitation from the outside, in the form of Jonadab's encouragement and enticement (4), combined with the raging fire inside Amnon's breast to bring about its dark fulfilment. In this we discern the work of the enemy of souls, for his appeal is ever to the unhallowed desires which he has planted as seeds in our hearts, and he sees to it that the outside incitement is always provided. In such circumstances it is as futile to expect temptation to subside as it would be to expect a rag soaked in petrol not to ignite when brought in contact with an open flame. The second point to note is the marked similarity between this intrigue and that entered upon by David in the Bathsheba affair. 'Like father, like son' is a truism, which has very real point here, and it bears witness to what one may call the entail of sin in the life of a family. David lusted after a forbidden thing, and his son followed in his footsteps, but the degree of degeneracy is greater in the latter act, as one would expect, for when sin gets into its stride it gets worse and worse, and moral standards deteriorate rapidly. We wonder what David's thoughts must have been when he learned of his son's crime and saw the pattern of his own life repeating itself, in even more lurid and deadly fashion, in Amnon's?

45) 13:15-18

The terrible story continues to unfold with a relentlessness that could have been predicted, knowing the background of the various participants in it. Predictable also was Amnon's reaction (15) when his lust was sated. His passion for Tamar was illicit, and it is of the essence of a wrong desire that it can never be satisfied: it is insatiable and therefore always brings frustration and further craving. God made true desires to be satisfied, but those that are wrong can never be, and this is why the only answer to them is their crucifixion. Thus there is no real alternative to the Christian prescription for the lusts of the flesh, only increasing and ever more maddening and self-tormenting frustration. The callousness of Amnon is appalling; but the callousness of men, even Christian men, though never allowing themselves to go anywhere near Amnon's pitch of wickedness, can often be very shocking when, having kindled the affection and love of a girl's heart and enjoyed to the full the pleasure this has brought them, they casually and heartlessly drop them, deciding, at this late stage, that it was not a suitable match after all, and 'not in the will of the Lord for them'. The question of God's will apparently does not arise when the desire for the flirtation is clamant, but only when the relationship begins to pall. Then, the will of God is made an excuse for extracting themselves from a situation that has become an embarrassment to them. Do they really think that God is 'taken in' by this irreverent solicitude for His will?

46) 13:19-22

The manner in which Absalom jumped to the right conclusion seems to indicate that Amnon's guilty passion for Tamar was no secret, but generally known. And if this be so, how are we to account for David's attitude? Did he not also know how Amnon felt? And if he did, why did he ever send Tamar to Amnon's house? The Septuagint (Greek) version of the text adds the following significant words at the end of 21, 'But he vexed not the spirit of Amnon his son, because he was his firstborn'. It may be that his fondness for his son blinded him to the truth about him so that he could see no wrong in him; and if this be so, then David himself is implicated in the foul deed, for he should have seen something that was plain to everybody else. Meanwhile Absalom is gripped by a deadly hatred against Amnon (22), which he nursed in silence, biding his time until opportunity should present itself for wreaking full and condign revenge upon him for the violation of his beloved sister. There is something terrible in the atmosphere of 22 which makes one almost shrink to read it. There are two kinds of anger; the one burns fiercely and must act impetuously at the moment of its awakening, but the other smoulders with a steady deadliness that can keep it in control, without any abatement in it, for years if need be, until the best opportunity for exacting the fullest revenge presents itself. This was Absalom's anger, and when this is so it becomes a man's life, and all else is eclipsed. So completely can the hearts of men be consumed and destroyed!

47) 13:23-36

We do not know how long Amnon nursed his great passion for Tamar, long enough at any rate to allow it to come to fruition. Absalom nursed his against Amnon for two full years, feeding day by day with fuel such as to keep it smouldering, fanning it ever and again into fierceness by the knowledge that his father declined to take any disciplinary action against Amnon for his terrible deed, until he determined to expedite matters and take the punishment of Amnon into his own hands. Again we see the subtle scheming and intrigue so characteristic of this family. David appeared to be suspicious of Absalom's intentions (26) towards Amnon, but apparently concluded that after two years the former could not possibly be still cherishing hatred; which merely proves how lacking in perception he had become so far as his family was concerned. So he weakly yielded to pressure from Absalom, as earlier he had just as weakly yielded to pressure from Amnon (6, 7). It is starkly impressive to realise that it was parental weakness and failure on David's part that played the all-important role in both the tragedies that darkened his house at this time. Ah, David, you did more harm than you could ever have realised when you lazed indolently on the rooftop of the palace instead of being on the battlefield leading your men! What a harvest he reaped! It is a measure of his spiritual unsettledness at this time that he was prepared to believe the worst when the news came of Absalom's revenge, and that all his sons had been slain, not Amnon only. One gets the impression of a man unnerved spiritually by the avalanche of disaster that had come bearing down upon him. He was learning in a terrible, heartbroken way that the way of the transgressor is hard.

48) 13:37-39

After taking his longcherished revenge on Amnon, Absalom fled the country, in fear of his father's wrath and punishment. It is interesting to see where he went - Geshur, where Maacah his mother had come from, back to the wild Bedouin tribe whose unruly influence could so clearly be seen in his undisciplined and wild life. It may be that he had had more contact with his maternal forebears than is recorded in the Scriptures, and that this link had shaped his destiny more than any spiritual influence in his father's house had been allowed to. If this be so, it explains how he was able to grow up in the household of a man of God and be so little touched by his spirit. If our secret lives are feeding on lawless and unhallowed influences, it is scarcely surprising that spiritual values will be undermined and set at nought. As long as ever there are bonds that bind us to the old ways and the old places, real spiritual life will be at a discount. It is not by accident that the New Testament refers to the beginning of spiritual life in terms so radical that it has to speak of death taking place before life can be. David's attitude to Absalom is very perplexing; he does not seem to be able to make up his mind what to think of him. On the one hand, he seems to long for his return, on the other he refrains from recalling him. We shall see more of this in the next chapter; we simply note in the meantime that his heart is divided and confused, as well it might. For Absalom had executed the judgment on Amnon that he himself neglected to do; viewed from this standpoint, justice had at last been done. But now what was his attitude to Absalom to be, since acceptance of his deed as an act of justice and vengeance would be to condone a hideous family crime? Two wrongs never make a right. And was David even thus early beginning to suspect Absalom of having designs on the throne, now that Amnon, the firstborn, was out of the way? The life of sin becomes incredibly complex and complicated.

49) 14:11-20

In the previous Note we said that David seemed to long for Absalom's return; and this is the sense given in the AV. But it is only fair to say that a very different construction can legitimately be placed on 13:39a and 14:1, for the words can be taken to mean that David was in fact hostile to Absalom. The word translated 'towards' in 1 here is, the scholars tell us, used more frequently to mean 'against', and if this be the real meaning, it would explain, in a different and perhaps more satisfactory way than in yesterday's Note, why David did not recall Absalom, when in fact it was within his power unquestionably to do so. This would also explain why Joab had to resort to a stratagem to procure the young man's homecoming. In any case, the story presents a number of real problems, and we must consider these carefully. First of all, we should see that from the judicial point of view, Absalom's banishment was right and proper. He had committed murder, and punishment of some kind there must surely be. And the conflict that arose for David, on any interpretation of the above verses, would be between judicial and paternal feelings. And at the instigation of the woman with her parable, David sacrificed the judicial in favour of the paternal. It is in fact this that causes the difficulties in the story. When Nathan spoke to David by parable on that earlier occasion, concerning Bathsheba, his design was to arouse David's conscience as against his feelings. But here, the woman's parable was designed to arouse his feelings as against his conscience, and this is a very disquieting procedure.

50) 14:11-20

The attitude expressed by the woman in her parable seems to be: punishment cannot bring back Amnon to you. Why continue it, then? There is a whole philosophy contained in this, and one that can only give rise to the greatest misgiving. For it gives expression to the kind of emotional thinking that bids fair to cloud and confuse fundamental moral issues in our own time, and elicits more sympathy for the criminal than for the hapless victim. It suggests and implies that the upholding of law and order is harsh and unfeeling, and that loving action stands in contrast and antithesis to doing right. Whatever the merits or demerits of recalling Absalom from banishment may have been, it certainly cannot be argued for in this manner. The fact is, there is no antithesis between love and righteousness, either on the human level or in God's dealings with men, and it is only confused thinking that can make it seem so. What is good for men (in this we include all kinds of loving action and attitude) cannot but also be right for them. The real antithesis occurs not between love and righteousness, but between love and mere sentimentality - a very different matter. The woman's wife, however, seems to have succeeded in diverting David's mind from the question of right and justice sufficiently for him to have been brought to the point of acceding to Joab's desire for Absalom's return, although the fact that Absalom was not allowed to see the king's face seems to indicate that a sense of justice still weighed strongly with David in the matter. This half-measure, however, as we shall see later, had also unfortunate consequences. Nothing David does seems to work out aright in this situation.

51) 14:1-20

The woman's statement in 14 has often been taken as a fruitful illustration of the grace of God at work in the Gospel. And, rightly understood, this is a legitimate procedure. We must be careful, however, in the way we apply the illustration. It is true that, in the very deepest and most wonderful way, God does devise means whereby His banished ones be not exiled from Him. But it is certainly not by waiving the rights and claims of justice that He does so, for this would be fundamentally immoral. Indeed, it is precisely because He upholds the law that He is able at all to show grace and forgiveness to men and restore them to fellowship with Himself. The divine dilemma, if we may so call it, was to find a way to be both just and at the same time to be the justifier of the ungodly. And in the death of Christ, in which God Himself was at work in reconciling the world to Himself, the uttermost claims of law and justice were met and upheld; the law was magnified and made honourable, and vindicated, with its full penalty paid. And on this basis, God could honourably and in justice forgive the sins of men. It is of the highest importance to see that in the work of atonement and reconciliation there is no clash between love and justice. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins; and it is because this is so that forgiveness is the expression of His love. He lovingly forgives, not in spite of, but because of the fact that He is holy and righteous. The grace of God is founded on His immutable, eternal laws.

52) 14:21-24

David's forgiveness of Absalom was very partial and half-hearted, for although the latter was allowed back to Jerusalem, he was not allowed to see the king's face. It may be that David acceded to Joab's and the Tekoan woman's pleas for Absalom's return simply for appearances' sake, and because there was a public feeling in the country that he should be brought back. If this be so, it demonstrates the emptiness of public gestures when there is no real spirit in them. It also demonstrates the folly, from the spiritual point of view, of a grudging spirit in the matter of forgiveness. Grudging forgiveness is in fact no forgiveness at all, and is likely to engender bitterness of the sort that certainly grew in Absalom's heart (see 28ff). To forgive is to forget (Hebrews 10:17), and to treat the sinner as if his sin had not been. But David was still cherishing something in his heart, which was foolish and wrong.

But such an interpretation of the situation assumes a simple resentment on David's part against Absalom, while in fact matters were much more complex. We have already seen that there are two ways in which to take David's reaction to his son (see earlier Notes). What we have said about incomplete forgiveness and the unfortunate results it brings in its train stands as a lesson for us, whatever be the true understanding of David's situation here, but we must also take into consideration the problem of Absalom being re-admitted to the royal favour without the slightest sign of repentance on his part. This further complicates the situation, and raises the question whether in fact it was wise of David to have yielded to Joab's pressure for Absalom's return without some sign of a change of heart in his son. Perhaps this was why David kept him from seeing his face for so long, in the hope that penitence might develop. If so, he was sadly disappointed, as our next reading will amply show. The very complexity of all this is some measure of the spiritual confusion surrounding David at this point in his experience. We think that the David of earlier days would have been far more clearheaded and sure in his dealings.

53) 14:25-33

The people were obviously 'taken in' by Absalom's handsome looks; he was undoubtedly a popular favourite. It is rather disquieting to see how they were prepared to ignore his outrageous history and make an idol of him in spite of all he had done. The kind of heroes a nation worships are a fairly reasonable index of its moral and spiritual state, and the people's acceptance of Absalom here would seem to argue that they had deteriorated in moral stature in a way that could only spell foreboding in the future. This is one straw in the wind indicating the trouble that was soon to come in the kingdom of Israel. Absalom's behaviour towards Joab can only be described as childish but childishness can be an extremely serious matter when its exhibitor is the son of a king and has power to give expression to it with a certain measure of impunity, as we see in 30. We have already noted David's weakness and laxity so far as his family were concerned, and one cannot but feel that Absalom's attitude here is one that would need to have been firmly dealt with and broken in childhood and boyhood. Joab, it would seem, had had his fill of the petulant young man, and was little disposed to have anything more to do with him, but true to character, Absalom had his way, and further intercession was made with the king, and Absalom was finally admitted to his presence. But 35 is a very quiet verse, and we may be pardoned for reading between the lines and thinking that, notwithstanding the kiss of peace, there was reservation on both sides. It is never enough to go through the actions of reconciliation, for true reconciliation is of the heart, and when the heart is not in it, it might as well not be. What follows in the next chapter makes this painfully clear.

54) 15:1-16

The events recorded in this chapter mark the greatest crisis in David's reign, and the story which it tells of the beginning of Absalom's rebellion is charged with high drama. There is much to learn from it. The Scriptures make it clear that the source of this disaster lay in David's great sin with Bathsheba. Nathan had prophesied that trouble would arise in his own house because of what he had done, and trouble did arise. It is solemnly true that sin sets in motion forces which we no longer are able to control, opening the sluice-gates of the dark world, so to speak, and there is no knowing what will not break forth before there is an end of it. But while this is undoubtedly the ultimate cause behind the revolt, there are more immediate factors which led to it. The circumstances mentioned earlier concerning the murder of Amnon, David's failure to punish Absalom because of his affection for him, although it was his duty to do so as the judge of Israel appointed by God for this purpose, his half-forgiveness of Absalom, recalling him to Jerusalem without giving him a full pardon, and then to admit him to favour without the slightest sign of repentance on his part - all these circumstances aided and abetted David's son in the foul conspiracy he hatched against his father. But none of this can be said to excuse Absalom's sinful arrogance and ambition. There is no excuse for arrogance and ambition, though there may be many factors contributing to them, for they are primal sins, and we may discern the subtle and tortuous influence and machinations of the evil one in the way in which Absalom went about stealing the hearts of the people. The rebellion did not start openly or even perhaps deliberately, but gradually and secretly, with circumstances combining to bring to light half-formed desires, secretly entertained. In such a situation there comes a point of conscious consent in the mind - perhaps even unconscious consent, for a man can cross the line almost without knowing he has done so. Then we see the full force of the thing, and its grip on the mind becomes apparent. Then it is too late. This is how it was with Absalom.

55) 15:7-12

We must suppose that the process of undermining the people went on for some considerable time before the strategic moment came ('forty' in 7 ought, the scholars tell us, to read 'four'). This also means that the process of deception was protracted, and one can only marvel at the cold-blooded ruthlessness of Absalom as he laid his plans under his father's very nose, while pretending loyalty and allegiance to him. What makes it particularly horrible is the death of natural affection within him that made it possible. But then, when a man gives himself over to an unholy passion like ambition, it claims all of him, and common humanity itself, let alone natural and filial affection, is lost. Absalom was essentially a schemer, and this type of person is the most unscrupulous of all, trampling upon anyone who stands in his way, in order to gain his objective. Everything is subordinated to the tremendous, voracious appetite within him for self-advancement. Such men are terribly dangerous, for finally, all distinctions between good and evil vanish from their minds, and they cross the deadline beyond which there is no possibility of recovery. To such a tragic and fatal condition Absalom had now come, and when the opportune moment came he brought his carefully planned revolt to fruition, brazenly and blasphemously using religion as a pretext to initiate it (7). The two hundred men mentioned in 11 seem to have been men of prominence and influence, taken by Absalom either to act as a blind so as to conceal his nefarious design, or to give prestige to his movement in the eyes of the people, or in the hope that, once they saw how the wind was blowing, they would give him their allegiance. (They must have been at least friendly with Absalom, to have been invited at all.) Their ignorance of what was afoot was a testimony to the secrecy with which Absalom had succeeded in surrounding the plot. Doubtless, however, they were carefully chosen as potential supporters who might be likely to throw in their lot with one who appeared to be making a successful coup. Absalom was no fool.

56) 15:13-18

David's swift reaction to the news of Absalom's defection makes one wonder whether he had suspected that something was afoot, in spite of the secrecy surrounding the plot. Perhaps he did, but held his hand, doing nothing about it, in the hope that Absalom might have second thoughts. Alas, such a hope was doomed to disappointment. It is true that love is always eager to believe the best, but it is also true that love is not blind, as the modern saying would have us believe, but perceptive, and it was surely weakness on David's part that he forbore to take action to quash the beginnings of rebellion, if he was aware of their presence. There is something for us to learn here. Sometimes we fail to take such needed action because of the unpleasantness it would cause, or the disturbance it would bring into our situation, and this is often a great temptation. We will go to any lengths to safeguard the even tenor of our way. This, however, is a form of cowardice, and it seldom works; indeed, it simply means that even great unpleasantness and disturbance will have to be faced at a later stage, when we are probably less capable of dealing with it. It was so with David. There is of course an opposite danger in rash and hasty, ill-considered action, and wise discernment is essential if pitfalls are to be avoided. One must learn to refuse to allow self-regarding attitudes of 'peace at any price' - and self-indulgent unwillingness to put ourselves about, to dull and overcome our better judgment and betray us into unfaithfulness to what we know to be right. If David had acted as swiftly at an earlier stage as he did at this point, the whole rebellion, with all the distress it caused, would have been stifled before it could have begun.

57) 15:19-23

Even in the midst of deepest distress David was not left comfortless. The loyalty shown by Ittai must have touched him very deeply indeed and reassured him that God had not utterly forsaken him. We can think of numerous expressions of assurance in trouble in the Psalms, which this kind of incident may have inspired. It is the proof that God has sent the trial not merely as a judgment but as a means of purifying and sanctifying His servant. When we think of how often David mourns in the psalms about men who turn against him and revile him when they see he is in trouble and under the chastisement of God, it is all the more impressive to realise that there was a man who was prepared to stand by him in the extremity of misfortune. The Rev William Still comments finely here: 'Why then, was he amongst the foremost to stand by the hapless monarch? Because Ittai being a man of honour, saw in David, under the surface of the things we have been mentioning, a man worth being loyal to. Loyalty then, being a thing of the spirit, is more objective than subjective; its incentive is not in the loyal one, but in the one to whom loyalty is given. Thus, we should not say, 'Ought I to be loyal to him?' But, 'Is it good for me to be loyal to someone?' because, if we answer Yes, we may find ourselves being loyal to someone unworthy, and our loyalty is lost upon worthlessness. We should say, 'Is he worth being loyal to?' If so, it is worth for us to be loyal to him. The world is full of people who are wasting loyalty upon worthlessness. Ittai knew a man when he saw one. Do you? There is but One.'

58) 15:24-29

These verses contain one of the most striking lessons of the whole story, namely, David's humble submission to, and acceptance of, this great trial as being from God, 'Let Him do to me as seemeth good unto Him' (26). To have recognised the Lord's hand in it is some evidence of his spiritual stature, for lesser men either could not, or would not have discerned the Lord's hand in it at all. Few things are more familiar in men's experience of misfortune than the bewildered cry, 'Why should this have happened to me?' More often than not it is a rhetorical question, not expecting an answer, although an answer could certainly be given in many cases, in terms of David's thought here. But it takes courage to face up to the realisation that God is chastising us, for this in turn will mean confession of sin, and we are so prone by nature to excuse ourselves. And so the blinds are drawn on our minds, and we dull ourselves into incomprehension and ask plaintive questions. There is something else, however, that also lights up David's stature, namely, his attitude to the ark of the covenant. His concern that the ark should be carried back into the city may have been evidence of his faith that all would yet be well, and that God would restore the kingdom to him, and if so, here is an example of faith burning unwaveringly in the midst of darkness, against hope believing in hope. But it may on the other hand be that David was not thinking of his own restoration at all, but rather of the good and well-being of the city and the people. The ark was the symbol of the Lord's presence and blessing, and even if he himself were being rejected by God for his sins, it was unthinkable that the city and the people should also be. They would need the ark, and therefore it must go back. Even in this sorrow, David's mind and heart were set on something higher and greater than his own fortunes. Ah, it is not possible that a man with such a spirit should be cast away. In surrendering the ark to the city, he surely brought the divine presence to himself.

59) 15:30-37

The moving description of David on the Mount of Olives turns our thoughts irresistibly to our Lord and His Gethsemane agony in the midst of the revolt of mankind against the will and rule of God. In this light, the whole story affords us an illustration of the Gospel and of the tragic circumstances of man's sin which made it necessary. The appearance of Hushai (31) is taken by some commentators to be the beginning of God's answer to David's prayer in 32, where he prays for Ahithophel's counsel to be turned into foolishness, and it may be that this lies behind David's rather strange pronouncement to him in 33. Doubtless his keen mind saw very clearly what an asset Hushai would be in the court of Absalom, and he would be quick to press the possible advantage when it presented itself. This 'allocation' of Hushai provides an interesting study in the strategy of service. A man in the wrong place can only be a burden to the work; and surely the place for him is that which he is best fitted by nature, temperament and qualifications to occupy. We cannot be more useful to God than He wills to make us, and we ought therefore to accept our limitations and do with all our might what we are fitted to do, leaving to others what we are not. It was to Hushai's credit that he did what many of us are often very unwilling to do.

60) 16:1-4

On the face of it, Mephibosheth appears here as basely ungrateful and treacherous in view of David's kindness to him as Jonathan's son, but when we read 19:24-30 we discover that it was Ziba, not he, who was the villain. Ziba, like some others in the story of 2 Samuel, had his eye on the main chance, and was prepared to slander and vilify his master to gain his own ends. Perhaps he gambled on the chance that if David got back his kingdom he would take summary vengeance on all who had joined the revolt against him, putting them all, including Mephibosheth, to the sword, in which case his, Ziba's lie about his master would never be discovered. Perhaps, however, he did not think thus far forward, and was concerned only for the immediate prospect of gaining his master's possessions from David as reward for his (specious) loyalty. At all events, he played on David's obvious need of sympathy and loyalty, and the king was taken in by him, and straightway disinherited Mephibosheth. All of which goes to prove how easy it is, when under stress, to misjudge one's friends and take offence where not only none is meant, but also when they are entirely innocent of such faithlessness as Ziba imputed here. We should note how much unnecessary distress was caused by Ziba's calculated opportunism, not only to David who had enough to burden him at this point without having this added, but also to Mephibosheth, who suffered permanently because of what happened, for as we see in 19:29, 30, he did not have full justice done him when the kingdom was restored to David. It is sadly true that the damage done by misrepresentation, whether wilful or accidental, is sometimes irreparable. How careful we should be to avoid both Ziba's dastardly deceit and David's too swift assumption that what he said was true.

61) 16:5-14

It would be difficult to find a more graceless creature than Shimei. Here is a soul corroded with bitterness and suppressed resentment, awaiting his opportunity to do despite to David. He was of the household of Saul, and this evil must have been festering and smouldering in his heart for years. The vicious hatred of the man serves however to set in all the greater relief the contrast of David's attitude to his cursing. He is utterly submissive to the providence of God that has overtaken him, and accepts all involved in it as from Him.

There are two points to notice. Firstly, when David said, 'It may be that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing', he was recognising not only that he was suffering as the Lord's anointed, and suffering in a revolt against the purposes of God on the part of Absalom, but also that in this respect such sufferings can prove fruitful. In this sense, then, here is faith reaching out in the darkness to the goodness of God behind the discipline (and even as he was speaking, Hushai's plan was beginning to work and the beginning of the end of the revolt was taking shape). But in the second place, David recognised in the cursing, and indeed in the whole tragic episode, the chastening hand of God, and refused to allow his men to remove it. This is very striking, and it is some indication of his spiritual discernment and perception that he could read the signs in his own life so clearly. Of course there were other explanations of Absalom's revolt, all compelling and convincing and entirely rational. When the hand of God comes upon men there are always 'other' explanations of what happens, but David had perceived the spiritual cause of the revolt in his own past sins and shame. This is the point here. And he was prepared to take his punishment like a man, and humble himself under the mighty hand of God. Is there not something for us to learn here?

62) 16:15-23

The juxtaposition of these verses with what immediately precedes them casts a gleam of light upon the dark chastening under which David was conscious of standing, for they reveal that even in His severity God is graciously planning and working in love for us. Hushai, the Archite, David's friend, is accepted into Absalom's court as an adviser, an ill-fated decision on Absalom's part, as the unfolding of the story will presently show. But we can hardly doubt that the hand of God was in this, on David's behalf. We cannot feel happy, however, about the means Hushai employed to ingratiate himself into the court, nor could we possibly believe that God condoned his lying. God does not need the help of our doubtful and questionable methods for the fulfilment of His will; He does not believe, even if we sometimes seem to, that the end justifies the means! It was not because of, but in spite of, Hushai's lies that God was able to use him finally to bring down the rebel government.

A word about Ahithophel (see Psalm 1:1-9 and Psalm 55:12-14). Here is a man who stands out as a cold and calculating schemer, deadly and treacherous in his dealings with the royal house of Judah. He was David's counsellor first (15:12) and, if we take Psalm 55 as having reference to him, it would seem a greatly trusted and respected one. But he proved traitor, to David's inexpressible hurt and distress, for he was also a close friend and companion to the king. It is the closeness of the bond that makes unfaithfulness and treachery such terrible things, and one cannot fail, in reading Psalm 55, to sense the desolation that swept over David. Sins against love and trust are the greatest sins of all, and do deepest hurt and harm.

63) 17:1-14

These verses give a remarkable study in character. They record the differing counsels, which Absalom sought and received from Ahithophel and Hushai. A little thought must make it clear that Ahithophel's plan was simple and masterly, bearing the sure mark of a resourceful and effective strategist, and if carried out would almost certainly have spelt disaster and ruin for David. Why, then, did Absalom opt for Hushai's alternative plan? In the ultimate analysis we can only say that the hand of God was at work here, both to protect David from imminent danger, and to bring Absalom to book, as is explicitly stated in 14. But it is interesting to see the means which the Lord used. Hushai's appeal was to Absalom's vanity, and the picture of the hosts of Israel going forth marshalled for battle, with himself at their head, was very alluring to him. There are significant hints throughout the narrative to suggest that he was a vain young man - his love of spectacle, and his entourage of horses and men to run before him; the polling of his hair from year to year; his praise throughout Israel for his beauty - all straws in the wind which Hushai was not slow to clutch at in seeking to divert him from Ahithophel's counsel. Absalom learned, too late, that a house divided against itself cannot stand. He wanted success in his campaign; but he wanted self-aggrandisement too, and in the conflict that arose within him, self won. He would not resist the temptation to preen himself, and so lost all.

64) 17:15-23

The exciting events of these verses are redolent of the Resistance stories we used to hear of during the second world war, when desperate ventures by underground workers succeeded in liberating or saving from capture key figures in the fight against oppression. Again the moral problems involved in the deceptions that were practised arise in our minds, and we need ever to remember that God does not need our duplicity in effecting His Sovereign purposes for His people. David escapes, and it is soon clear, most of all to Ahithophel, that the tide is beginning to flow in his favour. Indeed, the traitorous counsellor realises that the one hope of a quick and decisive victory over the king has been thrown away, and that the rebels might as well surrender forthwith. We recall how it is said of Judas, after betraying Jesus, he went out and hanged himself, and it is striking, and perhaps significant, that Jesus quoted from Psalm 41:9, in referring to Judas words which we have already seen may have been written by David concerning Ahithophel. There would seem to be a parable in the latter's suicide, affording us a solemn reminder that sin, and especially a sin like ambition, is ultimately self-destructive. Ahithophel had destroyed himself before ever he hanged himself, by indulging his soul-destroying ambition for power, and allowing its seeds to multiply and spread within him until he was consumed. Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

65) 17:24-29

Mahanaim to which David now came, was some forty miles north-east of Jerusalem, and on the other side of Jordan. This was where the angels of God met with the patriarch Jacob (Genesis 32), and near the ford Jabbok, where he wrestled until the break of day and became a prince with God. Whether or not David had thoughts of this in his mind - if he had how he would long for a similar manifestation to help him and assure him in his distress - there is a sense in which history repeated itself in the shape of the three men, Shobi, Makir, and Barzillai, who came bringing provisions of all kinds for the beleaguered company. Their comment (29b) is truly Christ-like, and there can surely be no doubt that the hand of God was at work in them towards David. One recalls the words 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies' (Psalm 23:5). We do not know if the prayer in Psalm 86:17, 'Show me a token for good...' was on David's lips at this time or not, but it was certainly fulfilled for him in the coming of these men, and must have given him cause to hope that God had not forsaken him. This is one of the most wonderful experiences that can come to us in times of trouble; in the midst of the darkness something happens - often so slight and imperceptible that we almost miss its significance - that gleams and flashes with light and in a moment transforms a situation from despair to quiet hope. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord.

66) 18:1-8

The day of reckoning always comes! It was inevitable in this case that it should; and it came with great disaster upon Absalom. It is very striking to notice that David seems to have assumed that the battle would go to him. There is no doubt in his attitude when he gives orders to Joab to spare his son. One can only suppose that in this terrible time of testing and trial his faith had been purged and renewed, and an assurance wrought afresh in his soul that God still had purposes of grace for him. At all events, here is a very different David now, alert, purposeful and competent in his generalship once again. What is more, there is also a new spirit among the people that were with him, and the expressions of loyalty and love with which they seek to protect his royal person take us back to earlier days when all was well with him in his kingdom. And this is some evidence of the restoring grace that has been at work in him through the fiery crucible of the rebellion. This is reformation and renewal indeed! There are still weaknesses uncorrected, as we shall see presently, but it is a new and more hopeful David, much more like the David of earlier and more arduous years, that sends his army into battle against the rebels. We are not surprised that they carried all before them in an overwhelming victory. For not only was he right with him, but he was right, and this is an irresistible combination in any engagement!

67) 18:9-18

Joab was a ruthless and implacable foe for any man to have, and Absalom, having once incurred his bitter enmity (see 14:30ff) he could expect no quarter from him. But even this knowledge does not prevent us from being appalled by his cold-blooded violation of the king's expressed wish that Absalom might be spared. His continued flouting of the king's commands with apparent impunity is one of the more mysterious aspects of the story, 1 and 2 Samuel, and one can only assume that not even David himself was entirely uninfluenced by the extremely strong and compelling personality of the captain of the host. A frenzy seems however to have gripped Joab when confronted with the opportunity to put an end to Absalom's life, and the testimony of the soldier who disclosed the latter's whereabouts to him about the king's solemn charge (12) was powerless to restrain him. This is a parable of the utterly irrational power of sin which drives men insanely on to commit it utterly regardless of the known consequences to themselves of doing so. It is a painful and frightening fact of human experience that knowing what our sin will bring in its train is frequently not a strong enough deterrent to keep us from it when its imperious demands are clamant in the soul. Nothing but the voice of Christ can still that storm, and if He is grieved into silence when He sees that we are determined to have our own way, then we shall go down, and nothing can save us. Well might the Psalmist cry out in fear, 'Keep back Thy servant from presumptuous sins' (Psalm 19:13)!

68) 18:19-33

Joab's unwillingness to allow Ahimaaz to bear the tidings of the battle to David may be an indication that, his frenzy now past, he realised his own perilous position as the murderer of the king's son; for Ahimaaz was a trusted friend of David's and might well have accused Joab before him of his foul deed. In the event, when Ahimaaz is finally given permission to run, he cannot bring himself to break the news to the apprehensive father of Absalom. Did he hope to be able, as a friend, to break the news gently, and then find that he could not, through very distress for the king? David's grief is deeply moving and touching, and although it is clear that Absalom had to suffer the extreme penalty for his folly, it was surely inevitable that David should feel the sorrow and pain of his son's death more than the joy and elation of the victory that had been won. Few things could be more touching than the heart-rending agony expressed in 33. Absalom had been an evil son to David, and had caused him much sorrow and sadness and shame over the years; but he was still his own flesh and blood, and he mourned over him with a great mourning. Nor is it fanciful on our part to see in David's sorrow a reflection of the infinitely greater sorrow in the heart of God over his wayward and rebellious children (see Matthew 23:37; Luke 19:41, 42). The Scriptures in general, and the words of Christ himself in particular, warn us of the reality of hell, a terrible, awful, Christless eternity, full of woe and loss, but it is a hell to which men go in face of the tender entreaties and love of a Saviour Who wept over their souls and died for their sins, to save them from it. Not only does Christ say, 'Would God I had died for them'; He did die for us, that we might be forgiven. That is the measure of the yearning in the heart of God for the souls of men. He loved - like that!

69) 19:1-8

This is not an easy passage to interpret aright, and considerable care is needed in disentangling the different strands in it. On the one hand, there is David's grief for Absalom, which was undoubtedly a profoundly harrowing experience for him, and one which awakens a lively sympathy in the hearts of those who have known what it is to lose loved ones themselves. And in this respect, one is chilled and appalled by the callousness shown by Joab towards him, and the heartlessness with which he chided the mourning king. How cruel it must have seemed to David! On the other hand, the kingdom had just been saved from disaster, and David himself from death, and Absalom had been the evil genius that had so nearly succeeded in bringing this about. And the fact that all this seemed to be overlooked in the king's grief over his son would certainly bring an uneasiness upon the people, and it was but right that David should be made to be aware of it. It is here that the complications of the passage become plain. There is such a thing as immoderate grief, and we doubt not either that David had for long been too attached in the wrong way to his favourite son, or that his grief because of this contained undue and unhallowed elements in it. But Joab was not the man to be dealing with him about it. For his heart was broken, and there is always that in human heartbreak that entitles a man to the rarest human compassion and gentleness. Instead Joab trampled roughshod over his feelings, and all his 'rightness' in regard to what was immoderate in David's attitude served but to emphasise how heartless and inhuman he was. If we are able to learn from this that our 'faithfulness' in admonishing one another must ever be touched with love and understanding, we will have read the lesson of this passage aright.

70) 19:1-15

A distinction requires to be made here between the tribes of Israel and the tribe of Judah. The former comprised ten tribes, and it was they, it would seem, who had defected to Absalom, while Judah in the south (which is usually associated with the tribe of Benjamin), being David's own tribe, would doubtless have given support to the king. That their support however was not general seems clear from these verses, for even the men of Judah were slow in extending an invitation to David to return to the throne. Indeed, it was the men of Israel, the northern tribes, who were first to 'speak a word of bringing the king back' (10), and this grieved David not a little, causing him to send word to the elders of Judah, reproaching them for their dilatoriness in the matter. It has been suggested that the men of Judah were perhaps apprehensive lest the victorious David might take vengeance on those of them who had given support to Absalom; but this would surely have been a fear shared by the tribes of Israel also, and they were the first to ask the king back. The fact is, the rebellion had left the nation in a disarrayed, fragmented condition, and hearts everywhere were out of sorts, not excluding the loyal band of David's followers. It was here that David's greatest task lay, in a rehabilitation of the morale of the nation, and it was to this that he was now addressing himself. But there are burdens and distresses in such a work, and one of those that must have hurt David most keenly was the lack of concern among his loyal people to have him restored to the throne (11). It would be an interesting study to consider whether the men of Judah's reluctance might have been due to jealousy and pique that the men of Israel had forestalled them in inviting David to return and, like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son, were acting churlishly and resentfully. At all events the king's appeal in 11 and 12 seems to have melted all wrong feeling in them, and fellowship and concord was restored. This difference, however, between Judah and the rest of Israel indicates an attitude which was yet to develop into a grave and permanent rupture in later years, at the end of Solomon's reign. This is one of the first signs of that disastrous disintegration.

71) 19:16-23

Almost the whole of the remainder of the chapter is concerned with relating David's dealings with some of the individuals who figured in the story of the revolt. First of all, Shimei reappears on the scene. There are two things to note here; first of all his unqualified confession of his guilt in having cursed David in the day of his misfortune and his casting himself on the king's mercy. It is, of course, true to say that in the circumstances he could scarcely have done anything else, for now David was restored to power and had him at his mercy. But the fact is, we ourselves are often very prone to excuse ourselves in all manner of ways even when we really have nothing to say for ourselves and when the only right thing to do is to make such an unreserved confession. It is something for Shimei to have realised that his only hope was to own his fault and ask for mercy. It is those who ask that receive. Secondly, we should note the stature of David here, in his merciful dealings with the man. Shimei deserved to die, for he had acted in a shameful and atrocious manner towards his rightful king, adding the insult of cursing to the injury of his association with the revolt. But David granted him a royal pardon: In this he surely reflects his greater Son Who, when He had ascended up on high, led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men, chief among which was mercy. This is the glory of the Gospel that our victorious King delights in mercy.

72) 19:24-30

Mephibosheth is the next to figure in the story. The circumstances which prompted David's challenge here is recorded in 16:1-4 (see earlier Note). We sometimes think of this post-rebellion investigation as illustrative of the Day of Judgment, when Christ shall judge the secrets of men and all wrongs shall be righted. But in this case it is only a faint and imperfect shadow of that ultimate reality, for although David made strict enquiry into the plea of Mephibosheth and the duplicity of Ziba, he did not make a just and honourable restitution as far as Mephibosheth was concerned (29), restoring only half his possessions and leaving half still with the crooked Ziba. It may be that David was at a loss to know whether Mephibosheth was speaking truly or not, in which case he should have suspended judgment pending further enquiry; but both the words and the attitude in which the latter expresses himself ring with sincerity and show a nobility that David should have been more able to recognise than he apparently did. As it was, in the judgment he passed Mephibosheth was neither vindicated nor condemned, but left with a cloud of suspicion resting upon him for the rest of his days. David was less than just and fair in his treatment of his old friend Jonathan's son.

73) 19:31-40

Now it is Barzillai who comes up for recognition. His 'alms' came up for a memorial before David, just as the deeds done in the body by believers will come up for reckoning at the judgment seat of Christ. There is something almost Melchisedec-like about this old man in his attitude to the king. He had come to David's aid when he was in need, at a time when it was by no means certain that he would ever sit on the throne again, and it should therefore be clear that he did so with a purely disinterested spirit and with no other motive than that of a genuine desire to help and encourage David in his affliction. His courteous declining of David's offered favours (33) underlines this, but it does more. It shows Barzillai to be detached from earthly honours and self-regarding considerations in a way that is not always evident in those of advanced years. We cannot but be impressed with the calibre and stature of this aged saint, and we think that David must have been too, especially since kings are often surrounded with those whose secret purpose often in being there is to curry favour or jockey for position. Barzillai exemplifies our Lord's words, 'Do good and lend, hoping for nothing again, and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest'. It was not an earthly king's reward, but the reward of heaven itself that he was soon to inherit, and his faithfulness to his rejected king on earth would be reckoned as faithfulness to the High King of heaven. 'Inasmuch', says Jesus, 'as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me'.

74) 19:41-43

These verses confirm what we indicated in the Note on 9-15, namely that a divisive spirit was entering into the unified life of the nation. It is probably the sublime thoughts prompted by the previous passage that serve to set this in such ludicrous contrast; and there is something ludicrous about the petty jealousy shown here by the men of Israel against Judah. But such situations tend not to remain merely ludicrous, and this was no exception; for as we see from the first verse of the next chapter, there happened to be a 'man of Belial', a tool of the devil, near at hand to take quick advantage of the dissension and cause trouble. This will be our lesson from tomorrow's passage; meantime we should ponder the potential destructive power inherent in human jealousies as well as the pettiness to which they tend to reduce even the strongest of men. The men of Judah stood on what they considered to be their rights, and the men of Israel stood on their dignity; this is one of the classical patterns for strife and dissension, and it promotes resentment and bitterness that that will persist long after the original cause is forgotten - as in this case it deserved to have been in the first place - and the issue becomes magnified beyond all reason. If Israel was wrong and foolish in taking offence, Judah was wrong in being neither magnanimous nor forbearing in dealing with them. Neither would budge an inch. How true to human nature all this is, and how needful for us to see in it a mirror of our frequent pettinesses!

75)20:1, 2

As was pointed out in the previous Note, Sheba was a tool of the devil who took advantage of the dissension between the tribes to stir up trouble, and it is an evidence of how explosive the situation had become that Sheba's revolt very nearly became another national disaster like that of Absalom. Sheba was a Benjamite, of the same tribe as the former king Saul, and it may be that hatred against David for having superseded Saul had lurked and smouldered in his heart for years before finding opportunity to express itself decisively, as it now did. We can scarcely doubt, if this be so, that he had also taken part in Absalom's revolt, and if so, one is tempted to think how slow he was to learn that treason and rebellion cannot pay. But then, when the heart is gripped by the evil one, rational thinking becomes impossible, and one is carried forward by blind, unreasoning hatred that never learns that it is suicidal. Thus simply does the dark power destroy its victims. We can imagine how sick at heart David must have been when he saw further trouble rearing its head; but at least the men of Judah clave to him, and he was in an infinitely stronger position, both politically and, much more important, morally and spiritually, than on the previous occasion, and the whole movement proved, as we shall see, to be abortive; not however before it sowed some further seeds of that tribal disunity which produced in later years the tragic harvest of the divided kingdom, after the death of Solomon.

76)20:3-12

The commission given to Amasa (4) is the fulfilment of David's promise in 19:13 (which see). We did not comment on this at the time, but it does not need much thought to make us realise that it was a step of doubtful and uncertain expediency on David's part to have promised him the post of captain of the host; Amasa had been Absalom's chief of staff (17:25) during the rebellion, and it is clear that David in 19:13 promised him this preferment on grounds of policy and expediency, in order to win over the men of Judah. It is never very wise or safe to allow oneself to be influenced in one's actions in this way. The words of the well-known hymn, 'Perish policy and cunning' are very pertinent here. At all events, David soon proved that his new commander was not the man for the crisis (5). No reason is given us for Amasa's failure; it is simply that in a situation when time mattered supremely he tarried longer than he should have, and proved himself lacking in strategic and tactical resources. And, in the meanwhile, having been appointed to replace Joab, he had undoubtedly incurred the implacable enmity of that redoubtable warrior, with the grim result that is recorded in 9ff. We cannot but be appalled at this man's utter ruthlessness and cold-bloodedness, and feel that sooner or later he must be overtaken by the condign judgment of God for the enormity of his crimes. In fact, he met his end at the express command of Solomon (2 Kings 2:28-34) in fulfilment of David's dying wish that he should be brought to justice (2 Kings 2:5, 6). There can be little doubt that he was a brilliant general, but there are some prices too high to pay for military competence, particularly in the work of God, and we do not doubt that the divine purposes would have been fulfilled in David's reign just as well, if he had got rid of Joab at an early stage. God can dispense with human brilliance when it is crooked, and so can we.

77)20:13-26

Having disposed of his rival, Joab lost no time in tracking down the rebel Sheba, trapping him in the town of Abel of Beth-Maachah, and investing the place with the full intention of razing it to the ground. But now we see at work a wisdom and skill infinitely superior to Joab's. The town of Abel had, it seems, become proverbial for its wisdom, and on the evidence before us here we may certainly say it lived up to its reputation. The wise woman showed Joab a more excellent way, and in view of the ease with which this potentially dangerous and disastrous situation was averted, one is tempted to think that ordinary wisdom and common sense, if only given the opportunity, would prevent a great deal of unnecessary conflict and distress among men and nations today.

We are not told what David's reactions were when the victorious Joab returned in triumph to Jerusalem with the head of Sheba as the evidence that the revolt was quashed, but we may be pardoned for thinking that his relief was not unmixed with dismay to find that the man whom he had been so determined to depose from position and indeed dispose of finally had reinstated himself in the place of power. Once again Joab was over all the host of Israel; once again David had his thorn in the flesh. Not thus easily are such thorns removed.

78) 21:1-14

The gruesome and 'unchristian' nature of this story presents real problems of ethics, but it should not be too readily dismissed as a barbarous and bloody relic of heathenism incompatible with the idea of divine revelation. For one thing, one has only to remember that the Gibeonites could well have carried out a vicious and deadly reprisal on some unsuspecting town of Israel, slaughtering all the inhabitants, to realise that the action taken here was in fact a judicial one, and perhaps designed in part at least to prevent a large-scale massacre. Furthermore, when one takes into consideration the fact that Saul's sin against the Gibeonites consisted in his violation of the solemn oath, in the Lord's name, by which Israel was bound to the Gibeonites (Joshua 9), it becomes clear that the divine anger expressed in the famine was justified, and that it could be turned away only by the demands of divine law being met. In this respect, the story is analogous to that of the sin of Achan in Joshua 7, in which the divine displeasure was turned away only when its cause was sought out and brought home to the guilty party. In this case, as has been pointed out, since Saul slew the Gibeonites as the king of Israel, he involved all Israel with him in the violation of the oath. Similarly, the seven sons of his house represented all Israel in the penalty they paid. The idea expressed in this is the solidarity of the nation's life from generation to generation, and if this were understood more in our time, it would serve perhaps to explain a good many of the problems that are vexing and distressing our national life today. God does not forget the unatoned-for past although we do, and it is His prerogative to call men and nations to account in His own appointed time.

79) 21:15-22

It is not certain whether these verses relate to events which took place in David's later life or look back to earlier experiences, but in either case they speak of the continuing conflict with the Philistines, and it is almost impossible not to see in them an illustration of the rigours of spiritual warfare. It is not enough to slay one Goliath; and the battle with the powers of evil is never a once-for-all engagement. Evil is a many-headed monster, and the giant's progeny is very numerous, as David found out, and we shall as we go on in Christian warfare. Nor is the vanquishing of the giants always so easy and effortless as David found it to be with his pebbles and sling on the first occasion. Here we are told that he waxed faint and was like to lose his life at their hands, and only the timely intervention of Abishai saved him. This incident seems to have startled his loyal warriors into an awareness that he was too precious and indispensable to them and to Israel as a whole for his person to be risked further in open warfare (17). The terms in which they expressed this awareness seem to indicate that they saw in him not only a loved and revered leader, but - much more significant - one who had an integral part to play in the purposes of God for His people. David, to them, was 'the Light of Israel'. Is it reading too much into these words to say that David's men discerned that through him the line of divine promise was to be continued and that from him there would come, in the fulness of the time, the One Who would be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles'? We think not, but at all events, whether consciously or unconsciously, they safeguarded the divine purposes by sheltering David from the rigours of battle. Thus often does loving concern for a loved leader accomplish more than we could possibly know in the unfolding pattern of the will of God.

80)22:1-51

This whole chapter appears, with minor differences, in the Psalter as Psalm 18. Although it is placed here following the account of David's victories over giants, it more probably belongs to an earlier period of his experience, when he had finally been established as king over all Israel. To study this magnificent song of praise piecemeal would be to destroy its essential unity, and we must rather try to capture the thread that runs right through it. An analysis of the chapter will show that after a brief introduction (1-4) David speaks of a wonderful manifestation of God (5-19); following this he speaks of the grounds on which the divine protection is assured (20-30), then of the victory won (31-44); and the song closes with a brief epilogue. It will be seen from this that there are two main sections in the song, 5-19 and 31-46, both dealing with David's experience of the grace and power of God. One commentator suggests that both sections refer to the same experience which is described in two different ways, and this may be, though there is certainly a difference in emphasis in the two, the first (5-19) extolling the deliverance God gives to a helpless and hapless victim; the second (31-46) showing a warrior going forth fully equipped for battle and triumphing by the help and grace of God. The progression that this indicates is an important one for the spiritual life, as we shall see in the next Note.

81)22:1-51

The progression referred to in the previous Note is hinted at in an introductory way in 2 and 3 in the words 'rock' and 'fortress', 'shield' and 'deliverer', 'horn of my salvation', 'Saviour', the first series applicable to a fugitive from enemies, the second to an attacking warrior. Alexander Maclaren comments, 'The shield is a defensive weapon, horns are offensive ones, and the combination suggests that in conflict we are safe by the interposition of God's covering power, and are armed by the same power for striking at the foe. To trust Him is to have His protection cast around and His power infused for conflict and victory'. The word 'trust' in 3 means 'to take refuge in', and it is the experience of hiding in the Rock of Ages that David speaks of in the first part of the Psalm. Two words are used in 2 and 3 for 'rock', one meaning 'crag or cliff' suggesting inaccessibility, the other meaning 'a rock mass', giving the notion of firmness and impregnability. Hidden in Him, nothing can assail, and nothing can prevail over the believer. The experience described in 5-7 is one common to man in any distress, and supremely in his sin. As such, we have an ideal illustration of the human predicament for which the Gospel is the divine and only answer. The plight of man (5, 6) and his despairing cry (7) leads to the movement of eternity (8-19) for his sake. It is glorious writing, assuring us that the God Who can convulse the elements in such fashion will leave no stone unturned to bring us help in our need. As indeed He does: 'He sent from above, He took me...' (17, 18). This is His gentleness (36) or humility, as the word might be rendered. How low He stooped, to lift us up and make us great!

82)22:1-51

The Rock and Refuge that is the Lord is more, however, than a shelter in the time of storm; He is a fortress from which to issue forth strengthened and equipped for battle, and this is the theme from 31 onwards. Notice the varied equipment mentioned in 31, 34, 35, 36, 40. One does not have to think long before seeing how all this illustrates the Christian life; for when we run to Him for shelter from our sin, we find in Him a sufficiency for victory. In His death and resurrection we are given a new status, and have been placed in a new position, being made kings and priests unto God, made a new royalty by which we reign in life by Christ Jesus. Christ is made head over all things to the Church, His people who have fled to Him for refuge, and He gives us this victory over every dark power that might threaten us. It is this endowment - by which we gain full provision for victory over sin (for in Him the old man has been crucified that the body of sin might be destroyed) and victory over Satan (for He spoiled principalities and powers, making a show of them openly in His Cross) - that enables us to go forth with confidence into battle, conquering and to conquer, wielding the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. Nor is it fanciful to see all this in David's 'pre-Christian' experience in the old economy; for belief in the doctrine of the Trinity commits us to the proposition that the Eternal Son was at work in His people long before the historical Incarnation took place. There are no victories won in the Lord's battles, either against flesh and blood or in spiritual warfare, except by the grace of Christ's victory. David, like his father Abraham, rejoiced to see Christ's day, and this ultimately was the source of the gladness recorded in this song of deliverance.

83)22:1-51

Before we pass from this chapter, we must look at the significance of 20-30. These verses speak, as Maclaren points out, of the correspondence of God's dealings with character, as illustrated in David's experience. 'God delivered me', says David, 'because He delighted in me, and rewarded me according to my righteousness' (20, 21). To regard this statement as smug self-righteousness is to miss the point. David is not preening himself in self-satisfaction, but bearing witness to the fact that so far as he knew his own heart, his life was right in the sight of God. The main direction of his life, in its basic fundamentals and essentials, was towards God, truly and correctly orientated to His will and purpose. This is the point here, and this is why David experienced the intervention of God on his behalf. The truth is, God does for us and in us all He is allowed to do; He blesses us and enriches us within the limits that we ourselves set Him in our lives. There are lives that have not known this lifting up and have not known His victory because He has not been allowed to lift them up or give them His victory. This is what 26 and 27 are meant to convey. And we leave this chapter with its startling challenge ringing in our ears, 'How much have we allowed, are we allowing, Him to do for us, and what limits has our forwardness placed upon His working in us?'

84)23:1-7

Alternative translations of these last words of David will greatly assist in a deeper understanding of their meaning, and show that they are in fact a prophecy of the future. David sees a Ruler Who is to come and the effects of His coming; and relates this to himself and his house, in the thought of the everlasting covenant made by God with him. In other words, he is conscious of being caught up in the grand drama of God's redemptive purposes, and is able to relate his life and experience to it. This is very wonderful: to sense one's place and function in the economy of God, to know one has fulfilled the purpose of one's existence - this is to have lived. The mention of 'the everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure', makes it clear that David sensed that in his life and work, his reign over Israel, in the battles he fought, he was fulfilling indeed his part of the divine plan that would ultimately lead to the coming Ruler Who would rule justly over men, even Christ the King of Glory. The RSV renders 5 interrogatively, 'Does not my house stand so with God?' and this harmonises with the interpretation just given, indicating David's consciousness of the part he and his house had to play in the onward march of the divine purposes. The morning without clouds (4) is one of the most beautiful and moving descriptions of the coming kingdom in all Scripture, and belongs in spirit to the final chapters of Revelation, although it has in fact many fulfilments before the final consummation (cf Song of Solomon 2:11, 12). When the Gospel dawns on the darkened soul of a man, it is a morning without clouds for him, as grace sweeps away the dark shadows of sin and he rejoices in the knowledge of God's forgiveness. But supremely the Second Advent of Christ, when He shall come to reign, will see the ultimate fulfilment of this wonderful word; for then the shadow of death will be banished for ever, and the dead in Christ shall rise. That will be cloudless splendour indeed! Even so, come Lord Jesus.

85) 23:8-39

The remainder of this chapter lists the names and exploits of David's mighty men, and in the heart of it there is a lovely jewel in the story of the water from the well of Bethlehem (14-17). It often needs only a slight circumstance to reveal a whole character, and this beautiful story falls into such a character, as it sheds a flood of light upon the relationship existing between David and his mighty men. Perhaps the supreme lesson the story teaches is the grace of loyalty and devotion. It is clear that David was a man who could inspire and command loyalty in his men and that some of them in particular gave him the very highest honour and devotion. This should be seen in relation to what he had done for them and made of them. The reference to the cave of Adullam in 13 reminds us of the motley crew of nondescripts that gathered to David in those early days, and of the fact that he had made men of them. There, we see the raw material, here we see the finished work. To have produced such men was no mean achievement. And in return they gave him the loyalty of their hearts. In the spiritual life God gives some men positions of leadership in His work. This has unique privileges, but also solemn and heavy responsibilities, and it is the latter, far more than the former, that weigh most with those who are given them. God calls others round these men, to form a working nucleus, and in the disciplines of being made into a fighting force, He requires most of all a spirit of loyalty. With this, the work of God progresses and develops and comes to fruition in its own particular aspect of the divine economy. Without it, that work is made more difficult and costly than it need be. This has far greater importance than we might think. We owe this loyalty to those who have been the means of blessing in our lives, and God does not take it lightly when we neglect to honour our obligations in this direction. Some of God's dearest servants suffer needless distress and hurt from those who forget all too soon the time and travail spent on their spiritual welfare. But to hurt them is to hurt Christ, and experience has shown that it does not go well with the ungrateful and callous. They sometimes have to learn the grace of thankfulness the hard way (2 Timothy 4:14). All honour to David's men who showed such unqualified devotion, all honour too to David for the kind of recognition he accorded to such sacrificial love. Happy is the fellowship where such a mutual spirit of love and loyalty prevails!

86)24:1-9

The story of this final chapter is quite plain and straightforward, but there are problems of interpretation that we must consider. Compare 1 with 1 Chronicles 21:1 for a seeming contradiction which however is resolved in the recognition that each statement gives a different insight into the truth, and that Satan can move only by divine permission (see Job 1 and 2). The mere taking of a census, recorded here, could not in itself have been wrong, for it was provided for in the law (Exodus 30:12). Yet it was obviously an action so ill advised that even Joab could speak against it (3). The explanation of the subsequent divine anger must therefore lie in some attitude or motive of David's which was clear to his officers, but not to us. It has been suggested that David's action was motivated by pride and the desire for increasing military glory. Prosperity and power had led him to wish to organise his kingdom more perfectly as a worldly power among the nations of the earth. The first step would be to place his army on a more warlike footing, hence the numbering objected to by Joab. In other words David was pursuing a course of action foreign to Israel's calling as God's peculiar people. Much earlier, in the story of 1 Samuel we saw a similar manifestation, in the people's desire for a king, to make them like the nations, and both that instance and this proved to be no less than a desire to withdraw from the attitude of dependence on Jehovah. The whole point of Israel's election by God was that they were to be different from other peoples. So also with David here; he had tasted the intoxicating exhilaration of military success in the interests of God's kingdom, but now was beginning to think of this as an end in itself. It was the temptation to depart from the divine ideal and purpose because of merely earthly and human considerations, pride, vainglory and personal advantage. It was not the numbering of the people as such, but what it signified on this occasion, that was fateful for David.

87)24:10-12

Nearly ten months were spent on the fruitless exercise of numbering the people, and when it was all over it seems to have come home to David's heart and conscience that it had been a gross misuse of precious time and a sin against the Lord to have done so. There was no intervention by a prophet on this occasion, as in the matter of Uriah, to stir his slumbering conscience (the words 'For when' in 11 should read 'And when', there is no suggestion in the original as there is in the AV that it was the visit of the prophet Gad that led to the king's repentance); rather, the seriousness of the sin came home spontaneously to him when his desire had been gratified. This has something to teach us about the blinding power of sin; how often it seems as if a cloud comes upon otherwise clearly thinking minds, exercising a completely hypnotic power that renders a man incapable of realising just what he is doing. It is almost as if an evil spell grips him in such a way that he is borne along by a power outwith his control, and only when he 'comes to himself', and its baneful influence passes, does he see in truth what he has done. It is then that he says, 'How on earth could I have done this? What possessed me to do such a thing?' This is how it was with David; he sold himself to the overwhelming desire to number the people, and having done so he was under its mastery and gripped by it. This is always true when we dabble with forbidden things, and it is only by the grace of God that the consequences are sometimes less disastrous than they were on this occasion.

88)24:13-17

David proved once again from bitter experience that being forgiven did not absolve him from the consequences of sin. And now he had the bitterness of seeing how his sin brought distress to his people as well as to himself. We saw earlier, in the story of David's great sin, why it would not have been good for David to have escaped the consequences of what he had done, and this must again be seen here. In the economy of God the pain and suffering attendant upon sin are used of Him as a sanctifying grace to purge the heart of its evil tendencies and to remind us that, forgiven or not, sin costs us very dearly, and it is the evidence of His great love for us that this should be so. Love and judgment, we must learn, are not incompatibles, but co-relatives. It is interesting to see how David's decision to 'fall into the hands of the Lord' rather than of men (14) indicates a conviction in his heart about the justice of God as well as His mercies. At least he knew that when God punishes He does so righteously. And it seems clear that the punishment that did come stood in an integral relation to the sin that had been committed, for David's precious census figures were diminished by seventy thousand, as if to remind him of the danger in setting so much store by numbers. God's justice is very exact, and His punishment fits the crime.

89)24:18-25

The story of Araunah's threshing-floor provides a fitting and significant ending to the book we have been studying. David suffered the chastisement of the Lord, but it brought him to his senses and we leave him in an attitude of worship and sacrifice, giving of himself in costly devotion (24). We learn two things here; first of all, that the real goal of all God's dealings with us, in chastening and chastisement, is not negative but positive, not death but life. What happened here shows that life had come anew to David; to speak and feel as he did is life indeed. In the second place, it is the aim and purpose of God to bring us all to this place of total consecration. In this connection, we should ponder the contrast between the end of David's career in 2 Samuel and that of Saul's in 2 Samuel. In the one it is 'I have played the fool, I have erred exceedingly'; in the other, 'I will not offer unto the Lord that which doth cost me nothing'. These are the possibilities before each man in life, and the choice is ours. One last word: the site of Araunah's threshing-floor was on Mount Moriah (see 2 Chronicles 3:1), and it was here that Solomon built the temple of the Lord. The house of God is ever built on sacrifice; the corn of wheat that falls into the ground and dies bears much fruit, and lives that are laid on the altar turn many to righteousness and bring new life to the birth in Christ.