

James Philip Bible Readings

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The First Book of Samuel

Bible Notes on 1 Samuel were first produced in 1965/66, based on a series of Sunday evening studies as far back as 1960/61. We have since studied the book on two further occasions, in 1974/75 and 1988/89 in our morning services. We believe that many new insights have been gleaned since the original Notes were prepared, and trust that the Notes that follow will prove helpful and fruitful for those who did not have the opportunity to read the original issues.

This historical book marks the beginning of a distinct period in the Old Testament story. It may be useful to take the following (very) approximate dates as 'signposts' and guides to a comprehensive grasp of the Old Testament revelation as a whole. Abraham - 2000 BC, Moses -1500 BC, David - 1000 BC, Ezra - 500 BC. The first Book of Samuel introduces the 'Davidic' era. Four characters dominate the story - Eli, Samuel, Saul and David, and together they mark the transition from the 'priestly' emphasis to the 'prophetic' and the 'kingly'.

I) I:I

The book of 1 Samuel follows historically upon the Book of Judges (Samuel was the last of the judges), and marks a time of transition in the history of the people of God. This transition is evident not only in the fact that, in the genealogy found at the end of the Book of Ruth, which immediately precedes Judges, there is no mention of the line of Aaron, which was the priestly line, but only the tribe of Judah, from which David the king was to come, but also in the fact that the lawlessness of the time of the Judges, of which it is said that 'in those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes (Judges 20:35), was to give way to an era which was to reach its summit in the reign of David. Thus, the period represents a great watershed in Israel's history, in which the birth pangs of a new order were experienced. It was in this sense a critical time, and in this, there was the raising up of a man of God, as the mouthpiece of the Divine Word to the nation. It will readily be seen that this is a very relevant study for us in these days, when old landmarks are steadily being eroded and obliterated, and lawlessness and indeed violence abound in society.

2) 1:1

But there is another consideration also to be taken into account.

What the New Testament says about the Old Testament must be the best key to interpretation. Jesus said, of the Old Testament Scriptures, 'They are they which testify of Me'. In the last analysis, He is what the Old Testament is about, and - amid the immense variety of its different parts - He is the one unifying theme, and He is borne witness to, in prophets, priests and kings alike. Up to this point in the Old Testament history, the predominant emphasis has been on the priestly, but now it is the turn of the prophetic and the kingly. Samuel marks the beginning of the prophetic line, and Saul and David the kingly. This threefold witness to Christ is borne in two ways - as a type or illustration of His coming in the fulness of the time, and as an illustration of the inadequacy of their own power. The priestly service could not save from sin (as the Epistle to the Hebrews makes plain), but pointed beyond itself to the one effectual sacrifice for sin, the Lord Jesus Christ. The prophetic testimony could only speak the Word, not enforce it; and kingly power ultimately proved ineffective, and sometimes corrupt. All alike pointed beyond themselves to the One Who was to come, who was Prophet, Priest and King.

As we have pointed out in yesterdays Note, what we read of in 1 Samuel is the emergence of the line of Judah, and what is surely indicated in this is that the divine purpose is moving forward into some new thing. At first, this is not unmistakably clear, but soon it will emerge in the story of David. The moving forward of the divine purpose - this is the kind of insight we need to grasp in this record.

3) 1:1

The anarchy and lawlessness of the time of the Judges must be remembered as the background to the story we are to study - a dark period of Israel's history indeed, when the spiritual capital of former days had been expended and exhausted, and the word of the Lord (cf 3:1) had become a scarce commodity. It was a time when the righteous judgments of God were upon His people because of their continued sinfulness, and in fact as the story begins Israel was under the domination and oppression of the Philistines. This is the context in which we must understand the first seven chapters of the book, and God's visitation of grace and deliverance culminating, after twenty years of Samuel's ministry, in a victory over the Philistine domination that was complete and lasting. And yet, the story does not begin with an account of the sin of the time, nor of the accomplished victory, but with something that at first glance seems like some insignificant piece of folklore, even legend - the story of the birth of a baby to a family in one of the tribes of Israel. This is very striking, but it bears a rather striking similarity to another Old Testament story, found in the opening chapters of the book of Exodus, which records the birth of another baby, Moses, who was destined to become the deliverer of his people. In both stories alike, we therefore see the marvellous, hidden workings of the living God - in the one, in a slave environment in Egypt, and in the other, in the obscurity of a little Israelite village, Rama, preparing for His people and for His glory - in both alike, the same grace, and the same God. Perhaps the faithful of the land were praying earnestly, tearfully, faithfully, as they must also have done in the time of the Exodus, and perhaps feeling that God was not hearing their prayers and their cries, while God had in fact answered their prayers and had sent this little child into the Ephraimite family.

4) 1:18

What a contrast is presented in this simple pastoral idyll. God Almighty and a poor, insignificant childless woman - but this is all the point of contact that God needs for the furtherance of His sovereign purposes in the world. She is brought to a white heat in intensity of prayer, and mighty, far-reaching events were taking place that were to change the destiny of a broken and beleaguered nation. In such inauspicious, unostentatious ways does the hand of God work furthering His sovereign and unremitting purposes for His people and for the world. Viewed in this light, the long years of unanswered prayer for Hannah become explicable, for she is now seen to stand in the line of promise, where long and patient disciplines are the order of the day. Abraham waited twenty-five years for the fulfilment of the promise made to him concerning a son, and there was much testing and training during that time to fit him to be the father of the faithful. Nor was it to be different for godly Hannah, and God brought her to the place of utter submission to His good and perfect will before He could trust her with the son that it was in His strategic purpose to give her; for this son was to be His, not hers, and natural affection was to be laid on the altar of the divine will. Does this seem hard and forbidding to us? Ah, it seems so only from the outside. Inside, all is light and joy, for God is no man's debtor, and Christ Himself has assured us that no one gives parents or children for His sake and the gospel's without receiving an hundredfold in this life. With what joy we shall presently see Hannah giving back Samuel to God and to the world. And who shall think that she did not consider herself well-rewarded.

5) 1:1-18

The climax of Hannah's anguish and pain is seen in 9-11. Here was a surrender and submission born of tears, but how real and how decisive it was may be seen in what follows in the story of Samuel's spiritual development and ultimate calling to the service of the Lord. God must have been well satisfied with His work in her, to have brought her to such a position. How necessary to prepare a godly mother for the man on whom He was to lay His hand in such a signal fashion! We should take careful note of this, for it brings out the importance of the influence that parents can have on the lives of children as yet unborn. A parent can influence eternally a child's spiritual well-being, and if this be so, then the only safe, as it is the only adequate, attitude is one of full surrender and submission to the Lord. Samuel never wavered in all the long years of His service for God, and only the Day will reveal how much this was owing to the utter devotion and separation to the will of God in which he was born. Indeed, when one thinks of the tremendous and far-reaching influence mothers can have upon their children, it becomes all the more inexplicable that there should be so much encouragement to intrude into the man's place, instead of recognizing a sphere of ministry here that is fraught with unlimited potential for good.

6) 1:19-23

It is some indication of the general declension of the time that Eli should have concluded that Hannah was drunk in the house of the Lord. It may well be that Eli had taken the words of the expostulation in 14 on his lips more than once, and that the presence of the daughters of Belial (16) in the Temple was no isolated experience in his unhappy and ineffectual priesthood. His complete misunderstanding of Hannah's attitude is a common error, as may be recalled by the verdict of the sceptics on the Day of Pentecost, centuries later, when they misinterpreted in such contemptuous terms the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples, saying 'These men are full of new wine'. Zeal for the Lord of Hosts is often mistaken - and criticised - for fanaticism. But it was at the point of this greatest misunderstanding - and what hurt and distress it must have brought to the distressed spirit of Hannah! - that something decisive was accomplished spiritually, for the peace of faith came to her soul (as 18 indicates clearly), and the answer of God came to her, as is indicated by the wonderful words in 19, 'and the Lord remembered her'. There is a lesson here for us. Sometimes the sorest and most hurtful shafts of the enemy of souls are best interpreted and understood in relation to the fulfilment of the divine purposes in and through our lives. As it was with Christ, so it is also so often with us. It was the very spear that pierced His side that drew forth the blood to save; it was in His darkest agony that all our sins were pardoned; it is out of the presses of pain that the soul's best wine comes. We bear in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest, in us and in others. One wonders whether Eli, in speaking as he did to Hannah in 17, realised just how fundamentally important and far-reaching this incident was to be for the future of Israel. What seems clear, however, is that whether Eli realised it or not, Elkanah, Hannah's husband clearly did, as his words in 23 make plain, 'The Lord establish his word'. The Lord in fact had spoken no word about Samuel, but Elkanah surely recognized that in the baby that was to be born God was speaking not only to them, but also to the nation, and that He purposed through this child to establish His word in Israel after long years of declension and spiritual famine.

7) 1:24-28

Elkanah recognized in the unusual circumstances of Samuel's birth that the hand of God was upon the child, and was willing to waive the normal custom of taking his wife up to the annual sacrifice in Shiloh (21-23). When Hannah finally went, after weaning the child, taking with her the usual offerings, she reminded Eli of her previous visit, in words that are beautiful in their simplicity (26ff). What a breath of vital and living experience in a temple that had known so little of the Lord's presence or blessing for so long! What must Eli have thought? We cannot know, for he makes no answer to her fervent testimony. It is almost as if he was not allowed to speak, for this presentation of the child Samuel to the Lord marks the passing of Eli's 'regime' and the instituting of the new. He is set aside as a castaway, and the kingdom was given to another. Such is the import of these verses, and this interpretation seems to be confirmed in what follows in the next two chapters that follow this. But it may well be that, although Eli made no response to Hannah's words at that time, they were nevertheless imbedded in his heart, for when we come to the story of Samuel's 'call', the priest was quick enough to 'put two and two together' and to realise that God indeed had His hand on this young lad in a very special way. As the story begins to unfold, we shall see in the next chapter that in the midst of the declension and degradation of the time, the writer of this history keeps introducing the name of Samuel (cf 2:11, 18, 21, 26; 3:1) as if to underline that here was God's 'new thing' that was to be the answer to all that was wrong and evil on the national scene, and that in the fulness of the time, this would become abundantly evident. Such is the pattern we are to see unfolding.

8) 2:1-11

This chapter consists of two parts, first of all the Song of Hannah, and then a long description of the moral and spiritual degeneracy of Israel. There is a certain dramatic intensity in the chapter as it stands. Its burden is the apostasy under Eli and his renegade sons - a dark and terrible picture, indeed - but over against that, here is a praying woman! And is it not significant that the record of the terrible darkness in Israel is prefaced by this song of deliverance of Hannah's - as if, at the outset, to set it in the framework and context of divine grace, as if, insistently to remind us that the declension is not the most important part of the story, but rather the reality of the divine intervention. And, this being so, is not this an encouragement and an incentive to prayer. A praying woman - here is the real strength and hope of any nation, the pious devotion of ordinary folk like Hannah and Elkanah, in their simple, quiet service for the sanctuary. They are the salt of the earth, salt in the midst of an evil generation, preventing the onset of corruption, maintaining an influence for good in society and finally throwing up a deliverer. 'A city set on an hill cannot be hid'. And withal, the 'fruit' of her prayers, in the birth of her son, is set over against the prevailing darkness. We referred in yesterday's Note to the repeated reference to Samuel in the midst of the darkness and declension of the time, and in the contrast this affords the message is 'God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty'. It has been said that prayer is our 'baby', and how true this is, in the work of God! It is rather like Paul's statement in Ephesians 2 - the stark description of the darkness of the human predicament, without Christ, followed by the words: BUT GOD! Which reminds us that there are two ways of looking at our contemporary situation today - one to view the growing secularisation of society, the deepening apathy, the infidelity, the coldness and the deadness, and assume that all is well nigh lost and that the situation is beyond remedy - and the other to take the living God into account. And here also, we see the hand of God at work, in this particular 'weak thing', the child Samuel.

9) 2:1-11

The first thing that strikes us about Hannah's Song is that it seems to be saying things unrelated to the blessing she had received from the Lord in the birth of Samuel, and far beyond it. This is true, and it is of very real significance. What had in fact happened was that the Lord had turned away her reproach, in bestowing on her the desire of her heart, a man-child. And what she says in her Song indicates that she took this grace shown to her as an assurance that the Lord would also show grace to His people Israel, and turn away their reproach also, and deliver them from the hand of the Philistines and from the apostasy represented by Eli and his wicked sons. What God had done for her He would do for the nation; and indeed, He would do it for the nation through what He had done for her, that is, through her son Samuel. This is the measure of the importance of this great Song of thanksgiving, and it invests her praise with a wonderful prophetic quality. It is not merely that she was able, so to speak, to 'put two and two together', but that she was wrought upon by the Spirit of God and given a word for the nation in her day, that was surely a foretaste of the 'word' that Samuel was himself to speak in the fulness of the time. It is very impressive to see from this that Hannah's burden and travail, the discipline of many years, were all in the will and plan of God for His work, and for the blessing of His people. Should not this throw a great light on the frustrations and continuing disciplines that come upon the servants of God in their heart-sore experience? One thinks in this connection of the prophet Hosea, and all that came out of his personal heartbreak and tragedy for the work of the Lord in Israel. This teaches us the very valuable lesson that we may learn so much through the discipline and agony of continuing prayer. A dimension of depth is developed in the soul through such discipline. Prayer makes for far-sightedness. In her personal travail, Hannah learned of the deep things of God, of the ways of God with men, and the principles of His workings. She learned not only what God was like, but also what He was about to do in judgment and mercy in the land, and the gift of Samuel was to her the token that this was so. And what she saw was the adversaries of the Lord being broken in pieces (10), and the poor being raised (8) and set among princes. And the rest of the chapter, and indeed of the whole book, unfolds the fulfilment of her 'vision'.

10) 2:12-17

For the background of the offerings mentioned in these verses, and an indication as to how far and how deeply the sons of Eli corrupted the office of the priesthood, we need only consult such passages as Leviticus 7:29-34. It is a sad and tragic picture that is presented here of the religious life of Israel, which had brought upon the people the verdict that 'men abhorred the offering of the Lord' (17). It is all the more striking therefore that the record of this terrible darkness in Israel is prefaced by Hannah's Song of deliverance, as if at the outset to set it in the framework and context of divine grace, to remind us insistently that the declension is not the most important thing, but rather the reality of divine intervention. It would be easy to make application of this story to our own situation in the Church today, and refer to the unhallowed influence that unfaithful and 'way out' ministers have on the outside world, just as at the time of the Reformation a corrupt priesthood vitiated the life of the Church in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. And this is true; and unfaithful ministers will be called to give an account of their stewardship to God. But we should not forget that there is also such a thing as 'the priesthood of all believers', and that the name of God is often blasphemed among the Gentiles because of the unhallowed lives of those who make a great profession of faith. We all need to take the warning of these verses to ourselves, for we must all, not only ministers, appear before the judgment seat of Christ. We should also remember that Eli was not always like this. We do well to beware of the dangers that come to those who grow old in the Master's service. There are many today in middle age and older who in younger days were burning and shining lights for God, but have now made spiritual shipwreck through having allowed the light to grow dim. Carelessness, neglect, sin - these things have robbed them of their heritage. Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall!

11) 2:18-21

In contrast to the grim and sombre picture of judgment about to fall on the house of Eli, we are given in these verses another glimpse of the gracious purposes of God at work. Here, in 18, is the sign of divine grace, which introduces God's answer to the human predicament in Israel at that time. We should never forget this, in any situation of crisis - it is a lesson writ large on so many pages of Holy Scriptures, as if to remind us that God is the one great Circumstance that can change any time of crisis into opportunity for good. This interaction of mercy and judgment is both striking and significant, and it is borne witness to in the well-known words that are found in 30, 'Them that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed'. The deepest truth of the human situation, as G. Campbell Morgan comments, is that 'the ultimate victory of God is independent of the attitude of individuals or peoples towards Him. The ultimate destiny of individuals - and nations - is dependent on their attitude to Him. It does not at all matter what my attitude towards God is, as to His ultimate victory. It matters everything as to my own destiny. Nothing depends on me as to His victory. He will press into His service for His final victory all souls who are loyal to Him, and they will share in the rapture of His victory. He will press into the service of His ultimate victory all souls in rebellion, and they will share in the wrath of His victory'. This truth is echoed also, in a dramatic way, by C. S. Lewis, in *The Problem of Pain*. 'You will certainly carry out God's purposes, however you act, but it makes a difference to you whether you serve like Judas or like John'.

12) 2:22-26

The grim and ugly story of the decline of the Eli dynasty continues without respite. One cannot but feel sorry for the aged and heart-broken Eli, but one is obliged to recognize that the rebuke he administers to his sons is both weakly and ineffectual. It is some measure of how far he himself had slipped from the things of God that he was apparently incapable of expressing a deeper moral indignation or of taking decisive action to dismiss them from office in the priesthood because of their outrageous behaviour. A mere expression of disapproval is not sufficient to absolve one from complicity in evil when complete dissociation from it is called for and also possible. It was, of course, long past the time when effective action could have been taken, and this is the human reason, as the last phrase in 25 is the divine reason, why the old man's protests fell on deaf ears. There are lessons here for parents that need to be learned. There is a time for correction, and when it is missed, through an imperceptible and more or less slipping away from the categorical standards of God, it can rarely be redeemed. And even when parents come to see their mistakes, and turn back to God, it is often too late in the day to have any effective influence on their families. So far as Phineas and Hophni themselves were concerned, a time had come for them when the Spirit of God ceased to plead with them. They had treasured up wrath for themselves, during the longsuffering of God (cf Romans 2:4, 5), and at the last it came upon them to the full. Vengeance was ready, and mercy was gone, for them.

13) 2:27-36

The final verses of the chapter form a climax to a dark and sombre chronicle of evil. We may wonder where this man of God came from in such a dark time, but it reminds us that even in the grimmest situations of moral and spiritual declension God still has His faithful ones that can be called on to do His bidding. We are not told when he came to Eli, but it is certainly an 'evening' scene for him, at the end of the long day of his opportunity. It was a devastating indictment that was passed on the old man, and one can almost see the priest crumpling before the terrible indictment. It is not without significance that the visitation came in the evening of life's long day. The truth is, God does not interfere with us too much along the way. We often wish He would, far more than He does. We would like Him to intervene miraculously, to point out wrong courses to us, making it virtually impossible for us to err. But this is what He will not do. He gives us His word, and calls us to live faithfully in its light day by day. If we neglect it or transgress its plain and unmistakable teaching, He will not abrogate the normal laws of cause and effect for our benefit, nor set aside our responsibilities as moral beings able to differentiate between right and wrong. If we are intent on having our own way, He will finally stand back and say quietly, 'Very well, if that is how you want it, have your own way'. And the sorry tragic decline will go on until, at the end, He steps in to show us the consequences of our disastrous self-will. As the Psalmist says, 'He granted them their request, but sent leanness to their souls'. This is how it was with Eli, who was formally deposed, set aside, and his position given to another. As a believer he was no doubt saved, but as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 3, he was saved 'yet so as by fire', and he suffered loss (1 Corinthians 3:15).

14) 3:1-4

Having been prepared by the story of Samuel's birth, in chapter 1, and by the repeated references in chapter 2 to his growth and development in the Temple, we are now ready to learn of the momentous call that came to him, and of the precise way in which the Lord was to take him up in His service. On any estimate and on any interpretation, this is a truly tremendous story, and it has so much in so many ways to teach us. First of all, in the perspective of the book as a whole, we have spoken of the ongoing purpose of God, and the ongoing march of the divine will, and now here, in the call of Samuel, we have the fulfilment of Hannah's prophetic utterance, when she saw the adversaries of the Lord being broken in pieces, and the poor being raised and set among princes. Here, then, is the beginning of the greatness of the people of Israel that came to full flower with the reign of David. It is all of a piece, this history, and holds together. This is how significant and strategic the coming of Samuel in answer to Hannah's prayers proved to be, from the long-term point of view. This holds a lesson for us, when we have the sense of the divine purposes at work in our own day. We may not live to see all that is to come, but our children will. We may be laying the foundations of many generations in what we are doing in our time. Is not this something to be working for? This is how we are to view what is said in the opening verses of the chapter about the Word being a scarce commodity (this is the tone of the word 'precious' in the AV translation) and there being no open vision, for the chapter speaks of the coming again of the word of the Lord to Israel after so long a time. A recovery and a restoration of the Word to the nation - and the ongoing story shows the impact of that Word upon the whole of society, restraining evil and enemies alike, and establishing a new sense of responsibility in the body politic of Israel.

15) 3:1-4

There is a symbolism at work in the language of 2 and 3. Eli's growing blindness accentuates the moral and spiritual darkness that had come upon his administration in the priestly office; and the reference to the lamp of God going out indicates the time when the call of Samuel took place, for the lamp of God was always lit in the evenings, and it burned until the morning. Thus, it was just before dawn that the Lord spoke to Samuel, in the proverbial darkest hour of the night. How wonderful that at the darkest and blackest time of all, the Lord should reveal Himself again in love and power! In Israel, the bright light that had been lit in the days of Joshua had waned, and was now giving its last dying flicker, when God stepped in to raise up a deliverer. We too, in our post war era have seen the lamp of God that once burned so brightly in our land flickering and all but going out. And the message that this passage brings to us is this: there is a God in heaven Who remembers the light that used to burn in days of old among us. He yearns over this lost land today, and He will not let that lamp go out. He is calling Samuel, it may be many Samuels, to bear the word of the Lord to the land once again. In the dark night of sin that has come upon us, He is once again calling, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And in the call, training and thrusting forth men of conviction and character and dedication in these days, we are, please God, witnessing the return and the recovery of the word of the Lord in our time. This is wonderfully heartening, especially to those who have eyes to see what the Lord is doing in our day and generation, in the peopling of the pulpits of Scotland with men of vision, men whose hearts God has touched, men with a message to proclaim and who are proclaiming it without fear or favour up and down the land. Please God this realisation will fire God's people with a burden to get behind such men and pray them on in their costly work!

16) 3:4-10

The next lesson this story has for us is a word about the need for a personal experience of the Lord. The trouble - and indeed the tragedy - about there being a famine of the word of the Lord, and no open vision, is that no clear teaching about salvation is available, and men live and die 'within the sanctuary' without ever really knowing God in a personal way. Indeed, it is perfectly possible in such circumstances - and alas only too likely - that people can be brought up within the precincts of the house of God and all its worship and service, and remain 'outside', strangers to grace and to God. This is why we must make this challenge with great plainness of speech, although with great tenderness and compassion, even to those who have been 'church people' all their lives. It is not enough to have been this; the crucial question always must be, 'Do you know the Lord?' Samuel did not, as we are told explicitly In 7. It is sometimes said, and taught, that for those brought up in a Christian tradition, that evangelism is to be thought of as a 'movement in grace', not a 'movement into grace'. It is true that, ideally considered, conversion should mean this 'movement in grace', in the sense that children baptised in the name of Christ are baptised 'unto faith', and that baptism declares them to be born for a destiny of salvation, born to be born again. But this pattern can be regarded as valid only in the context of living faith: but in the context of the problem of nominal Christianity - which is not real Christianity grown cold, but a misunderstanding of it so decisive that it is the antithesis of the true faith - it is a different matter. It is one thing, by patient instruction in the faith, to bring people to a 'confirmation' of the vows made on their behalf in baptism, but quite another when baptismal vows and profession of faith alike are so completely misunderstood as to be taken to mean virtually the same as decent living, exemplary conduct, or good works. We must not forget our Lord's words to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, and brought up in the tradition of Judaism, about the necessity of being born again. It is clear, from what He said to this ruler of the Jews, that something had gone wrong with the normal pattern of the then Church's teaching and instruction of its people. It had not brought this ruler to a knowledge of the Lord, although it was in fact designed to do so, and could have done so, if he had understood it aright. But he had not; indeed he had so misunderstood it as to turn its meaning into the exact opposite of what the Scriptures themselves taught, namely justification by works, instead of justification by faith. Since this is so - and this is the situation which faces us in such widespread measure in the Church today - that the issue is not a further and fuller enlightenment concerning something that men have already partially and to some extent grasped themselves, but the unlearning of an attitude that is in complete antithesis of the true revelation of salvation by grace through faith alone. It is because this doctrine has been so tragically obscured that there are so many earnest devout souls in our churches today who, like Samuel, do not yet know the Lord.

17) 3:4-10

Following upon what was said in yesterday's Note, we need to observe that the story in these verses affords a very useful illustration and exemplification of conversion, and of the difficulties that sometimes attend it. We are told here that God called Samuel four times before the young man responded significantly. And this bears witness to the difficulty of waking people out of the sleep of death. God calls men in the word of the gospel, but they go slumbering on, unheeding. And, as with natural sleep, they do no more than stir uneasily in their sleep, conscious that something is disturbing their rest, but so faint and far away that they think that it is a dream world. But it is reality that is trying to break into their dream world. And sometimes they need a great jolt to make them wake up. 'Awake, thou that sleepest, and rise from among the dead, and Christ shall give thee light (Ephesians 5:14)' Then, there are those who hear, but do not recognize the voice; and sometimes need to be told that it is God speaking to them. So it was with Samuel. Sometimes a man may become conscious of a disturbedness in his mind and spirit during a service of worship, as if a new awareness of things were developing in his consciousness. He may go out of church in a disturbed state, without realising what was the matter with him. And he may need to be told that it was God speaking to him, though he did not realise it. There are also, of course, those who do hear, and do recognize, and do not want to obey the voice of God. That is a critical state to be in, and fraught with spiritual peril. 'Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts' is the warning Scripture gives to such people.

18) 3:4-10

The next point to be underlined in the story is what Eli the priest said to Samuel: 'Go, lie down, and it shall be, if He call thee, that thou shalt say, ' Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth'. ' It is important for us to see and understand the implications of these words. In the first place, they indicate an attitude of submission to God, an attitude of response and obedience to the divine disclosure of Himself. This is often the first step to be taken that leads to a genuine experience of grace. It is what Saul of Tarsus did on the Damascus Road, in the words 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' But more: we need to see what these words meant for Samuel. For, in listening to God, and submitting in glad response and surrender to His Word, the young man was taken up into a glorious and far-reaching purpose that involved the destiny of the whole nation. Could he, or Eli, or anyone, for that matter, have foreseen all that was going to unfold for him in the future. One has only to read on in 3:19-21; 4:1 to realise that Samuel became the mouth-piece of God for a whole nation, for thirty years! That is how big the thing was! And the chapters that follow tell the story of his nationwide ministry that wrought deliverance throughout the land. The statement in 7:13 gives an immensely significant summary of that ministry in the words 'all the days of Samuel'. It was a lifetime of the victory and triumph of God.

19) 3:11-18

The calamity referred to in 11 is surely the capture of the Ark of the Covenant by the Philistines (referred to in the chapter that follows this). Nothing could have shocked and horrified the people so much as this terrible disaster, for it symbolised the saving and protecting Presence of the Lord Himself. The solemn words in 12 should serve to underline to us how seriously God takes Himself and His Word in relation to those who by their carelessness and neglect dishonour His Word and His Name. It is the thoroughness of His dealings that is in view, when He once begins to take to do with us. It is certainly true that although 'the mills of God grind slowly, they grind exceeding small'. The terrible thoughts expressed in 14 should be compared with Hebrews 6:4-8 and 10:26, 31. In the story of the downfall of Eli and his house we may in fact have a graphic and realistic illustration of the solemn warnings of Hebrews, and of John's teaching about 'the sin unto death' (1 John 5:16b). It is possible for a man to pass beyond the point of no return, and this, it would seem, was the sad and tragic position with Eli and his house. The aged priest's submission to the verdict (18) seems strangely out of character with the rest of what we know of him. Had he reached the point when nothing mattered to him now? George Philip of Sandyford suggests in his Notes that perhaps Eli assumed that in the life to come God would be more tolerant and easygoing, so that sin and wrong would be glossed over, and proffers Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:10 as a sufficient corrective to such a misunderstanding. For those in the wrong with God, the worst is always yet to be.

20) 3:19-21

The brief verses with which the chapter closes are among the most thrilling in all the Old Testament. We are told in them that the Lord appeared again in Shiloh - in the very place that had been the scene of all the corruption and unfaithfulness and defilement of their past years. What grace this is! And what grounds for hope, in the midst of our own troubled and confused situation, that God will once more work in grace and power in the land. Whenever and wherever the Word is recovered, there is the evidence that the Lord is appearing again in the human situation. This is how it was in Israel (4:1a) in the raising up of Samuel. The statement in 19 is particularly significant in this connection. We are told that the Lord let none of his words fall to the ground. This means not only that Samuel was recognized as a prophet of the Lord, but - more important - that his word was regarded as bearing a divine authority that could not be gainsaid. What he said was confirmed by future events, and fulfilled in the life of the nation. In this way the whole land was made aware that the Lord had purposes of grace that were about to be wrought out. We should not under-estimate the magnitude of this moral and spiritual revolution: from Dan to Beersheba it set men talking with a sense of new and solemn expectation. It was the biggest thing that had happened for generations. And remember where and how it all started - in a humble woman's earnest prayers!

21) 4:1-11

We have seen, in chapter 3, that the significance of the call of Samuel was the giving back of the word of God to the nation of Israel. This is always the first step in renewal - the recovery of the Word, and the recovery of belief in its authority and life-giving and sanctifying power. But this is essentially a long-term work, not something accomplished overnight. We have already referred to the perspective of history in this - Samuel's call was the beginning of something that reached its full flower only in David's reign. So also, in the more restricted sense, we need to see that between 4:1 and 7:8 more than 20 years of patient labour and ministry on Samuel's part had to take place. The full significance of this patient toil is seen in 7:1-13: everything Samuel did led to this one thing, the repentance of the nation. For 20 years and more, however, God's presence (symbolised by the Ark) was withdrawn, and only after this did He return in mercy to them. This is always something we need to remember in our thinking about revival - we cannot earn it, nor should we think God will come running to us when we see fit to lift our cries to Him. Repentance is the need - and national repentance takes a longish time.

All this serves to give us an understanding of this chapter. And it is a grim chapter indeed. There is nothing of Samuel in it, and nothing of God either - nothing but further darkness and disaster. There is a verse in Judges 2:10 which speaks of another generation rising up, after Caleb and Joshua, 'which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel'. This that we read in chapter 4 is the full and fateful flowering of that godlessness, the grim and relentless outworking of the declension caused by sin, and of the judgment warned of by God in chapters 2 and 3 against the house of Eli.

22) 4:1-11

The loss of the Ark of the covenant to the Philistines was a terrible blow to Israel, symbolising as it did the withdrawal of the Lord's presence from them. It was indeed a judicial sentence passed on them, comparable to the judgment of the Captivity at a much later period in their history. And in one sense, it was all the more so, in the context, and in spite of, the gift of Samuel to the nation. But God was strong enough to resist pity for his people until grief and calamity had done their solemn work in them. He is a holy God, and not to be trifled with. But more: for long enough the effect of the word of the Lord may not be seen as a deterrent and a restraint on evil. When a ship is sailing 'full steam ahead' and the order is given 'full steam astern', it does not reverse direction immediately, but is gradually, over a space of miles, brought to a stop, before the momentum of the new direction can make itself felt. This is how it was with Israel: although the divine corrective had been issued, the direction of the nation was still the same, and they were therefore subject to all the hazards which 'going that way' involved, thus, the terrible humiliation at Ebenezer, and the loss of the Ark. It was truly Ichabod (4:21), for the glory was departed from Israel. And, significantly, it was Israel's false trust in the Ark as a protective symbol that led to the defeat. The Ark became superstitiously more to them than the Lord of the Ark, and with hearts that were so far from Him, no symbol could ever have sufficed to secure His presence. When the moral is at such a discount, the mystical and the superstitious will never avail.

23) 4:12-22

And so the news came to the aged Eli that Israel had been defeated, and the Ark of the Lord captured by the Philistines. Significantly enough, it was not the news of his sons' death so much as the loss of the Ark (which he had feared, as we see in 13) that finally broke him. Even in the midst of personal distress he was able to perceive, however dimly, the magnitude of the disaster that had overtaken Israel. The Ark had never been outside Israel's possession down all her long history, and this was an unspeakably serious catastrophe to have befallen her. Paradoxically, although the mere presence of the Ark did not guarantee the Lord's presence with the people, its absence certainly betokened His withdrawal, and this the aged priest could understand. The word 'Ichabod' means 'the glory has departed', and refers to this withdrawal. God was still among them, but in judgment, not in blessing, and the sense of His presence was withheld from them - as indeed it had been for a long while, though not, obviously, from Samuel - in the way in which the Holy Spirit withdraws Himself from us when He is grieved with us, although He still dwells within us. The story of the withdrawal of Emmanuel from Mansoul in Bunyan's Holy War is a good illustration of the spiritual lessons for us in this story. It was long e'er the Lord was wooed back among the people, twenty long years, and how much they had to learn the hard way before He returned in blessing!

24) 5:1-12

This chapter and the next give us a description of the 'history' of the Ark of God in its long, 20-year absence from Israel. They present a complete contrast to what has gone before in the story. For, in chapter 4, Israel pinned their hopes on the Ark's presence with them in battle, and they were sadly disillusioned; it had no power for them. But here, in these two chapters, it proved very different. And the Philistines, who doubtless in the flush of their victory over Israel came to the conclusion that this Ark, and its God, of whom they had been so afraid, had proved to be a myth and a fraud, discovered that they had taken into their midst a very disconcerting and frightening Power, that utterly discomfited them and brought confusion upon them. For the Philistines took the Ark and placed it in triumph in the shrine of their god Dagon, as a trophy and an indication that Dagon had triumphed over the God of Israel. Never did they make a more disastrous mistake! For the Ark, lifeless symbol as it had been to an Israel from whom the Lord had withdrawn Himself in displeasure, was nevertheless the representation of the God of Israel to the Philistines, and they very quickly learned how living the living God of Israel was! There is a grimly delightful humour at work throughout the chapter. 'He that sitteth in the heavens' was surely laughing, and having the Philistines 'in derision' (Psalm 2:4), for on the first night of the Ark's sojourn in the shrine of their god, Dagon was knocked flat on his face, and on the second he was reduced to a stump. Poor Dagon! Only a stump was left - no head to understand, no hands to help, in their time of need. This is what the living God thinks of false gods and false religions! The rest of the chapter continues the almost comical reaction of the Philistines in their panic about what had overtaken them. When Ashdod, where the shrine of Dagon was situated, was thus humbled and violated, the Ark was hastily removed to Gath, another of the Philistine cities, but Gath suffered the same kind of judgment, upon which it was next moved to Ekron - but to no avail: wherever the Ark went, devastation resulted. Thus effortlessly the living God brought confusion and panic to His enemies!

25) 6:1-12

The disorder and panic continued for seven long months (1), until the Philistines' priests and diviners came up with a plan to solve the crisis. They resolved to send the Ark back to Israel, but - significantly - they enjoined the Philistine nobles to send with it a trespass offering, a description of which is given in 4ff. It is interesting to see how, in their own groping fashion, they recognized the need for propitiating this angry God. This is not an evidence of rank heathenism, but a true religious insight, and one that needs to be re-learned today. For another thing, the attitude of respect, even reverence, that they now showed for the Ark, amounting to repentance for their sin, should have been a lesson for Israel that only such a heart-attitude can make any kind of sacrificial system meaningful or acceptable to God. This is exactly what the later prophets of Israel summoned the people to show forth, when they were bringing multitudes of meaningless sacrifices while their hearts were far from God. In this sense also, the children of darkness were showing themselves wiser than the children of light.

26) 6:1-12

What we have said up to this point has other, and even deeper lessons, in the illustration that is given us here of spiritual realities. For here is a parable of what our Lord, Who is the living Word, does with the powers of darkness. We should recall, in this regard, that the Ark of the Covenant contained the tablets of stone, with the word of the Lord inscribed on them, and that therefore the Ark symbolised that living Word from on high. There was a day when the powers of darkness laid siege to the Son of God, and made Him captive. They thought that they had thereby conquered the living God. But never were they so wrong. And if Satan had not been such a fool, he would have felt some disquiet in face of his seeming triumph, as he witnessed the quiet serenity with which Jesus approached His 'hour'. The truth is, Jesus let Himself be slain; His death was something He accomplished, just as God let the Ark be captured. But this was simply the way in - into the heart of the enemy's sanctum, and there Dagon the prince of darkness was toppled from his throne. And Christ, in His death, effected a way in to the inner sactum of evil, and spoiled principalities and powers, making a show of them openly, triumphing over them in His cross. Down he came, proud usurper that he was, and was set at naught. The strong man was bound and his house spoiled. This is the central truth of the gospel, from which all other instances and illustrations of it take their leaning, including the story of Dagon and the Ark. Once we establish this interpretation, we see how applicable it becomes when the living word d God is thrust into the human situation. For it was that word that toppled the Roman empire in the ancient world, and destroyed the idolatry of the mediaeval church at the time of the Reformation. What an encouragement is this! Let loose the word of God among men, it urges, for this is the way to cast down strongholds.

27) 6:1-12

The Philistines found the presence of the Ark a huge embarrassment to them, and they tried desperately to rid themselves of this awful liability they had brought upon themselves. It did not, apparently, occur to them to come to terms with the God of Israel and learn to worship Him; rather, they wished Him to leave them alone. This is an all too common reaction in men's hearts when the living God comes too close to them for comfort. The Gadarenes had such an attitude when our Lord cast out a legion of demons from the unfortunate man, in Mark 5:17, for they besought Jesus to 'depart out of their coasts'. He was too uncomfortable a Presence for them to want Him anywhere near them. The magistrates in Philippi took the same view of the Apostle Paul, after the dramatic conversion of the jailor following the supernatural earthquake that opened the doors of the prison where Paul and Silas were held. And when they found that Paul was a Roman citizen, they were unnerved and came and besought them to depart out of their city.

One further point should be mentioned before we leave this passage to consider the remaining verses of the chapter. The gifts which the Philistines sent back with the cart that bore the Ark back to Israel are evidence that they recognized the need for restitution and reparation for what they had done. This is an aspect of wrongdoing which has until recently gone unrecognized in our modern legal systems. The thief is punished at law for his crime, but the unfortunate victim of his theft may suffer considerably at his hands, without ever receiving restitution. In this sense human law falls short of 'putting matters right'. In divine law, however, not only must the penalty of the broken law be paid, but also the repair of the injury done must also be effected. This is in fact seen supremely in the Cross, where Jesus not only paid the price of sin, but also 'atoned' for man's lack of righteousness and the injury this caused to the honour and majesty of God, by offering a perfect righteousness on our behalf, in the death He died. All this is shadowed in dim outline in the action of the Philistines here. Even 'the new cart and the 'milch kine on which there hath come no yoke' have significance in this respect as suggestive of the phrase 'without blemish' in Israel's sacrificial cultus. How striking that there should be such groping after the truth in the dark heathenism of the Philistine religion!

28) 6:13-21

There was, understandably, rejoicing when the Ark of the Lord was returned to Israel, and the men of Bethshemesh duly fulfilled the requirements of the situation by slaying the cattle and offering burnt offerings and sacrifices to the Lord, using the wood of the cart for their fire. The men of Bethshemesh had good cause to rejoice, for here was the nation's sacred treasure, mourned by the people as lost irretrievably, brought back to them by their enemies, almost as if the angels of God had restored it to them. One commentator likens this to the return of God's people from the captivity of Babylon itself: 'When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream'. But it is to be feared that the men of Bethshemesh betrayed an attitude not much different from the Philistines, or indeed from that which had brought upon them the judgment of 'Ichabod'. For the profane curiosity they displayed in prying into the secrets of the Ark (19) - in marked contrast with the awe and reverence with which the Philistines had eventually sent the Ark back to Israel - was visited with summary punishment at the hand of the Lord. One recalls a later occasion, in David's time, when (see 2 Samuel 6) David was intent on bringing the Ark back to Jerusalem, that Uzzah irreverently put out his hand to steady (as he thought) the Ark in its progress, and suffered death at the hand of God. It does not do to treat holy things lightly or irreverently, and God will not hold us guiltless when we do.

29) 6:13-21

The bringing back of the Ark seems to have been a kind of test for Israel. Perhaps God wanted to see if His people had changed any, and were now a willing people responsive to Him. If this be so, this episode about the men of Bethshemesh makes it clear that the work of repentance and renewal was hardly begun, and that they had in fact learned little from the disaster earlier at Ebenezer, when the glory departed from Israel in that disastrous defeat by the Philistines. There are two things in particular we should notice here. The first is the difference in the divine reaction against the Philistines from that against the Bethshemites. With the former, it was troubling that came upon them; but with the Bethshemites, who were Israelites, slaughter was the punishment for their profanity. From which we may gather that the sins of the saints are far more serious in God's sight than those of the heathen. Sins against the light are always more critical than sins of ignorance. The other thing is that the eventual reaction of the Bethshemites to the Ark was no different from that of the Philistines. They also, like the Philistines, wanted it away, for it was a source of embarrassment and offence, not to say, fear, to them. It was too hot for them to handle, and they wanted rid of it. God was too uncomfortable a reality to have so near, and they did not think that religion should be taken to such extremes!

30) 6:13-21

Mention was made in yesterdays Note about the eventual reaction of the Bethshemites to the presence of the Ark in their midst as being little different from that of the Philistines, and that they also, like the Philistines, wanted it away, once they grasped the significance of having it among them. We said then that 'God was too uncomfortable a reality to have so near, and they did not think that religion should be taken to such extremes!' This is very similar to what happened to our Lord Himself, in the story of the gospels. When first He came preaching and ministering, the common people heard Him gladly, but when they began to realise the implications of His message, they walked no more with Him, and finally cried, 'Crucify Him'. Nor is it different today. How many men of God are at first hailed with enthusiasm at the beginning of their ministry and welcomed with open arms, but when it becomes clear to their congregations what their preaching implies, and it comes home to their hearts and the consciousness of a Divine Presence assails and troubles their consciences, how different everything becomes! It is more than some can stand, and they form an often implacable opposition to the work of God in their midst, and do their utmost to underline it. Well, the Philistines and the Bethshemites alike found to their cost that it does not go well with those who enter into a trial of strength with the living God!

31) 7:1-13

This chapter marks a climax in God's dealings with His people, as in the prophet Samuel's long and painstaking ministry. It will be useful for us, however, to pause for a little to take stock of the situation in Israel. Chapters 5 and 6 have recounted the 'adventures' of the Ark of the Covenant among the Philistines and elsewhere while it was absent from Israel, a period - as we see from 7:2 - of more than twenty years. This, then, was the position: the people of Israel had grieved God away by their sin, and for more than twenty long years He hid His face from them, in the sense in which Jeremiah spoke of such a predicament centuries later, when he lamented that God was 'as a stranger in the land' (Jeremiah 14:8). For all that long they had to wait for His return to them. Such is the one side of the picture - the desolation and barrenness of Israel, and the long years of spiritual and national oppression and captivity at the hands of the Philistines. The other side of the picture is this: during these twenty or more years there was the work and ministry of Samuel, calling the nation to repentance and new obedience. It is important for us to recognise that 7:3, 4 are in all probability descriptive of the whole of Samuel's ministry. It may well be that in these twenty long years Israel experienced a Philistine occupation; perhaps not: perhaps it was only a tribute state to the Philistines. But that was the context of the ministry of renewal, and the backcloth for the tremendous work of reconstruction and rehabilitation that took place, and needed to take place. That is to say these years were not what one would have called a propitious, advantageous time. This was the atmosphere in which Samuel fulfilled his ministry. In this regard the story about Dagon in 5:1-4 is a kind of prophetic preview, a symbol indeed, of what God was going to do in Israel, the pulling down of strongholds, and every high thing that exalted itself against the knowledge of God. And this, in fact, is what happened in Israel in the fulness of time, and recorded for us in this seventh chapter.

32) 7:1-13

There are many important lessons for us to learn from this passage, and they come out loud and clear for those who have ears to hear. For one thing, we are told in 2 that 'all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord'. F.B. Meyer points out usefully here that the nation was brought to a unity in its need: all the house of Israel. This was a big change from the anarchy which had increasingly prevailed for so long in Israel (cf Judges 21:25), when the nation was fractured and fragmented. Here, a unity developed, and the very depth of their crisis served to bring them together. One is obliged to say that this presents a contrast with the lack of such a spirit today when sectional interests, even in evangelical life, vie with each other in such tragic ways. For another thing, we are told in the same verse that Israel lamented after the Lord. This is the spirit of repentance without which there can be no national renewal. We have said that the very depth of the crisis brought them together, but it was not merely the depth of the crisis that did this. Just as today, there would be many then who could not of themselves have appreciated the depth of the crisis if it had not been brought home to them. And what brought it home to them was Samuel's ministry of the Word throughout the nation. We should recall what was said at the end of chapter 3:19 about the recovery of the Word of the Lord through Samuel's ministry. We must understand this as the underlying reality throughout the period. Indeed, this links up with 7:3, 4. It was the ministry of the Word that wrought this change and led to the national renewal, a long-term, patient and painstaking ministry, a consistent testimony to the things of God. Samuel put the Word of God back into the life of the nation, and into the heart of the nation's life.

33) 7:1-13

In this connection it is perhaps significant to realise that it must have been during these years that, under Samuel's influence, what became known as the schools of the prophets came into existence (cf 1 Samuel 10:3-5; 19:23, 24; 2 Kings 2). The great significance in this is that it is clear that a new era was dawning in which the priestly emphasis was giving way to the prophetic. Under the priestly system, the emphasis was all upon sacrifices. This was a God-given awareness that man's sin could be dealt with only by something outside man. But this was something which, in the very nature of the case, gave rise to the possibility of abuse; and abuses came, when the people could offer multitudes of sacrifices while their hearts were far from God. The prophetic ministry as a whole was a protest against this heartless and empty ritual, and its clarion note was the insistence that the problem of man's sin was a moral one that could be solved only by attention to moral issues; thus Samuel's strong moral challenge here. This does not mean that the prophetic strictures contradicted the earlier priestly insights, but rather reinterpreted them in such a way as to bring out the inner meaning and significance of the sacrificial system and lead to a true understanding of it. We may learn from this that any outward observance, symbolic, sacramental or otherwise, when divorced from essential moral content is meaningless and valueless, and constitutes a blasphemous parody of the truth of God. As F.B. Meyer finely says, 'The times demanded an order of men who should be trained in the law of God, who should be fitter to interpret the holy oracles to the people.' This then is one of the ways in which the Word was spread throughout the land in these days.

34) 7:1-13

It is salutary for us to remember and realise that national renewal does not, and cannot, come overnight. Those who work and labour must be prepared to be patient for long, weary, and seemingly unrewarding years before the hoped for and longed for awakening comes. And, withal, there is a loneliness that can often be very costly indeed for those who are called to such a task. But - and this is a wonderful comfort and encouragement - a man of God, though almost inevitably he begins by standing alone, does not remain alone. There is a spontaneous generation inherent in his work and in his message, and it begets men who are likeminded, who also become 'able to teach others also', and so the word multiplies. This may be one of the meanings of the phrases in Acts, 'the word of the Lord multiplied' and 'so mightily grew the word and prevailed'. This is one of the comforts, and the reassurances, God gives His men. The water is ever turned into wine, and the loaves and fishes are ever multiplied. But that would have been later - perhaps much later, when the word was well established and leading onwards to the climax of victory, renewal and deliverance. To begin with, and for a considerable time afterwards, Samuel must have stood alone. Indeed, there is a sense in which a man is committed to this kind of loneliness and isolation. For, when a new thing is to begin, it begins with one man and it takes time for it to get over to others. And for this, he needs to be a man sure enough of God and of his calling to be prepared and willing to stand alone, indefinitely, until God be pleased to work and to vindicate His great Name in him and through him.

35) 7:1-13

We continue to study this important passage, and now look at some of its details. The drawing and pouring out of water (4) was symbolic of pouring out their hearts in humiliation and surrender to the Lord (we wonder if this is the origin of the beautiful action of David with the water from the well of Bethlehem, in 2 Samuel 23:15?). An ancient (Chaldee) version of these words renders them thus: 'They poured out their hearts in repentance before the Lord.' The burnt offering wholly dedicated to the Lord (9) is a similar indication of this new, total consecration. There is no thought now of trust in their arms, or any superstitious confidence in the Ark - they looked to God, and they were not disappointed. There is a rich association of ideas here (9) in the combination of the sacrifice with prayer, and one is reminded of the well-known words in Revelation 12:11, 'They overcame him through the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they loved not their lives unto the death'. This is also how to deal with the Philistines that beset our lives and seek to lead us into bondage! When we stand where the Israelites then stood, in the place of repentance and submission to The Lord, we shall not plead in vain. We should not fail to note that spiritual revival meant national deliverance for Israel. In this connection it is interesting to know that the word 'discomfited' in 10, which in the Hebrew expresses 'the confusion of a sudden panic' and is especially used of supernatural defeats, is used several times in highly significance contexts in the Old Testament - in Exodus 14:24, where the Egyptians were troubled by the presence of the Lord in the pillar of fire; in Joshua 10:10, when Joshua put to flight the Amorites; in Judges 4:15, when Sisera and all his host were set at naught by Barak. The implication here is that the God Who thus intervened in days of old, does so again - and will do - when His people turn to Him in penitence and new obedience. His arm is not shortened that it cannot save (Isaiah 59:1).

36) 7:13-8:5

It is clear from the last verses of chapter 7 that there is a 'telescoping' of events here, and that after the climax of Mizpeh and the raising of the stone, Ebenezer, Israel began to enjoy a time of peace and prosperity that lasted over many years. And there is no doubt that, in response to Samuel's ministry, the people were constrained to put away false gods. One recalls what Paul says of the Thessalonians, centuries later, in a similar situation (1 Thessalonians 1:9, 10), 'You turn to God from idols, to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven, Whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, Who delivered us from the wrath to come'. The pattern, in whatever age, is always the same: heart repentance and a serious following after the Lord invariably brings a time of spiritual vitality and continuing dedication. It is not difficult to see this pattern in the past history of our own land, as for example in the 19th century, when the great evangelical movement that began in 1858/59 lasted in its three main phases until 1904, in the culmination of the Welsh Revival. One is reminded of Elijah's experience as he waited for the promise of rain on the top of Mount Carmel. So often did his young companion come back with the words 'there is nothing', before he eventually saw on the horizon a little cloud the size of a man's hand. How long some of us have waited to hear this word also! Please God we shall find grace to keep on waiting and labouring, even if, like Israel, we have first as a nation to pass through the bitter distress of national collapse and oppression before renewal is possible! We must note, then, that these last verses of chapter 7 give a summary of many years of Israel's ascendancy and spiritual vigour under Samuel's ministry. This is the background against which we need to view what is unfolded to us in chapter 8.

37) 8:1-5

We come in these verses to something that had lasting and fateful significance in the life and history of Israel, the establishing of the monarchy. As pointed out in yesterday's Note, the events unfolded in this chapter took place many years after the victory at Ebenezer and the long period of prosperity - indicated in 7:13-17. For Samuel is now old (1), and his sons have become judges over Israel. This solemn watershed - for so it must be considered - is particularly a matter in which we must view the pattern of events from a true perspective, in order to assess their significance and their place in the divine purposes. In our opening and introductory Notes on 1 Samuel, we indicated that the divine sovereignty is everywhere evident in this historical sequence. God invited men's cooperation, and when He received it His purposes were brought to fruition and they were blessed; and when that cooperation was withheld His purposes were still brought to fruition, but those who refused to cooperate suffered loss. The institution of the monarchy comes into the second of these categories, for the burden of the interpretation we place on the events before us now is that the monarchy should never have been. Theocracy, not monarchy, was the divine intention for the rule of Israel. But the institution of the monarchy does not mean that the divine purposes were frustrated. No: He turned it unto good - just as His sovereign power turns all evil to good - and used it in His divine purpose, overcoming the rebellion of His people, incorporating it indeed into His redemptive plan and used it for His glory. But His people suffered bitterly as a consequence of their determination as we shall see as the book of 1 Samuel unfolds. This, then, is the message: our God is marching on.

(Our contention that the monarchy ought never to have been is supported by the distinguished theologian Emil Brunner (Dogmatics II, p 274) where he maintains that 'from the point of view of the theocratic idea, the King is a very ambiguous phenomenon.... The monarchy exists in a kind of twilight between God's highest will for His people, and that which is in direct opposition to His will, owing to the blurring of the distinction between Israel and the surrounding nations, reducing it to the merely human level.')

38) 8:1-5

What we find in these verses, after the long years of spiritual prosperity and vitality, with the will of God at the centre of Israel's national life, is an atmosphere of spiritual declension - not, it is true, as low and abandoned as in the time of Eli many years previously, but significantly, low. Samuel's own sons had turned aside from the true way and the elders of Israel were lacking in true spiritual discernment. Now, it is in times of spiritual lukewarmness that wrong decisions are often taken, wrong actions performed, and wrong courses begun. There are several things to note here. For one thing these verses bear witness to the recurrent pattern of blessing and declension in the history of the people of God in every age. There is nothing permanent and nothing lasting, neither is there any height of spiritual dedication and attainment from which it is not possible for us to slip back, nor will there ever be until Jesus comes to reign. This bears witness to the fitful and partial nature of man's spiritual accomplishments. It has been so in every age - apathy followed by revival, revival followed by declension. This is why we must never limit the horizon of our hopes merely to spiritual awakening, but to the return of Christ Himself. Only His coming will do all that we long should be done. For another thing, we must look at the vexing problem which these opening verses of the chapter raise for us: why is it that the sons of such a giant in the faith went wrong? This is no easy question to answer, and we must beware of glib and ill-considered pronouncements on it. But there are several comments that may be made, and we shall turn to these in tomorrow's Note.

39) 8:1-5

The striking - and ominous - thing about this sad situation in Samuel's family, recorded here, is that it seems almost a repetition of the earlier tragedy of Eli's family, which led to the overthrow of Israel by the Philistines. And it is significant that it was the presence of Samuel's godless sons in Israel that seems to have led to the request the elders made for the appointment of a king to rule over the people - a request which, as we have already indicated, was to have the most momentous and far-reaching consequences for the nation. The question why this should have happened to Samuel's sons is, as we have said, a very difficult and perplexing one, and admits of no easy answer. It hardly seems possible, for example, that Samuel was blind to their spiritual inadequacy. This would be hard to believe; but if he had been aware of it, we can only assume that he allowed family bonds and considerations to override his spiritual judgment, and made the office of prophet and judge hereditary, apart from any considerations of their moral or spiritual fitness. Doubtless with the highest hopes that they would follow in his footsteps, he guided them into the work when he had better have made painstakingly sure that they were called to it and worthy of it. It was God Who made Samuel a judge and a prophet; it was Samuel who made his sons judges (1). That is where the problem lay. One recalls a similar kind of mistake, as we believe, made by Barnabas when he insisted to Paul that Mark, his nephew, should be allowed to accompany them on the second missionary journey, in spite of the fact that he had failed them on the first journey by forsaking them in a time of pressure. But Paul resisted this, believing that he needed to prove himself worthy. And we can hardly doubt that Paul was right. Barnabas allowed family considerations to intrude into the situation, when he would have been better to recognize Mark's failure for what it was, and act accordingly.

40) 8:1-5

But what was said in yesterday's Note was perhaps only one factor in the problem. There are two other things to take into consideration, the first of which is that Samuel in the nature of his work had an itinerant ministry, and would necessarily be away from home and family a good deal, perhaps too often, although on the Lord's work. And it is possible to neglect, albeit unconsciously and inadvertently, home duties and responsibilities in such a way and to such an extent that a grim and costly harvest was reaped in later years. That is indeed a solemn thought, and one that should give cause for sober reflection. The other consideration is this: How is it that so many Old Testament families seemed to go wrong? The suggestion has been made that a wrong view of marriage lies at the root of this. Seldom in the Old Testament do we see the woman as the true helpmeet, and therefore seldom does she take her place in the home as a guide and influence according to God's intention and appointment. It is a failure to live up to the revelation given in the word of God as unfolded in Genesis 2. This is how family life was so different in the New Testament, for Christ gave woman her true place, and thus brought about a return to the true order indicated in the original revelation. Whenever this is established, well-being results. We need to learn from this that conformity to God's holy Word in the major issues of life is a supreme necessity. Today, the emphasis is just as much and as dangerously in the opposite direction; instead of the unbiblical oppression of womankind that we undoubtedly see in the Old Testament, in disregard of the original revelation, we now have an equally unbiblical exaltation of womankind in the perverse feminism of modern days, reaching its height (we might well say 'depth') in the absurd 'political correctness' of altering the Divinely given Scriptures in order to excise any so-called sexist references that might conceivably 'offend' women's sensitivities about gender. We are amazed that major publishing houses should have demeaned themselves by going to such ridiculous lengths. This is surely trivialisation and irresponsibility run riot!

41) 8:6-9

These verses, as we have already pointed out, speak of something that had far-reaching and lasting significance in the life and history of Israel, namely the establishing of the monarchy. We now need to look into all that this fateful decision implied. The reason why Israel demanded a king was ostensibly because they were disenchanted with the evil sons of Samuel. But closer examination reveals a very significant thing and this is made only too clear in the words at the end of 5: 'Make us a king to judge us like all the nations', and reiterated more fully and determinedly in 19 and 20, after Samuel had 'spelt out' the implications of their fateful determination. There are two things to be pointed out here. The first is that when we look more deeply into the underlying reasons for the people's attitude, we become sadly convinced that they had failed to respond to the deeper insights of Samuel's ministry, even while going along so far with His thrust for repentance and turning from their idols. We are faced here with this fact: it is possible to respond in measure to God's word - as Israel did (cf 7:1-13), and know His blessing and reviving, and yet fall short the deepest in His purposes. What was missing in them was any real awareness of or insight into God's purpose in having called them at all. And it is significant that after the Exile in Babylon, there were no more kings in Israel, and no more idolatry either. The danger with conventional religion is that of being content with too little, without seeing deep down into the mind and purpose of God in His election of them. The second thing is that the whole point and purpose of having chosen Israel as His own people was precisely that they should not be like other nations, but different from them. And to think otherwise was a denial of that calling. God's people were to be 'a peculiar people', separate and different from others, separated unto Himself, and so it always is to be. The Church, as God's people, is called to be different from the world, and it is only as the Church maintains that separate calling that she will ever know the plenary blessing of God. Spiritual non-conformity is our calling, as Christians.

42) 8:10-22

Spiritual non-conformity, we said in yesterday's Note, is the calling of God's people, of whatever age, and the danger into which Israel fell here is one into which the Church repeatedly falls, to her loss and impoverishment in our own day. History proves that the Church has ever had most influence in the world when she has been most separate from the world, and most unlike it. But Israel was determined for her own way, in spite of the grim warnings that Samuel gave them about what would happen if they pursued their determined course and appointed a king, and these verses give a sad but true picture of what would be their lot under kings such as the nations had. One has only to read the prophets to see what a devastating fulfilment Samuel's words here had in the life of the chosen people. Indeed, it is precisely in the prophetic writings that it becomes all too clear that it was the kings of Israel and Judah that were mainly responsible for the nation's moral and spiritual collapse, and that it is this that lends credence to the contention that we have already made that 'the monarchy should never have been'. The 'monarchy' as a 'movement' is shown in the prophetic writings to have failed, and to have led to the exiles, first in Assyria in 732 BC, and later in Babylon in 597/586 BC. When we read again the awful catalogue in 11-18, and compare these verses with the burden of the pre-exilic prophets, what impresses us is the literal fulfilment of Samuel's prophecy. It is this that underlines the 'Nevertheless' in 19 only too clearly and demonstrates that they were quite without excuse.

43) 8:10-22

When we look back to what is said in 7-9, and the Lord's reaction to Israel's determination to have a king (cf also 19ff) problems do in fact arise in our minds. Israel's rejection, we are told, is a rejection of their God, not merely of Samuel, and yet God says in 9 and 22 'Hearken unto their voice and make them a king'. What can this mean? If it was not God's will for them to have a king, why this seemingly easy acquiescence in their wishes? Two things may be said about this. The first is that this may well be a condensed account that we have before us, and that it represents a fairly protracted debate between Samuel and the people, and that what is spoken of here is not so much an 'easy acquiescence' as a deeply distressing and regretful acceptance by God of their unhallowed attitude, in terms of what is said in Psalm 106:15, 'He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul' (cf also Ecclesiastes 11:9 and Isaiah 50:11). It is as if God were saying to them, 'If you are determined to go your own way, then go; but you must accept the consequences of this wrong decision'. We have, in fact, to distinguish between the directive will of God and His permissive will. The monarchy as a movement did not form part of God's directive will for His people at all, and it is awesome to think that from Saul to Zedekiah Israel was only in the permissive will of God. All this is not, of course, to say that God did not bless His people from this time onwards, but all along it was 'second best' blessings, with much sorrow and disaster mixed with them. This has relevance for the whole of spiritual life. When we get out of God's directive will for our lives, God does not cease to have dealings with us; but He blesses us only within the limits we ourselves set Him by our disobedience. Not only so: when He thus continues to bless us, we may be lulled into a false sense of security; but we should learn from this sad story that storms lie ahead for us, and at the end we shall lie down in sorrow. God is not mocked; whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

44) 9:1-27

We come with this chapter to the point in the story where Samuel passes from the limelight and Saul, the first king of Israel, takes his place. We should bear in mind the interpretation given in the past few Readings, that the monarchy was something that was never meant, and that in insisting on having a king, Israel got out of God's highest will for His people. This, as we have said, did not mean that He could not bless them further, but it does mean that He could bless them only within the limits and limitations they themselves imposed upon Him. But - that having been said - we need to adjust our minds to the new situation, for in fact the period of the monarchy stands in its own right, in spite of its not having been meant in the primary intention of God. And God incorporated it into His purposes - as He does with evil and rebellion. In this respect Jeremiah's story of the potter's vessel (Jeremiah 18:1ff) is significant here: 'He made it another vessel'. There is both solemnity and grace in this - solemnity in that the original divine purpose was turned aside; grace that it was made another vessel. God takes up the broken threads of His purposes, so to speak, and proceeds once more with His fractious, rebellious people, overruling all for His glory, and bringing forth out of it something even greater than could have been if the rebellion had not taken place. For, from the line of monarchy - Judah - there came in the fulness of the time, the Messiah, of the tribe of Judah. This is something paralleled on a grander scale in the story of the Fall and the promise of redemption itself. For, the redemption promised in Genesis 3:15 and brought to fruition in Christ in the fulness of the time, brought forth something far greater than would have been possible even if man had not fallen into sin. All the same, it was not a matter of God continuing to work as if they had not sinned. For He was intent on showing His people the inevitable consequences in their folly and sin, as He had warned them in 8:11ff. And this is how we are to look at the account of the choice of Saul as king.

45) 9:1-27

What was said at the end of yesterday's Note is a pointer to how we are to look at the account of the choice of Saul as king. For, as will be recalled, Israel had determined to have a king, to be like other nations. And God took them up on this, for the description of Saul is something that would appeal on the human, natural level - Saul was head and shoulders above his fellows and his natural gifts and qualities are underlined here. This is how other nations would judge, and it was as other nations would judge that Saul was chosen. But natural gifts and qualities are not the prerequisite of true moral and spiritual greatness, but merely the standards by which the world, the nations, make their judgment. God took them at their word, then, and applied the standards which apparently appealed to them so much - and with what disastrous consequences subsequent chapters will make very plain. How different it was with the choice of the next king, when the, humanly speaking, likely-looking sons of Jesse were passed over in favour of the youthful David, when God said 'Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart' (16:7). It is instructive to compare this later statement with the opening verses of this chapter; for they make very plain to us that God allowed them to make this wrong choice because they were so determined on choosing in their own way a ruler over them. Thus, we must remember that, while we are now dealing with the history of a man who said at the end of his life 'I have played the fool', it was no kind of fatalism that was responsible for his failure, but his own responsibility entirely. It was open to him to have succeeded, and he would have, if only he had obeyed God. And we must treat the story, not in relation to God's 'second-best', but in its own right, even although Israel's sinful attitude had fateful and inevitable consequences for Saul. This will be easier for us to grasp and understand, if we remember how it was with Judas Iscariot, whose betrayal was an inevitable and necessary part of our Lord's crucifixion; yet Judas was, and must be regarded as, a responsible being to whom, right to the end, Jesus appealed.

46) 9:1-27

We are therefore able to look at Saul's story as valid in itself as a call from God, and full of promise at its outset. In this regard we can see once again, as we saw earlier in the story of Samuel's call, the momentous happenings that flow from seemingly trivial and incidental circumstances, the meeting of Saul with the prophet Samuel through the insignificant accident of the lost asses belonging to Kish, Saul's father. This is often how the call of God comes, the 'still, small voice' rather than anything dramatic or spectacular and without any fanfare or trumpets (when mercy came to our lost world it was not brought by legions of angels or any divine spectacle but through a little, helpless baby born in a stable in Bethlehem - the weak things of the world!) The important thing in this connection is to recognise the voice of God in the insignificant. Sometimes, we may miss that voice through being insensitive to it. Before we go further, however, we need to take note of an astonishing fact in this story, which is that neither Saul nor his servant appeared to know very much about Samuel, the man of God. This is surely a very revealing glimpse into the spiritual state of Saul's family and home. Samuel, the nation's deliverer, was apparently not much the subject of conversation or discussion in that home. It would be almost incredible to suppose that this could possibly be in view of all that we have already read about Samuel's tremendous ministry, if we did not in fact know that in countless homes within the membership of the Church, names and movements of almost household words among the faithful, have scarcely been heard of. It is the tragedy of so many Kirk families that it is TV and radio entertainers, not men of God, that preoccupy the minds and leisure time of young and old alike in our society today. But for our encouragement we need to recognise that it is no problem for God to speak decisively to a man in such a situation of spiritual deadness and indifference, and call him to His service. Since this is so, we should believe more, and have more confidence in the regenerating power of the Divine Word than we often do. There is nothing too hard for the Lord.

47) 9:1-27

But we must also look at the other side of this story of the seemingly insignificant circumstance which led to Saul's call from God. For there is indeed an 'inside story', in the hidden workings of the Divine Spirit in bringing about the meeting between Samuel and Saul. In 15-17 we read that God had been silently and secretly planning the 'trivial circumstances' which the earlier verses of the chapter unfold. There were 'back-room' energies and purposive divine activity lying behind these - and behind also so many of our own personal circumstances in the good providence of God. And look at what is said about Samuel in 15: what intimacy of fellowship between him and the Lord is underlined here! But more: in 16 we are given the explanation of this 'behind the scenes' divine activity, in the compassion and love of God for His chosen people, in spite of their sins: 'I have looked upon My people, because their cry is come unto Me'. And so Saul is caught up into the divine purposes. Not only were the asses found (20), Saul himself was found of the Lord, and to his bewildered amazement the divine anointing is bespoke for him. Matthew Henry suggests that in appointing the shoulder of the meat (24) to Saul, Samuel was signifying his own standing aside in favour of the Lord's anointed (the shoulder being the priest's own portion, Leviticus 7:32). In view of the symbolic nature of much that was done that day, this is a likely interpretation and serves to confirm the solemnity of the transaction that took place, as the slumbering soul of Saul was awakened and introduced to a world he had not hitherto known existed.

48) 9:1-27

We are to take, then, the story of Saul as an evidence of the patience of God in terms of the graphic picture given us by Jeremiah of the Divine Potter, referred to earlier: 'So He made it again another vessel, as it seemed good to the Potter to make it'. God takes up the broken threads of His purposes, so to speak, and proceeds once more to work with His fractious, rebellious people, overruling all for His glory, and bringing forth something even greater (as in Genesis 3) than would have been if the rebellion had not taken place. The meeting between Saul and the prophet, taking place through the insignificant 'accident' of the lost asses of Kish, Saul's father, was a night scene of some tremendous significance! It reveals Samuel's own passionate longing and yearnings for the work of God, his hopes and fears, his desire for God's will to be followed through God's appointed man. And it is clear that this was something communicated to Saul, for the young man's soul was awakened and kindled, as he was 'introduced' to a strange, new spiritual world. And we should not miss the significance of what was said in v 27 about the word of God coming to Saul. This is surely of significance in relation to what is said in 3:21 about that word coming to Samuel. Here was the work of God continuing in spite of Israel's wrong move in choosing a king. This bears out once again the inexorable nature of the divine sovereignty which is not prepared to allow His purposes to go by default by the perversity of His people. It is not that He 'passed over' this: on the contrary, we shall see that Israel paid dearly, and continued to pay dearly, for their transgression and the long downward movement of the monarchy as the years passed. What we said earlier about God's sovereign activity is again demonstrated here - He invites men's cooperation in His work, and when it is given, His purposes advance and men are blessed in it; but when men refuse to cooperate, His purposes still advance, but men suffer much for their refusal. And, as C. S. Lewis says somewhere, 'It makes a great deal of difference whether we serve Him as John or Judas'!

49) 10:1-6

For the anointing oil used by Samuel, see Exodus 30:23-33. It was a type of the anointing of the Holy Spirit for service. The kiss was one of obeisance, and signified loyalty, not affection (cf Psalm 2:12). Three signs were promised by Samuel to Saul, as tokens that he was indeed the Lord's anointed. Commentators have seen symbolic meaning in these tokens, as giving messages from God to Saul, but the interpretations are various. Rachel's sepulchre would surely remind him of his mortality, and that, though he was a king, yet he must die like his forebears, and that he must therefore live as one that must give account. Every graveyard speaks this solemn message to men, if they had but ears to hear. How needful was the message for Saul, in view of his latter end! Bethel was sacred in associations to every Israelite. It was the place where God, the God of the covenant, met with Jacob. It is as if God were saying to Saul, 'What I was to Jacob, I will be to you'. Bread (3) is the staff of life, and this was the symbol of the provision God would make for His anointed, and indeed for all who will put their trust in Him. At the hill of God he was to meet a company of prophets, among and through whom he would receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit for his calling as king. God does not send men to His service and warfare on their own charges. It is well that we should see and understand how thorough and full the Lord's provision for Saul was, in view of the tragic failure of his reign. What more could have been given him and done for him than what we read here?

50) 10:6-13

There are several important matters that we need to note in these verses. It has to be conceded that different views are taken of what is said in them about Saul's spiritual experience and status, by evangelical and godly men. There are those who believe that, despite the terminology used in these verses, Saul was never a truly regenerate man, and that - in view of the circumstances of Israel's insistence in having a king to be like the nations around them - he could not be considered as such. On the other hand, there are those who take the terminology and phrases used of him here and later in the story, at face value, and - comparing them with other Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament - believe that he was a genuinely 'converted' man, and that therefore his fall must be regarded as having suffered loss rather than the loss of salvation, in terms of 1 Corinthians 3:15 and 1 Corinthians 9:27. There are things to be said on both sides of this issue; but if words and phrases are to be taken at face value, and held to have similar significance to comparable ones in other parts of Scripture, in Old Testament and New Testament alike, it must surely seem that Saul did undergo a genuine experience of regeneration that day. Samuel prophesied that he would be turned into another man (6), and in 9 we are told that God gave him another heart. This must surely mean that he became regenerate, and therefore his rejection must necessarily be thought of as his having become a castaway (1 Corinthians 9:27) and disqualified.

51) 10:6-13

The New Testament teaching given by Paul on this subject is solemn indeed, and repeated in more than one place, as we referred to in yesterday's Note, 'He shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire'. Another point to note is the association between the coming of the Spirit and the giving of the new heart. This is a very clear indication that conversion is in fact the work of the Spirit of God, and does not take place without that Spirit. The unmistakable evidence of the change of heart that had taken place in Saul is seen in the surprise and amazement among his acquaintances. Evidently he had not previous association with anything religious, and the change was, to them, a spectacular one. A change of heart, then, it should be remembered, is authenticated by a change of life. As Jesus said, 'By their fruits ye shall know them'. The curious question, 'But who is their father?' in 12 seems to be an answer to the amazed incredulity of those who could not imagine that Saul should have become the anointed of the Lord. What is being said is that just as the prophets whom Saul met had received their anointing from God, without reference to their background or heredity, so it was also with Saul. God had called him and anointed him not in relation to any family qualifications but because He had sovereignly purposed it. That is sufficient reason and ground, as this answer is meant to indicate.

52) 10:14-16

These verses contain a very interesting and significant lesson. Saul remained quite quiet, not to say secretive, about his calling and anointing. Why? We think this may well have been one evidence of the divine anointing upon him. It would have been easy for him to have pleaded his own cause with his uncle, and promote his own interest, but in humility and dependence on God he decided to leave it to Him to work out His own purposes. This might very well seem to go against the grain, humanly speaking, for after all one's own self-consciousness in the matter of one's deep convictions about what we are called to do for God can be very real, and natural desire would make one want to convince others as well. But the fact of the matter is, others sometimes do not want to be convinced, nay, are sometimes determined not to be convinced, and when this is so, anything we might say, however charged with conviction it might be, is liable to be misinterpreted as evidence of pride, arrogance or ambition. This is something that one learns at bitter cost, if too much concern and eagerness are shown to proclaim one's convictions. It is better - or rather, the situation being as it is, it is necessary - to maintain silence and keep one's own counsel, and let the outworking of events speak for itself. For when a real work of God is taking place, its fruits will eventually be seen to be undeniable and incontrovertible, and sufficient to convince the most intractable gainsayers. This is how it was with Saul, and the point is underlined again in 27, where in face of the sneers and contempt of the children of Belial the Lord's anointed held his peace. He knew his time would come. And come it did, as we shall see in the next chapter. God Himself vindicates His servants. This is the patience and comfort of His people.

53) 10:17-25

There is a starkness about Samuel's pronouncement in 19, in which he charges Israel with rejecting God, that seems to have been lost on the people in their excited determination to have a king. There is no sign of mourning or misgiving, but on the contrary a kind of jubilation which makes them shout, 'God (Whom they had rejected!) save the king'. All of which teaches us that there is undoubtedly such a thing as a false sense of well-being that can fill our hearts and beguile us when we have done wrong, in such a way that the qualms and pricks of conscience are quite set at rest. This is an ominous reality, and can prove, as we see in this case, to have disastrous consequences. The actual choice of Saul was made by lot, as the word 'taken' in 20 and 21 indicates. This was the usual method of finding the Lord's will in olden times (see Proverbs 16:33, 18:18), and may have been used in conjunction with the Urim and Thummim on the ephod of the high-priestly garment (see Exodus 28:30). When Saul was thus 'taken', he could not be found, as he was hiding 'among the stuff' - another evidence of his hesitancy to assert himself which we discussed in yesterday's Note. It may also, however, be that he sensed something of the tragic destiny that awaited him because of the disobedience of the people. Even if he did not, there would still be good cause for shrinking from his calling, for it is not a light thing to be the Lord's anointed for His work. We may recall how Moses shrank from the awe-full responsibility laid on him (Exodus 4:1-17), and also Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:6-10). The manner of the kingdom was once again set before the people (25), probably in the terms of 8:11-18, as a reminder of the warnings that had been given them. It was to be the 'handwriting against them' in the future. How solemn! God's Word performs this function for us today, for He makes it plain beyond all doubt what disobedience to His will brings in its train. The Scriptures are written for our learning and admonition.

54) 10:26- 27

These verses provide a study in contrasts giving a twofold reaction to the coming of the Lord's anointed - hearts touched, on the one hand, and on the other, contempt and sneering. It is ever so: on the Day of Pentecost, hearts were touched, to some purpose, but there were those who thought the disciples were drunk, full of new wine. It is the 'savour of life unto life' and the 'savour of death unto death' of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 2:16, and which our Lord Himself experienced in His own ministry - aye, and experiences still today, for there are still those who say in their hearts, 'How shall this man save us?' and go about to establish their own righteousness. And Christ in the meanwhile holds His peace, for today is the day of His patience.

Let us concentrate, however, on the tremendous possibilities expressed in the words of 26 - 'men whose hearts God had touched'. This is the great need in any work of the Lord, men fired with a holy constraint and with hearts given over to Him for His purpose. It is this that enables men to go on and on in faithfulness and loyalty, come what may, without faltering or deviating from the central realities of the work. Men of this ilk are worth their weight in gold, and only they can enter in the fullest sense into the agonies and joys of service, and withal into a fellowship with one another that amidst the disciplines and burdens of the work is perhaps the sweetest thing on earth, next to fellowship with the Lord Himself. God is no man's debtor, and He sees to this.

55) 11:1-4

As we continue in the story of Saul we need to recognise that there is a certain perplexity about how to interpret it, and almost an ambiguity about it. On the one hand, we have pointed out that the monarchy was a tragic mistake - Israel, determined to have a king to be like the other nations, stepped out of God's will for them. And there is a sense in which the king they got - Saul - was bound to 'go bad'. But, on the other hand, as we have already said, we must not think of him as a puppet in God's hands, or regard the outworking of the story in any fatalistic way. Nor must we allow such fatalistic ideas to colour our thinking about him. The simplest and most direct way to think of his story is that it is the story of a man who began well, and continued well for a considerable time; but who later fell, and fell badly, falling away disastrously from grace, and ending his days in ignominy. This does not mean, or imply, that his spiritual experience of 'receiving another heart' was false or counterfeit; or that the things that happened in the earlier days of his kingship were infused with sinister undertones, and therefore must be regarded with suspicion. Rather, the situation should be looked at in terms of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:27 about the danger and possibility of falling away and becoming a castaway. Paul kept his body under, and brought it into subjection, to avoid this very possibility. This is the way to avoid what happened to Saul. He could have avoided it, if he continued as he began. This is the point!

56) 11:1-4

An illustration from another part of the Old Testament will help us to understand the point made in yesterday's Note. How do we construe the story of Solomon, David's son. He began well, very well, and under his reign the kingdom wonderfully prospered. But, alas, in later years he deteriorated very badly and fell into disgrace. But there was nothing fatalistic in his declension; and the fact that his later years were so dark and tragic does not mean that the years of his ascendancy must be held to be suspect. This can be said also about Saul's early years, and we are best to treat them as good years, before he went wrong. This actually serves to underline and highlight a very important lesson, which is that of the solemnity of the situation - and what might have been, if only Saul had continued as he began. The grace of perseverance and continuance is a much to be desired blessing. One thinks in this connection of the disquieting estimates of the 'fall out' of many young people within a few years of their initial profession of faith and commitment to Christ. We would like to think that many young folk would take heed of this, and pray that God would give them the grace of continuance and perseverance in their Christian lives. That being said, however, we need also to add a more hopeful comment, which is blessedly true of so many young folk, and say with the Apostle, 'But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak. For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have showed toward His Name...' (Hebrews 6:9, 10).

57) 11:1-15

The record of the victory over Nahash and the Ammonites was as decisive as any of the deliverances recorded in the Book of Judges, and comparable indeed to the defeat of the Philistines at Mizpeh recorded in 7:1-13. All the classical ingredients of a divine intervention and vindication are present in it...and it was by the coming of the Spirit of the Lord on Saul (6) that it was accomplished. It was a decisive answer to Saul's detractors who had said (10:27) 'How shall this man save us?' This was how, with a vengeance! Perhaps the most striking thing, however, was the low-spirited and pusillanimous attitude of the men of Jabesh, in face of the enemy threat. Compromise was the only thought in their minds and, as always, compromise led to something worse, and they were devastated by the terms given them by the Ammonites. A vicious circle operates here, of course; the more one 'gives in' to lawlessness the more is demanded; and the more that is demanded, the more dispirited one becomes, and the more disposed to both 'giving in' and 'giving up'. This is the story of many a spiritual declension, and the only way out is a decisive stand, and the recovery of a fighting spirit. Without this latter, defeat is a foregone conclusion. Some battles in the spiritual life are lost before they are even begun, because a wrong attitude at the outset makes defeat inevitable. Not for nothing does the Scripture say, 'Resist the devil and he will flee from you'. Some people collapse like a pricked balloon at the first sign of opposition, and give in without a struggle; the whole atmosphere of their thinking becomes a breeding-ground for despair. We need a war cry such as is found in Micah 7:8 to put mettle into us. This is what Saul did for the Israelites, as we see in the main part of the chapter.

58) 11:1-5

We have pointed out how Saul was content to bide his time, and let the Lord vindicate His choice of him, and now we see how well advised he was to do so. Here was the strategic moment for him to come into his own, and he did, to some purpose, in the great rallying cry that sounded throughout Israel. In a moment, almost, the entire psychological makeup of the people was changed, and from a cringing, poor-spirited company they were turned into a mighty army under the discipline and control of any able and determined general, who led them unhesitatingly and unmistakably to a resounding victory. Samuel's prophecy about his being 'turned into another man' was amply and dramatically fulfilled here, for the rustic, farm-minded cattleman becomes a great and successful soldier. When the Spirit anoints and appoints, he equips and enables. There is a faint reflection here of the tremendous endowment that came upon the powerless disciples on the day of Pentecost. One has only to think of what Peter was like, in Pilate's Judgment Hall, to see the utterly amazing transformation in the flaming and fearless - and we may say, irresistible - preacher in Jerusalem. 'Tarry ye in Jerusalem until ye be endued with power from on high', they had been told. In this light we may understand more clearly the significance of Saul's reticence and quiet hesitancy in thrusting himself forward. He was waiting for God's time, like John the Baptist, who was in the deserts until the time of his showing to Israel. There is nothing in the world so devastatingly effective as the action of a man whose hour has come.

59) 11:1-15

One supremely important lesson here is that the Spirit's Presence and anointing are associated with the production of character in a man. What a man is determines the quality and work of all he does; and what we are depends what we are prepared to be made by the Word, and on whether we are prepared to sit long enough under it to be really changed at the deep levels of our being. And there are evidences in this record of just how real the disciplines were, and the inward battles Saul fought and how significant they were in shaping his life and service for God. This is in line with New Testament teaching as we may see from what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:4 about being 'put to the test then entrusted with the gospel. Approval for service is not gotten in service first, but in life and character. Paul thinks of service for God as a stewardship, and obviously no master is going to commit responsibility to a man without some idea of whether or not he is fit to bear it, and discharge it honourably. Why should it be thought any different with God and the work of His kingdom? F.B. Meyer has a helpful passage in his commentary on this chapter, in which he insists that if a man wins the victory within himself he will win the victory outwardly: 'It is just in proportion as we are able to overcome, as Saul did in his heart, that we shall overcome, as he did, against the Ammonites'. We need to look at Saul's attitude towards his call and anointing, in this connection. We have already referred to his reticence and unassuming modesty about what had happened to him, and commentators are agreed that it could only have been modesty that made him 'hold his peace' (10:2). But do we conceive how many deaths he had to die to achieve and maintain this? Here was a man who at this point had conquered himself, who had 'kept his body under', and was under authority, therefore authority was given to him (6ff), and at the appropriate time he waxed mighty for God and His people. Such is the heritage of those who allow God to have His way with them.

60) 12:1-5

This chapter brings us to the record of Samuel's retiring testimony before the people as he bears witness to the life he has lived among them. It is a moving testimony and indeed a moving chapter with important lessons for us to learn. In the midst of the solemn and searching lessons that this book has had to teach us thus far, it is striking to see, in the contrast that the chapter unfolds, the two possibilities that it presents for the people of God: on the one hand a life of faithfulness and consistency from beginning to end, as shown by Samuel, with the divine authentication upon him, and with the divine mercy mediated by him through his life of prayer. It is surely good for us to be reminded of the possibility of thus living blamelessly for God. On the other hand, we have seen the fitful and checkered history of Israel moving out of the directive and highest will of God into a 'second-best' experience, with - as we shall see more and more - temporal judgments and disasters dogging their footsteps. At the outset, therefore, the message for us lies in the question that all this poses for us: which pattern illustrates our spiritual life, Samuel's or Israel's? What we need to realise is that to live as Samuel did is not the prerogative of a few specially anointed people. There is nothing exclusive about it in the sense that we may not also walk thus. It is all a question of being deeply willing and determined that it will be so. What Samuel's glowing testimony says to us is this: 'Aim high. Get your sights up. Enthroned the will of God in your hearts'. Remember what was said of Mallory and Irvine, who were lost on Mount Everest, 'When last seen, they were still climbing'.

61) 12:1-5

What a testimony these verses give to the quality of Samuel's life! It is the sheer consistency of it that so impresses us. Here was a man who never wavered from beginning to end for his work for God. Throughout his long and honoured career until his old age, his testimony was pure. And he lived thus, alike through times that were lean and barren of spiritual vision, and amid the peculiar perils that attend spiritual awakening and renewal. What need for such a testimony in our own day, when there is so much that is unedifying, when men who do not live moral and clean lives are elevated to positions of eminence in Government and Cabinet, when it is only too easy for private misdemeanour and public deceit to be sussed out'. F.B Meyer, in his commentary here says, 'Oh, that all our public men today were as clean-handed and pure-hearted as Samuel was! That when the records of their actions are rehearsed before the judgment-seat of God, it may be discovered that those who have been high in office have not prostituted their high position for their own emolument, or acted for private gain, but that they were clean-handed and pure-hearted. Happy is that nation whose public men are free from all complicity with bribery and from making profit out of the necessities or the sore distress of their fatherland!' What is it that can enable a man to live in such a way? The answer is surely found in the attitude expressed in the words from the story of his conversion and call to service, 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth'. He had an open ear, an open mind, and an open heart, to the will of God, and he committed himself to a total and continuing crucifixion of all within him that militated against this.

62) 12:6-15

Samuel rehearses the checkered history of Israel in these verses. This is something that we have frequently seen in other Old Testament studies. We have seen it, for example, in our readings in the Book of Joshua, when we made reference also to even earlier utterances by Moses; and a New Testament instance readily comes to mind in Stephen's rehearsal in Acts 7 of Israel's history, when he charged the leaders of his day in the terrible words 'Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost'. This, in effect, is what Samuel does here. 'Look', he says to them, 'at what you have done in the past. You have repeatedly rebelled against the Lord, and you have confirmed all your previous history in what you have now done, in determining to have a king'. But there is more; in this rehearsal of their past history, Samuel is drawing a contrast between what they did formerly in their predicaments when beset by their enemies, and what they were doing now. In the past it was certainly their rebellion and sin that brought the enemy upon them, but when they saw their need they cried to the Lord, and He delivered them. But now, in face of the present enemy, they were turning, not to God as formerly, but to a king. This was the significant difference that boded ill for them. (This is yet another evidence of the momentum that sin tends to have within itself, because it is never static, but becomes worse and worse as time goes on). For all that, however - and here we see the grace of God towards His people even in the wrong choice they had made - Samuel assured them in 14 that even then, with their king, if they were prepared to be faithful to God He would still bless them, albeit within the limits they themselves had set Him. O the forbearance of God! How longsuffering and gracious He is!

63) 12:16-22

The thunderstorm mentioned in these verses was clearly an act of God, and a rebuke to the faithless people. The wheat harvest (17) was from mid-May to mid-June, in a dry season in which there was ordinarily no rain from April to October. A thunderstorm at that time was therefore an unheard of phenomenon, and must be regarded as a supernatural and miraculous sign. What was its significance? It may be that there were echoes from the story of Moses, and the thunderings at Mount Sinai, and that Samuel was saying 'This God is the One you have turned your back upon'. Did they see this, and was this what brought the discomfiture and conviction upon them mentioned in 18, 19? It is significant that the sign that vindicated Samuel's ministry among them discomfited Israel, just as the pillar of cloud and fire discomfited the Egyptians while comforting and assuring Israel of old. Here, things were worked very differently, as they learned to their cost, for doubtless they suffered from the effects of the untoward storm in the ruin of at least part of their harvest. Things often go wrong materially when people are spiritually at odds and out of joint with God. But there is encouragement here also and we do well to ponder Samuel's assurance to the people in 20-22. Evil does not have the last word in the human situation. There is grace to reclaim us from our brokenness, if only we are prepared to start again with God. Sometimes the damage done by our sin is irremediable, in the sense that we can never undo its effects, but God can still take us up and make us 'another vessel' (Jeremiah 18:4), if only we cleave to Him and 'turn not aside' (20). In 22 we are given the touchstone of covenant grace: it is for His great Name's sake, not for anything in us that God abides faithful. What a glorious and comforting word, yet how solemn.

64) 12:23-25

Here is almost the last glimpse we have of Samuel, so far as his public ministry is concerned. What nobility is here! After a lifetime of faithful service he has been rejected by the people, and yet in spite of their ingratitude his heart is towards them and he remains their faithful shepherd. There is a parable here. At the end of the day, when all his public work is done, Samuel becomes the great intercessor. Old and grey-headed, his chief work henceforth is to be prayer for the nation. Not that he had not been a man of prayer throughout - he could only have done what he did by prayer - but now in an especial way he is to enter into a new dimension, so to speak, of service. Is this a word to some older Christian who feels his work is done? Is God calling you - sparing you - to a secret ministry of intercession? Some of us who are engaged in the ministry of the word have good cause to thank God for elderly and even aged friends who have lifted us up to God in warrior-like intercession and shaped and fashioned the course of our ministries by the virtue of prayer poured out in the secret place. It is not too much to say, in this connection, that some people's definitive service for God has not really begun until after the age of seventy. Samuel felt the burden of this so strongly that he thought it would be sin not to continue in prayer for the people he had loved and led these long years. Neglect of prayer is sin. Had you thought of that?

65) 13:1-7

The AV reading in 1 is certainly misleading and erroneous. The Hebrew original reads, 'Saul was...years old when he began to reign; and he reigned...and two years'. Even if we did not know this, however, a moment's consideration of the verses that follow would make it clear that the events of this chapter must belong to a time many years after that of the previous chapter. For when we look back to 9:2, Saul is spoken of as 'a choice young man', whereas here in this passage his son Jonathan is fully grown and a leader in the army. Clearly, therefore, a considerable passage of time must have elapsed. And when we recall that in Acts 13:21 Saul's reign is said to have lasted for forty years, it becomes clear that the events which are described in this chapter belong to a much later part of Saul's reign, and that therefore the years of his ascendancy are not recorded for us. This is of course in line with the purpose of the inspired historian, for he is concerned to portray the inevitable downfall of a reign which began in contravention of God's directive will. We have already pointed out that when we say that Saul had to come to grief because of Israel's fateful and rebellious choice of a king, we need to qualify this statement in such a way as to prevent any idea of a fatalistic power being at work, in the sense that Saul could not help himself. For he was a moral agent and responsible for his own wilfulness and disobedience. Yet it had to be in the sense that it was wrong from the start. God could not allow kingship to succeed, for that would prove Him wrong. The fact is, there is a chain reaction in sin - one sin makes us commit others also, and we are caught in a relentless wheel of our own making. Once we sin, sin calls the tune, not we.

66) 13:1-7

If we take what is said in Acts 13:21 literally, that Saul's reign lasted for forty years - and whether this is a literal figure or a symbolic one need not preoccupy us overmuch - it becomes clear that the events recorded in this chapter belong to a time (as indicated in yesterday's Note) when the first ominous signs began to appear that all was not well with his kingship. For although Saul gathered an army (4), it is clear that morale was not very high (6), and it may well be that disenchantment was showing and that the people were regretting their choice and losing confidence in him. His confident action in dismissing the great part of his army (2) - as if a mere detachment of men could deal with the Philistines - did not 'come off'. This speaks of a fleshly carelessness in the king which was very different from the spiritual dependence on God that characterised his earlier days. This was one telltale sign among others which led to his ultimate downfall. There is another consideration that points to the later date of this chapter. The Philistine threat mentioned in 3 was clearly a long-standing reality for Israel, and indicates that they were under the Philistine domination here, and had been for some time: for - for one thing - Jonathan's attack on the garrison at Geba (3) was a kind of 'commando raid', which roused the ire of the Philistines, who determined to make an example of them for their temerity in making such an attack. This is what precipitated the Philistine reprisal mentioned in 5ff. For another thing, the conditions described later in the chapter, in 19-22 bespeak a very real predicament of oppression within Israel, who had been rendered a crippled people, with armament facilities greatly reduced. All that follows in the remainder of the chapter serves to indicate that Israel was in sore straits indeed.

67) 13:8-14

The 'seven-day' tarrying mentioned in 8 needs to be understood as pointing back to 10:8. If our interpretation and estimate of Saul's reign mentioned in previous Notes is valid, we must assume that Samuel's command in 10:8 must have become an ongoing directive for the king and doubtless repeated at frequent intervals down the years, as a guiding principle for Saul's life and experience. For it said, in effect, to him, 'In times of crisis, Saul, restrain your impetuous nature, and wait upon God in His holy place. Wait till you receive His guidance' - which would come to him through Samuel the prophet. (One recalls how often we are told of David that he 'enquired of the Lord' before his battles). But this Saul did not do; He presumptuously intruded into the priestly office, signifying his taking matters into his own hands, attempting indeed to force God's hand in the matter. Samuel's blunt words to him indicate that he was being tested by God and had been found wanting. This 'incident' was very revealing, as incidents often are, as with startling and awful clarity they light up a whole character and show us a whole life in its true perspective, for what it really is. A destiny was involved in that single action, so far as Saul was concerned, and he forfeited the kingdom when by obedience and submission he might have had it established in his family forever. (Saul, was not deposed from the throne at this point; it was the succession that he forfeited here, and a later disobedience (15:26) lost him the throne also).

68) 13:8-14

The 'sentence' passed on Saul in 14 may be thought to be harsh and extreme. Several things have to be said here. We need to understand what the sentence actually was. It was the succession that was taken from him, not the throne - that was taken away from him later through further and continued disobedience (cf 1 Samuel 15). The seeming harshness of this is explained not only by the fact that this was not an isolated act, and not to be construed as one, but the expression of an attitude perhaps throughout many years; but also - more importantly - by the fact that God could not allow this attitude to be transmitted - its terrifying mushroom cloud would have wrecked His purposes and at all costs it needed to be checked. One thinks in this connection of a New Testament example, in the seeming 'harshness' of the divine visitation on Ananias and Sapphira - the same danger, and the same solemn dealing with it! One thinks also of the harshness of commando training during wartime as a case in point. Nothing but the best would do, and this involved extremes of training, to make men what they needed to be, and it was a very costly discipline indeed, with high standards of training far beyond the training of ordinary soldiers. This, alas, is where Saul did not make it. He wanted the 'ordinary standards', when he was called to a much more than ordinary calling. This is where the standard to 'enthroned the will of God in our lives' is so important. God must have this for His work, and if we are come to the kingdom for such a time as this, should we not be prepared for it, whatever it cost?

69) 13:15-23

The disobedience of Saul had its inevitable effects on the fortunes of the nation - this is the constant and almost monotonous lesson of the historical books of the Old Testament - and Israel appears to have fallen under the domination of the Philistines once again, who imposed a rigorous disarmament regime upon them. The raids mentioned in 17 may have had as their purpose the destruction of Israelite forges and the capture of their smiths, so as to prevent them from making arms for battle. At all events, the Philistine yoke came upon the hapless people once again, not to be lifted until David, the man after God's own heart, was raised up as their deliverer. Nothing could illustrate more clearly than this see-saw of defeat, victory and defeat that Israel's prowess in war was not a natural attribute, as was the Philistines', but a divinely given grace, and therefore conditioned and regulated not by military competence so much as by moral and spiritual considerations. To obey is better not only than sacrifice, but better also than any other possible consideration, in the sense that when true heart obedience to God is lacking, no other kind of competence, however impressive and comprehensive, will avail anything in the service of God. Well would it be for us all if we could learn this lesson! The lesson here is only too clear. God needs men for whom His divine will is everything: unquestioning faith and utter obedience. He must have this for His work. The future depends on it.

70) 14:1-15

The qualities manifestly lacking in Saul, and underlined in yesterday's Note, are now graphically exemplified in Jonathan his son, in the events recorded in this chapter. There is a very considerable encouragement for us in the story about Jonathan. He was never in the forefront of the developing record of Israel's experience, as Saul, Samuel or David were. That was not his lot. His role was always a supportive one as we may gather from the record of his wonderful friendship with David. In this, he was like Barnabas in the New Testament - never in the forefront of the work of God as Paul and Peter were, but an encourager, a son of consolation, and a good man to have around in time of need. But for this you still need to be a certain kind of man, with the Lord's will enthroned in your life. And this is how it was with Jonathan. The contrast between the atmosphere in the previous chapter and here in this one could not be more complete. Everything in chapter 13 was out of joint, because the man was out of joint; but here everything was right because the man was right. And here we have an illustration of what can be done when God is allowed to guide and control. Humanly speaking, it was a far more reckless and rash exploit than that recorded in 13:1-7, and the odds against them were infinitely greater, but Jonathan's boldness came from the Lord (6), and it was in submission to the divine control that he won this notable victory. We should not miss the contrast presented between Saul and Jonathan in these verses. We are told that he did not tell his father of his intention (1), and this may mean that even then Jonathan knew the latter's limitations and inconstancy. It may also indicate his impatience with the brooding, sulking spirit which Saul seems to have been showing (2), following Samuel's rebuke in the previous chapter. He is not the first, or the last, to fall out with God in sulky displeasure when rebuke comes; but God is not prepared to be blackmailed by His children in this way, and the events which follow demonstrate that God was well able to get on without him.

71) 14:1-15

If we were to ask how it was that Jonathan was so different in spirit from his father one would have to say that the influence for good in his life may well have been Samuel. And how glad Samuel must have been to see the Word at work in this young man. There can surely be little doubt that Samuel's ministry was what shaped and moulded his life, instead of his father Saul, who should have had the definitive influence upon him. This being said, we should note that the accepted wisdom that with a bad father it was likely that there would be a difficult son was not fulfilled in this situation; which should make us beware of making too facile judgments in such matters. Here is a bad father and a good son! We had better not fall into the error of taking refuge in a difficult heredity, and make this an excuse for our problems. Scripture has a disturbing way of debunking this, and calling our bluff. One has only to think of Boaz, in the Book of Ruth, who as the son of Rahab might have been excused for having all sorts of chips on his shoulder, with such a pedigree, yet he stands out in the Old Testament story as a large-hearted, generous and well-saved man. There is such a thing as the entail of grace, that can break into the darkest and most deprived of backgrounds, to bring forth beauty and loveliness in human lives. There is a well-known word in Deuteronomy 32:30 which says, Two shall put ten thousand to flight. This is how it was with Jonathan and his armour-bearer - as if to show how easy it all is when God's will is paramount. God is even prepared to send earthquakes to help matters out, when a man is light with Him!

72) 14:1-15

Jonathan's action here affords us a useful study in divine guidance. The spirited and positive attitude he shows, in face of the dispiritedness of his father and the low morale of the army, makes it much more likely to be God's will than the other. And having assumed this, he was then prepared to go step by step to ascertain how he must next act. There is a fine inter-weaving here of the general, over-all will of God and the detailed outworking of it, and we may be confident that when we are sure in principle that He is leading, He will also make clear each particular step when it needs to be taken. Thus Jonathan 'tested' the situation to seek the mind of God (9, 10), and he was not left in doubt as to what to do. But this procedure is valid only when the first basic principle has been established, namely that God did in fact want Jonathan to venture forth in the first place. Apart from this, all the testings in the world would not have led to a sure indication of God's will. It is when we try doors here and there to see if they will open for us without being sure in the first place that we should be trying doors at all, let alone going forward, that the troubles all arise. For if we are determined to find an open door in one particular direction, when other considerations show that it is unwise to be looking in that direction at all, God will not feel obliged to step in to prevent our making fools of ourselves. We should have had more sense in the first place, and we are left to learn the hard way that it does not do to get out of step with God or to step out ahead of Him.

73) 14:16-23

Did Jonathan know - could he possibly know - how big a thing this adventure was going to turn into? The fact is, when God is given a chance, there is almost no limit to the surprising and indeed revolutionary changes that can take place in an impossible situation. He sent an earthquake on this occasion, and spread such confusion and panic in the ranks of the Philistines that they fought against each other. Thus easily does He confound His enemies and ours, and we should trust Him more for such demonstrations of power, and expect them more than we often do. But we should bear in mind how this glorious victory was initiated. It was through one man who was right with God and willing to be led of Him, and it was accomplished in the face of, and in the presence of, the faithlessness of his father. Individual, aye, isolated, conviction is not in vain! There are 'signs following' when a man allows himself to be the instrument of the divine purpose. Earthquakes, of one kind or another, are ever the sign of resurrection power (Matthew 28:2). These are lessons that have relevance both for the personal battles which we fight in the Christian life, with temptation, for development, growth and character, and for those in the Church, at home and abroad. Jonathan's victorious foray is paralleled in the mighty forward movement in the Acts of the Apostles. Saul's abortive efforts are, alas, all too often reflected in the Church's experience in our own day, and if this be so, then we are faced in this passage with some very disturbing questions indeed. Is there something wrong at the heart of the Church's life today? Is there a vision that has faded? An obedience that has been withdrawn? A consecration that has been lost? Is there something out of joint in the experience of God's people that so many things should be in such a critical state, and so little evidence of 'signs following'?

74) 14:24-35

It is very noticeable how the whole atmosphere of this chapter changes when Saul comes on the scene. There can be little doubt that Jonathan's daring escapade invoked a great deal of strenuous effort and endeavour - it is never easy or 'a piece of cake' to accomplish the will of God - but there was a 'flow' about that endeavour, and a purposefulness very evident in the record. But as soon as Saul appears, tension and difficulty begin once more to rear their ugly heads. When a man is out of joint spiritually, everything around him is inevitably infected. This could hardly be otherwise: after all, if life is undergirt by precise moral and spiritual laws, it is inevitable that sin in a man's heart will have repercussions all around him, and indeed in proportion to the measure of his influence and importance in society. As the king of Israel, Saul could hardly expect that the effect of his 'out-of-joint-ness' could be confined to a narrow circle. Jonathan's comment on his father in 29 is a sad and grim one, but it was the simple truth, for Saul had troubled the whole land. The vow imposed by him on the people (24ff) was a very ill-advised one, and this is made very plain in the rest of the chapter. There are two possible interpretations of it: the first is that it was a religious exercise, imposed to promote the cause of victory, but it failed in its purpose for the very good reason that no amount of religious discipline can compensate for a disobedient heart, or act as a substitute for conformity to God's will. In different circumstances, such a fast could have availed much, but here it was abortive, because the man who ordained it was wrong at heart. It is easier to do such things, even when they involve great inconvenience and even sacrifice, than to obey God. To obey Him means crucifixion and death to self, and any inconvenience is better than that to the man who is intent on his own way.

75) 14:24-35

The second interpretation of the vow is that it was a discipline imposed upon the reluctant army due to Saul's relentless determination to get the utmost out of the victory over the Philistines. But this too came to naught, and in fact defeated its own purpose, for the army became so weak and faint that it could no longer fight at all. There is a lesson here for us. Saul was being driven by a harsh fanaticism that made him - and his treatment of the army - inhuman. This is never the effect of the good Spirit of God upon a man, and when we see such a spirit we must recognise its sinister origin and remember that there is a zeal that is not according to knowledge. Furthermore, the false discipline imposed on the army led to a highly unfortunate reaction (32) which caused them to transgress the law. It would have been better for them to have ignored the king's foolish vow and eaten the honey (26), thus preventing the unseemly display of inflamed and uncontrolled appetite to which they were eventually driven. Harsh, unwise, and inhuman discipline generally brings some such reaction in its train, especially when that discipline is senseless and imposed as the expression of a strong personality determined to exercise absolute rule over those in its charge. And nowhere is this seen more tellingly than in the sensitive unit of the family. Here is a realm where bitter harvests are reaped by harsh and loveless disciplinarians who give vent to - and expose - their own inner disorders and inadequacies in the imposition of autocratic disciplines upon their children. Mixed-up, delinquent parents are often a far more intractable problem than their counterparts in the young generation.

76) 14:36-52

These final verses of the chapter continue to show Saul in an unhallowed and ugly light, the more so because of the religious veneer that the account unfolds. One cannot but be struck by the way his harsh and graceless attitude was clothed with religious garb. It did not seem to strike him that the silence of God, indicated in 37, in face of his seeking divine counsel, might have had another and simpler explanation than the one he placed upon it and that the process of taking lots was an empty charade in view of his own 'out-of-joint-ness'. One marvels at his easy assumption that the sin lay in the breaking of the vow, mentioned earlier in the chapter, rather than in the ill-advised presumption that made it in the first place. There are none so blind as those who will not see. The process of taking lots eventually revealed Jonathan's violation of the vow in taking the honey (27), and Saul was so entrenched in his fanaticism that he inhumanly insisted on the death penalty for his own son. Fortunately, the people showed more sense (45) and refused to allow him to take such a dastardly course. In this instance, the voice of the people proved to be the voice of God more than the lot did in 41, 42. But the frightening thing, from the points of view of the spiritual 'mechanics' of the situation, is that Saul seemed to be in the right and yet was so radically and utterly wrong. This should teach us to view with great suspicion any kind of seemingly foolproof 'spiritual' reasoning that leads men into inhumanity and callousness. True faithfulness to God and to His honour and glory will never make us hard and forbidding. We should always remember what was said of the first disciples of Christ - men who lived more faithfully and closely to Him than most - that they had favour with the people, and great grace was upon them all.

The last verses of the chapter (47-52) seem to give a general summary and description of Saul's reign, with the various campaigns he waged for Israel.

77) 15:1-9

In many ways this is one of the saddest chapters in the book. Its central message is the final rejection of Saul as king, and the chapter stands in the sacred record to bear witness to this. Samuel's words in 1b, 'Now therefore hearken thou unto the voice of the words of the Lord' are a fateful introduction to all that follows, inasmuch as we are given the account of another act of wilful disobedience (cf 11, 19, 22). Saul's disobedience was a denial of the basis on which he was anointed as king over Israel. He was designed to have been the instrument of the divine purposes: but instead, he was intent upon doing it his way - i.e. acting as an absolute monarch. The distinguished commentator Delitzsch says 'Saul no longer desired to be the medium of the sovereignty of Jehovah, or the executor of the commands of the God-king, but simply wanted to reign according to his own arbitrary will'. In other words, he wanted to be a king like the kings of other nations. This, it will be remembered, was the root of the trouble when Israel demanded a king in the first place - to be like other nations, when the whole point of Israel's calling was to be different from other nations. One recalls our Lord's words, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercised lordship over them; and they that exercised authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so' (Luke 22:25). In this respect it is not difficult to see a remarkable similarity here to the story in Genesis 3, where Satan urged Adam and Eve to act in independence of God - 'Do your own thing, get out from under the hand of God, and be your own man'. And, significantly, the effect of that rebellion in Eden, seen in the tragic 'passing the buck' by Adam to Eve, and by Eve to the serpent - evading responsibility for their actions - is mirrored here also, for Saul blamed the people (15, 21). And God called it by its proper name - rebellion and revolt (23). The lesson is surely clear: doing it our way is always doing it the wrong way. As Isaiah puts it (53:6), 'We have turned everyone to his own way'.

78) 15:1-9

The destruction of the Amalekites, as well as being a judicial act, in which their sin came up in remembrance before God, was also a test case so far as king Saul was concerned. And he failed the test inasmuch as he spared the life of Agag, the Amalekite king, and the best of their sheep and oxen (9). The significance of this was that Saul thus turned the matter into an ordinary campaign, with spoils of conquest attending it - which God never intended it to be. Before we go on to the consequences of this incomplete obedience - which in God's eyes meant disobedience - we need to say something about two issues that arise here. The first is the moral problem in the slaughter of infant and suckling that is said to have been commanded by God. This is part of the larger question of the destruction of the Canaanites by Israel. The evidence of the Scriptures is that God used Israel judicially as His instrument of judgment upon these tribes, which had descended to such depths of degradation and shame as to make them almost sub-human. And rather than allow this to continue on the earth, God had to stamp it out as a plague, so that not even a vestige remained to be passed on to future generations, and thus pollute mankind. Drastic measures were necessary for a drastic situation, and this is what called for Amalek's total destruction. The second issue relates to what is said in 2: 'I remember that which Amalek did to Israel...'. The reference is to Exodus 17:8ff and to the ancient wrong that Amalek had done Israel in the wilderness at Rephidim. What we may gather from this is that God has a long memory. We should be both comforted and warned by this. God's recompenses in mercy and in judgment alike are always fulfilled sooner or later. He is not unrighteous to forget either our labour of love or our misdeeds. We forget the past so soon - time seems to take the edge off the sharpest stabs of conscience - but God cannot forget things that are an ever-present reality to Him (cf Ecclesiastes 8:11 and Isaiah 33:1). This should serve to remind us that it is not the passage of time, but the shedding of the blood of Christ, that blots out the past with all its stains. He - alone - is our peace.

79) 15:10-23

The God Who remembers Amalek's sin over the years also sees the secret motions of our hearts and lives. God sees. All things are naked and open to the eyes of Him with Whom we have to do. Samuel is called out of his retirement to confront the sinning king, and delivers a devastating broadside in answer to Saul's glib and facile claim to have performed the commandment of the Lord (13). The bleating of the sheep (14) means that sin has a voice that cannot be kept silent. It speaks to God in protest and accusation against us (cf Genesis 4:10; James 5:4). We may apply this solemn and tragic story in a number of ways. In Christian experience the 'bleating of the sheep' occurs when something from the old life is allowed to persist, something belonging to the old nature which God has ordained to destruction (cf Romans 6:6). In Christ we are meant to be new creatures, and this means a clean break with the old life. To carry over things from the old life that ought to have been left behind always spells trouble, for they drain spiritual life of all its vitality and lead to terrible impoverishment. Note also the significance of the things that Saul did spare from slaughter - the best of the sheep and oxen, and all that was good (9). There are some sins which, as we come to Christ, we hate and loathe, but there are others which we secretly cherish and do not want to let go, and these are often the high and the noble rather than the gross and ugly. What we must learn is that nothing that God has condemned and consigned to destruction, however refined and attractive, can be good for us. Saul spared Agag the king of the Amalekites against the express will and command of God, and it was at the hand of an Amalekite that he met his end (2 Samuel 1:6-10). Is it not ever so? It is the forbidden thing that we indulge in the spiritual life that proves our ruin and destruction at the last.

80) 15:10-23

The grimness of this passage is very severe as Samuel devastates the hapless monarch with the severity of his condemnation; but it is not without significance that it is set in the context of the prophet's grief and sorrow. We are told in 11 of Samuel's grief and distress, and his crying to the Lord all night, and in 35, that he mourned for Saul. It is very evident that his confrontation with the king was a very painful experience for him, in spite of the extreme sentence he was obliged to pass upon him. Indeed, it is clear that any less radical a challenge would hardly have prevailed to convince Saul that he was really being rejected and disqualified from his kingship, for there seems to have been an almost impenetrable armour of self-righteousness and self-deception surrounding him that made him almost incapable of grasping how fatal and doom-laden his disobedience had been. It says something very ominous about the awful blinding power of sin in Saul's life that he should have maintained with such an insistence to Samuel that he had fulfilled the will of God (13, 20), in spite of the clear evidence to the contrary. It becomes clear that after a certain point in self-deception has been passed, it is relatively easy to convince oneself that all is well and to be able to adopt an almost impenetrable blandness even in face of incontrovertible evidence, as is seen in 15 and 20, 21. It took some very hard words from Samuel in 22, 23 and the outright pronouncement of his rejection, before the awful truth got home to him. The equation of rebellion and stubbornness with witchcraft and idolatry in 23 is very striking, and is a reminder that God's thoughts are not our thoughts on some very basic issues in life. Saul took issue with God on these, to his cost, and learned the hard way that to obey is better than sacrifice, better indeed than anything else in the world, and that nothing else - literally nothing - will do in our relationship with God

81) 15:24-35

This solemn passage recounts the final rejection of Saul from the kingship. From this point the Lord no longer owned him as His anointed and, as we shall see in the next chapter, the prophet Samuel was commissioned to anoint a new king. Saul was not, however, deposed at this point; as we know, he continued on the throne to be a troubler of Israel and in the end the implacable enemy of his divinely appointed successor, David. It is open to question, however, whether Samuel ought to have acceded to Saul's desperate request in 30 to 'honour' Saul in the eyes of the elders of the people by returning with him to worship the Lord. Samuel's first reaction (26) was categorical and decisive, and it was when Saul continued to plead with him that he relented. It argues a strong natural bond between the prophet and the king that this should have happened, and some have seen a gentle rebuke in 16:1 against Samuel for allowing personal considerations so to move him. At all events, if Saul was concerned merely to 'keep up appearances', and conceal his rejection, he might have saved himself the trouble, for this is not something a man can ornately hide from others. It becomes only too painfully obvious, if not to himself, certainly to them. And, in fact, it would have been far better for Israel and for Saul too if he had quietly disappeared from public life at this point, for in remaining ostensibly on the throne, a king only in name, and without the sanction or blessing of God, he brought untold hurt and harm upon the kingdom, and descended himself into abysmal depths of evil, trafficking with evil spirits and dying an unhallowed death on the battlefield. How very terrible to be rejected of God through one's own wilfulness! God help us all!

82) 15:24-35

The last two verses of the chapter reveal that so far as Samuel was concerned this was the end of the road with Saul, for he came no more to see the rejected king until the day of his death. We should be careful how we interpret this attitude of Samuel's. It was not a question of natural disgust or anger on his part but rather a judicious attitude corresponding to the sentence passed by God Himself (11, 26). We think there is a correspondence here with what Paul teaches in Romans 16:17 concerning those who cause divisions and offences. They are, says the Apostle, to be avoided; not indeed in distaste, for loving hearts will always go out to them and mourn over their defection, but because of their actions they have, as it were, excommunicated themselves from the fellowship of the faithful, and revealed so wide a divergence from the truth as to make further association in the work of God impossible. When God separates men thus, separation there must be, and no false or misguided sentiment can be allowed to interfere with the divine decision. When it does, those who entertain it are simply taking sides against God. We must be careful lest we develop a hidden sympathy with sin and become secretly critical of God in His judgments on men.

83) 16:1-13

With this chapter we come to a new, further development in the story of 1 Samuel. The focus of attention now passes from Saul to David, and the latter occupies the stage for the rest of the book, and throughout 2 Samuel also. Saul moved himself - and was moved - out of the mainstream of the divine purposes, having rendered himself unusable in God's service by his disobedience. But the work goes on and God continues unhindered in His purposes through the instrumentality of David. The record of David's life covers a considerable amount of space in the sacred record - this alone is indicative of its importance. It is a very varied story with something for everyone in it, for we see him as a young man, as a man in his prime, in adversity, in victory; in royalty and kingship; as warrior, greatheart, soldier, statesman, shepherd, sweet Psalmist of Israel; and in his old age. A wide and varied canvas indeed! The remainder of 1 Samuel speaks of David's life and history before he was crowned king of Israel. We have sometimes used some such phrase as 'Through Trials and Tribulations to the Throne' to describe this part of David's life - those years when his path was a very chequered one, beset by the growing antagonism and finally the murderous hatred of the rejected Saul, as he sought to destroy the man God has appointed to replace him. There was clearly a demonic element in this, as the text makes clear, when it speaks of the evil spirit that troubled Saul. And behind this, the greater demonic attack on the line of promise (cf Revelation 12:1-11). But the deepest truth is that, demonic attacks notwithstanding, the over-arching reality throughout is that of the sovereignty of God. We shall say something of this in tomorrow's Note.

84) 16:1-13

The sovereignty of God, we have said, is the fundamental reality in the ongoing story of this book. We may recall the first lesson that was underlined in the introduction to this series, namely that our God is marching on. Saul is rejected, and David is taken up, and the divine purposes are in no wise frustrated. Man may obey Him, cooperate with Him and be blessed in doing so; or disobey, resist and suffer loss - but God's purposes go on. Not only so. God used Saul, even in his rejection, to further His sovereign designs, for it was through Saul that David was first of all brought into the court, and into prominence. Furthermore, it was through Saul's hatred of David that the stern disciplines of grace surrounding his earlier life shaped him into the man of God he became. God's easy triumph over evil powers, as shown in David's rise to the throne, is one of the most comforting and heartening lessons the Scriptures have to teach us. When He purposes a work, no power in heaven, earth or hell is able to thwart it. There are important lessons for us to learn in all this. If our God is marching on, and His purposes are going to be fulfilled, then 'keeping in' with Him, maintaining a right relationship to Him, will be the antidote to despair. People, ages, individuals, fall by the wayside, but God marches on. His work will not go by default. Furthermore - and here is a lesson of great practical import today - in face of the many gloomy prognostications that are widespread at this time about the crisis in the Kirk, falling membership, financial shortfalls, and so on, we could be forgiven for feeling despairing of the future - except for this - that here, out of a situation of failure and declension and out-of-joint-ness, God brought a new thing, through the man of His choosing and anointing. What is more, He established something very much greater than what it superseded. It was no mere rescue bid, no patching up of a leaking vessel - indeed the opposite. It was as if God left Saul's kingdom to disintegrate, to show its inherent rottenness, and to allow its badness to come to full flower, and then say, 'That is what happens when men go their own stubborn way; now I will show you My way' - and proceeds to shape and fashion a kingdom after His own good pleasure, of which it could truly be said that the glory of the latter house shall be greater than the glory of the former. This is the message that stands out from this chapter.

85) 16:1-13

We should not miss in this story the unobtrusive and inauspicious way in which God's 'new thing' began. David was an unknown young man, the youngest and least of his father's house. God chooses the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. We once heard Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones of Westminster Chapel speak about the outreach and spread of the gospel in Europe, beginning through a little group of praying women in Philippi (Acts 16:13). The weak things of the world! What potential there is in the nameless ones when God purposes a work! How many congregations have been vitalised by such groups who have laid hold upon God in prayer and would not let go until He blessed. The Apostle James' words are true in a good sense as well as the bad sense in which he originally wrote them: 'Behold how great a fire a little matter kindled'. The more one contemplates all this, the more one realises that David's emergence to prominence in the work of God follows a pattern that is encountered repeatedly in Holy Writ. One wonders how spiritual influence was brought to bear on his life in the first place. It may well have been the influence of Samuel's ministry during the years of spiritual awakening recorded in 1 Samuel 7. Be that as it may, there is more than a little evidence that he had a long preparation for God's service in the field and with his father's sheep in the wilderness. The hidden years, as with so many others raised up for God's service, played a significant part in the spiritual equipment of this man of God. His choice is full of interest and significance when contrasted with that of Saul: then (9:1, 2) the emphasis was all on natural qualities, for the people were intent on having a king like the nations', and natural qualities would be the ultimate criterion. But now a different principle was to operate. God wanted a man after His own heart, and therefore He looked not on the outer appearance but on the heart (7). The distinction is between gifts and grace, and it is a decisive, categorical one.

86) 16:14-23

The contrast in atmosphere between this passage and what precedes it is absolute, and we are plunged, with the mere mention of Saul's name, into a dark and ugly sense of evil. The evil spirit that troubled Saul is said to have been from the Lord. This may be difficult for some, but we must remember that when we choose evil rather than the good will of God, we are choosing more than we know. Can we complain then if God leaves us to our choice? If we choose to take ourselves outwith divine grace and divine protection, we must not be surprised to encounter and become enmeshed in dark and sinister powers that are intent on destroying us. To follow the tragic decline of Saul through the remaining chapters of 1 Samuel is to see a pattern emerging in which gleams of sanity become gradually eclipsed by nameless darkness. We do not, however, mean by this that Saul lost his reason, though it might seem like it. The Scriptures make a distinction between madness and demon-possession, and it is the latter that we are meant to understand in Saul's case. The last few verses of the chapter indicate, as we have already pointed out, the way in which God brought David into public prominence in the court. They also touch on a subject that is wholly fascinating - the influence of music in dealing with spiritual disorder. It is clear that Saul's devilish frenzy was capable of being restrained and dispelled by the power of David's harp playing. This is a very striking fact, and we shall have to devote some further thought to it in tomorrow's Note.

87) 16:14-23

In discussing the question of the influence of music, it is surely necessary at the outset to safeguard ourselves against any wild and extravagant claims concerning it. For one thing, no one could spuriously place music on the same level as the ordained means of grace by which God speaks to men - this would be an unwarranted confusion between the ethical and the aesthetic that would make nonsense of the moral foundations of life. Nor could anyone, in reading the story of Saul, fail to see that his basic need was for heart-repentance, not music; and this realisation should be sufficient to guard us against the danger of attempting to still the voice of conscience within by delighting or drugging the senses. This would be no different from 'taking to drink' (as many do) to 'drown their sorrows' and divert their minds from the urgent challenge of moral and spiritual issues. But when all this is said, it remains true that music is recognised in the Scriptures as possessing a certain power in men's lives. One recalls that when Elisha's minstrel played for him (2 Kings 3:15) the hand of the Lord came upon him. Paul advocates the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, making melody in the heart to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), and the use of music in the worship of the Church must therefore surely be meant to be, not only the expression of our worship to God, but also a source of inspiration and uplift and a means of clearing the clouds of evil from our souls. All the more reason, therefore, for ensuring that the music of the sanctuary is worthy and capable of being the 'handmaid of the Lord' in His dealings with us. For some music is plainly demoralising, and more likely to bring dark clouds of evil upon us than to dispel them, and should be avoided for its unhealthy and unwholesome influence. This is a subject on which little seems to have been written, and we would welcome comments from readers that might throw further light upon it.

88) 17-1-11

On any interpretation this is a great and glorious chapter, full of valuable lessons for the spiritual life. One of the first things we need to note is the space given to this story. Is it merely the fact that it signalled a major defeat for the Philistines, that it should be given such prominence and recounted in such detail? Hardly. It is rather that, as one commentator puts it, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, the writer has clearly given a symbolic indication, in placing this heroic deed at the beginning of David's story, of the kind and quality of David's reign (in contrast to Saul's), as one in which the divine power was to be signally at work, overruling all human circumstances in the furtherance of His will. Indeed, the contrast with Saul is very marked and complete. Saul was anointed as one who was head and shoulders above his fellows, a man among men, a choice in line with the thoughts and desires of the people to be like the other nations - human standards of selection, in other words. And Saul's first act as the Lord's anointed was a campaign of war against the Ammonites, on their standards (1 Samuel 11). But with David it was different. He was anointed not on human standards ('man looketh on the outward appearance but God looketh on the heart') and his first campaign, here, was not conducted by human standards, but on a totally other principle - that of faith and trust in the living God and in the power of His Name (cf 26; 36; 45, 46). The message here, therefore, is that of a man after God's own heart, living in faith and trust in Him; and this is the pattern of all his reign.

89) 17:1-11

There is, of course, further symbolism in the story before us, which we shall touch upon later in the 'typology' the chapter affords in this regard, that the war with the Philistines recorded here represents a fresh incursion on their part against Israel. How resilient an enemy they were, coming again and again against the people of God! And this surely reminds us that the battles we fight in the Christian life against the powers of darkness are never won 'once-for-all'. The devil left Jesus 'for a season' after the temptation in the wilderness, only to return later with renewed wiles and subtlety. This attack seems to have taken Saul at a great disadvantage, throwing him and his army into confusion and even terror. The low-spiritedness of the army was, of course, due to the fact that Saul, their commander-in-chief, was so out of joint spiritually. This is sometimes why we are more demoralised than we ought to be when pressures come upon us - our spiritual resources are so depleted. All the same, however, this was a major crisis, presenting an urgent danger - once again illustrating times in the spiritual life when the devil seems to confront us with perils of such monumental dimensions that the stuffing is knocked out of us. But man's extremity is God's opportunity, and in the story of Israel at this transitional point the crisis that faced them was the travail out of which a new stage was to emerge in God's dealings with them. The victory David was to win against Goliath and the Philistines was a new birth into the forward-moving purposes of God. Crisis-points can often be points of new departure in the work, in the providence and mercy of God. Is this how we view our crisis-points in life?

90) 17:12-31

We should note the casual circumstances which led to David's going to the army of Israel at this time - the simple and unostentatious provision of food for the sons of Jesse who were in the ranks of Saul's army. It is the 'naturalness' and the unobtrusiveness of God's working that is so impressive. There is always a 'rightness' about it (cf 17, 18). Incidentally, in view of the point made earlier about God looking not on the outward appearances but on the heart, we see how realistic this was in the case of Jesse's sons, because, for all Eliab's uprightness of stature and nobility of mien (cf 28, 29), his heart was just like Saul's, corroded with jealousy against David. And his sharp and unceremonious dismissal of David is very significant, dismissing in fact and in effect the Lord's anointed, an attitude which may well have dated from his being passed over by Samuel (cf 16:7) at the time of David's anointing by the prophet. This is not something that belongs only to an ancient time: one has seen it today in some folks' amused and contemptuous dismissal of a man whom God has used and owned in the ministry in significant ways. It is not difficult to 'see through' Eliab's unceremonious dismissal of his younger brother. The reason he gives for his attitude, and the real reason underlying it, are two very different things. He accuses David of being presumptuous and proud; but the truth is that his own pride was rankling because he had been passed over in favour of his younger brother. It was his own reflection that he saw in his brother - his own proud spirit, not David's. All too often the characteristics that so annoy and irritate us in other people are reflections of our own deepest self, and constitute a conviction of sin within us. A jaundiced eye colours everything we look upon.

91) 17:32-37

A word needs to be said at this point about the quality of David's faith. Here is a man who was sure of God. And the question arises. How was he so sure of God, so young? The training in the fields, watching over his father's flocks must surely have been crucial in this. One thinks of the parallel experience of other men of God in the divine service - Moses in the hidden years in the wilderness, Joseph's long preparation in prison before coming to power in Egypt (how similar his experience was to David's in the jealousy of his brethren!), John the Baptist, in the deserts till the day of his appearing to Israel. And the heart and essence of this training was surely this: getting to know God. This is surely evidenced in many of the Psalms. We cannot know whether any of these were composed during his early days, but many were in the days of his trials and tribulations on the way to the throne; and doubtless many of the thoughts expressed in such Psalms, which breathe the essence of personal experience of God, were thoughts born and nurtured during these early days. It is a solemn truth that the learning of the early days is crucial and all-important for later. It can condition all one's future for weal or woe. Many can think back to the disciplines and battles of the early days, and thank God for all the influences and experiences, not least the sitting under a living ministry that shaped and fashioned their lives and brought them to know God. One message in all this is very clear: do not waste your early Christian years, do not fritter them away on superficialities and on the trivialities of Christian life. We cannot serve a God we do not really know - for then we will run about doing things He has not asked us to do, expending energy worthlessly, and allowing promising Christian material to run to seed through lack of waiting upon Him.

92) 17:38-40

When there is this waiting upon God, there is an identifying with the divine pattern in His work - for there will be an appreciation of what we have said earlier, viz. that the principle upon which God works is that of choosing the weak things of the world to confound the mighty. This is the point about David's discarding of Saul's armour and the use of the five pebbles from the brook with which to slay the giant. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:4, 5 that 'the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds...'. What were Paul's weapons? Surely the preaching of the Word and prayer. One thinks of what he says in 1 Corinthians 2:1-4 about the weakness and fear and much trembling with which he approached his ministry in Corinth, and the 'demonstration of the Spirit and of power' by which that ministry was accomplished. The 'weak things' enable the man who uses them and who embodies them, to trust wholly in the God whose strength is made perfect in weakness. This is high ground - high ground for David too - and ground he was sometimes tempted to draw back from; but when he was truest to this ideal, he was most what God wanted him to be, and most effective for Him. One recalls, in this connection, words written by James Denney that have a real bearing on all this. Speaking of the recurring tendency in the Church to trust to methods which appeal rather to the senses than to the soul, or which are believed to be reaching the soul though they never get past the sense, Denney adds, 'No doubt such things make an impression and have an influence; but they are not the influence and the impression through which that kingdom of God can come for which Jesus lived and died.... The trust of the Church in other things is really a distrust of the truth, an unwillingness to believe that its power lies in itself, a desire to have something more irresistible than truth to plead truth's cause; and all these are modes of atheism.'

93) 17:41-52

It is impossible not to thrill with a great spiritual elation in reading the account of the contest between David and Goliath, particularly the words in 45-47. David's disavowal of Saul's armour referred to in yesterday's Note (38, 39) is a reminder that we do not fight the Lord's battles with the weapons of the world, and that when we try to, we will always come to grief. It is also well that we should remember what David brought with him to this critical encounter, in terms of the man that he had allowed God to make of him, for it was what he was that enabled him to speak with such magnificent confidence and assurance, and win the victory over his mighty foe. But it is certainly no accident and hardly surprising that so much in this story 'reminds' us of spiritual issues in the gospel, and indeed of Christ Himself, in His victory over the powers of darkness. In this connection the important point to note is the representative nature of the battle (cf 8, 9, 51, 52). Victory for either of the champions was to count, it was agreed, as victory for the entire army which he represented. And when David slew Goliath, the Philistines recognised their own defeat in his, and the Israelites their victory in David's. The victory of Christ on the Cross over sin and Satan partakes of this representative character in the same way. This is Paul's point in Romans 5:12-21, when he speaks of the two 'heads' of humanity, Adam and Christ. Adam 'lost' his battle with Satan in the Garden, and all humanity 'lost' in him, and fell with him; Christ, the second Adam, 'won' His battle with the powers of darkness, and all who are 'in Him' win the victory in Him. This is what Paul means in 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15 when he says, 'We thus judge that if one died for all then were all dead...'. It is this principle in fact which underlies all his teaching on sanctification, particularly in Romans 6, and a true grasp of it is an essential prerequisite of the Christian life of victory. To understand what is ours in Him, where we stand in Him, where God has placed us in the death and resurrection of His Son - this is the secret of the glorious liberty of the children of God.

94) 17:41-52

Here is a further comment on these verses, written more than a century ago, by Prof W.C. Blaikie of New College.

'The representative character of David, fighting, not for himself alone but the whole nation, was analogous to the representative character of Christ: and the shout that burst from the ranks of Israel and Judah when they saw the champion of the Philistines fall, and the enemy betake themselves in consternation to flight, foreshadowed the joy of redeemed men when the reality of Christ's salvation flashes on their hearts, and they see the enemies that have been harassing them repulsed and scattered - a joy to be immeasurably magnified when all enemies are finally conquered, and the loud voice is heard in heaven, 'Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God and the power of His Christ; for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, that accused them before our God day and night.'

Have we seen the gospel in this way? Have we entered into our Champion's victory and triumph, realising that it is our victory and triumph in Him, and that He won it for us? 'Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 15:58).

95) 17:41-52

The Spirit of God bears witness in our hearts that this is a parable of how the great giants that beset us in the Christian warfare can be dealt with and set at naught. Perhaps the forays of the Church into battle with the giants of today in modern society would be more effective if there was more of the kind of spiritual discipline behind it that was evident in David's approach. David's disavowal of the armour of Saul is a reminder that we do not fight the Lord's battles with the weapons of the world. Our weapons - the Word of God in prayer - are foolishness to our enemies both outside and inside the Church. But God chooses them to confound the mighty. For the weak things of the world, the base and despised things, constitute a door through which God can come to the world that He longs to bless and save. As the Apostle Paul put it, the preaching of Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness, is nevertheless the power of God and the wisdom of God, and God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty. The message of Christ crucified is the stone that brings the Goliaths of this world down. As Jesus Himself said, 'The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner. Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall it will grind him to powder' (Luke 20:17, 18).

96) 18:1-4

The last verses of the previous chapter, in which Saul inquires about the identity of David, are difficult to square with 16:19ff, unless we assume that there is no strict historical sequence being followed in the sense that the writer anticipates the story at some points in order to complete a particular theme he is intent on establishing. At all events, whether the friendship between David and Jonathan was struck instantaneously or developed over a period of time, it is clear that it was a heaven-born, God-given relationship, and it constitutes one of the most notable friendships ever recorded in history. It is clear, from what we read in the following chapters, that it meant a very great deal both to David and to Jonathan in terms of mutual enrichment. We ourselves can learn a very great deal from it. For one thing, it was a friendship that developed amid the darkening clouds that began to surround the royal court - the growing jealousy of Saul, his murderous hatred of David, and the working of evil spirits - how striking that in such an unpropitious atmosphere such a fair flower should grow! This is surely a parable of the Christian life, and reminds us that it has to flourish in the most unpropitious of circumstances and amid all that is alien to what it stands for. The littler 'cells' of fellowship which God creates in this way are not only His encouragement to His people, and an incentive to them to endure, but also a testimony to the world that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out (John 1:5).

97) 18:1-4

We should interpret this friendship between David and Jonathan as the gift of a gracious God to His anointed one, at the outset of a very long and dark road that David had to travel. It stands as a monument and testimony to the goodness and kindness of God to him. Subsequent chapters of this book reveal how many travails and troubles David had to meet before he ascended the throne of Israel. This, at a critical and lonely period of his life, was God's provision for his need. One readily thinks about the wonderful friendship that the Apostle Paul was given with Aquilla and Priscilla at a critical time in his missionary endeavours. It is well worthwhile spending some time 'analysing' this friendship to enable us to see its true basis, and what made it such a heartwarming and lovely thing for both men. One of the things that stands out clearly, for one thing, is Jonathan's selflessness. David was his rival to the throne, the man who was to supplant him as heir to the kingdom. How natural it would have been if he had resented this! But then it was not a natural friendship but a spiritual thing wrought by the Holy Spirit and born of faith in God. A love that could take second-place, as Jonathan's did, was a spiritual thing indeed. What made it? Not David's prowess in battle, or his bravery against Goliath - or, for that matter, Jonathan's bold and intrepid expedition against the Philistines recorded in chapter 14. Rather, they were drawn together by that which made them the kind of men they were. It is the presence of something that we can appreciate and wholly admire that draws us to certain people. And in these two men it was their sublime faith in God and the fact that the beauty of the Lord their God rested upon them that drew them so unerringly to one another. This is the basis and the secret of deep satisfying friendships in Christian life, and the more that beauty rests upon us, the more deep and satisfying the friendships will be. From all of which we may learn that true friendship is selfless; it gives, not gets, because the Lord is in it, and finds itself by losing itself, conquers by being conquered. This is its challenge for us, for who would not long for such a friendship? Ah yes, there are many in the world today who need such friendship, but not so many who are prepared to give it. We need not be lonely in life if we learn to give such loyalty and love to others instead of coveting it for ourselves. We lack true friendships precisely because we are so demanding and self-absorbed. Selfish lives are always lonely.

98) 18:5-9

We see in these verses the first traces of the evil spirit of jealousy in king Saul that was to corrode his heart and lead to the devilish disorder of hatred that was in the end to destroy him. The way in which the AV rendering of 5 describes David's attitude - '(he) behaved himself wisely' is given a different slant in RSV which reads '(He) was successful'. This latter rendering is probably closer to the truth than the former, in that it makes David's rise to favour with the people something that was swift and unimpeded - except, that is, for the opposition shown by Saul himself, the first signs of which become evident here. What is clear is that the anointing of the Lord was upon him, and that this was the explanation of his advancement. It may, of course, be that the AV translators had a very accurate feel for the main thrust of these verses, and recognised that, no matter how wisely and circumspectly David behaved himself in his relationship with the king, the fundamental disharmony in Saul's heart towards him would have ultimately shown itself, however he had behaved. We are sure that if David had any inkling of Saul's jealousy towards him - and who shall say whether in the deepening friendship between him and Jonathan something of this might have been conveyed to David by his friend - he would have been at pains to avoid any kind of unnecessary friction and would have 'leaned over backwards' in his efforts to be innocent of anything blameworthy. We may think that the women who sang Saul's and David's praises after the defeat of Goliath were unwise and ill-advised in the comparisons they made between the two - and this is doubtless true: careless words can cause immense harm in human relationships - but the truth is, if the eruption of jealousy had not come then, it would have come on another occasion and on another pretext. For jealousy is the most corrosive of all wrong attitudes and least likely to be indefinitely hidden from sight. It is a soul-destroying, dismal sin, burning like a fire deep down in the heart and finally - as we see in what follows - breaking out to the surface sometimes with the most startling and disastrous, not to say fatal, effects. In such a situation, anything would have been a suitable means of triggering off the explosion within Saul's smoldering heart.

99) 18:10-16

The inference in 10 is a very startling one. Saul's 'prophesying' is obviously meant to be regarded as inspired by the evil spirit, and if this be so, then it was a spurious, counterfeit performance, although not necessarily recognised as such at the time. It is the subtlety of the evil one that he makes his workings so resemble those of the good Spirit that only the discerning can see the difference. It is not for nothing that Paul speaks of Satan as coming sometimes as an angel of light. We may learn from this that there is a false fire in spiritual things, and that not every 'spiritual' manifestation is from God. (One scholar has pointed out significantly that the form of the verb in the Hebrew translated prophesied is never used of true prophecy by an OT writer). What followed this prophesying makes it clear that Saul was not under the control or direction of any benign spirit, and this is the ultimate criterion of judging; if it leads to disintegration of behaviour, it has its origin in the devil, however spiritual it may seem to be. We need, however, to be able to discern its source before its ultimate effects are evident, and this is where the spirit of discernment, referred to by John in his first epistle (4:1), needs to be exercised. And it is possible, through experience, and a wise and penetrating study of the Scriptures relating to this subject, to learn to recognise the signs of the enemy's working in the hearts and spirits of men. How needful is such knowledge today, in view of so much that purports to be of God!

100) 18:17-30

Saul's frenzy of hatred in 10 gave way to an attitude of diabolical cunning which was like to prove more than disastrous for David. The latter's appointment to a military command (13) may well have been inspired by the devilish idea that becomes explicit in 17 and 25. But it is not easy thus to dispose of a man on whom the divine anointing rests, and it should encourage us today to realise that all the plottings and schemings of Spirit-less men to harm and jeopardise the work and testimony of God's chosen servants are as liable to come to naught. The calculated insult to David in the matter of Merab (17) might well have brought grievous trouble upon Saul, had David been disposed to react violently to it, for already he was the favourite of the people, and it does not take much to stir a popular rebellion against a king of whom the people have got thoroughly tired. But this was not David's way; nor did later opportunities to have swayed the nation in his favour find him disposed to take advantage of them. This does not mean that David missed vital chances of attaining a quick succession to the throne God had promised him; rather, it is an evidence of his serene and sublime faith in God, and of his willingness and desire to let God Himself establish him in the kingdom in His own way and in His own time. How wise it is to allow God to work out His own sovereign purposes for us and in us without our clumsy interference. A great deal of spiritual wisdom consists in keeping step with God and not running ahead of Him or anticipating His time for the fulfilment of His will. We may never know just how much harm we do when we take matters into our own hands and wrest the initiative from Him.

101) 18:17-30

A further note may be added on this passage before passing on to the next chapter. We referred in yesterday's Note to the attitude of diabolical cunning which motivated Saul in this sordid part of the story. It is a measure of how heartless and unscrupulous Saul had become that he should have used his daughter Michal's genuine love for David as a mere pawn in the fulfilment of his nefarious purpose of destroying David. What a deadly condemnation of any father that he should say of his own daughter 'I will give him her that she may be a snare to him'. But we may well wonder whether there was a further element of devilish cunning at work in him, in an ugly and sinister perception that he had about David, that this was a likely avenue along which the young man might be ensnared. David was human, after all, and full-blooded in his natural and healthy human desires, and Saul may well have surmised that David could be 'got at' in this way. We should not forget that, at a much later stage in his life, when he was king, David succumbed to temptation in one of the darkest experiences of his life. At all events there was no yielding on this occasion, and Saul's ugly and dastardly hopes came to nothing, and the king knew that the Lord was with this young man held in such high regard by the people (30).

102) 19:1-7

This chapter and the next really belong together as to subject matter, namely the climaxing of Saul's murderous jealousy of David, and the open and final breach between them. The picture we are given in them is a very ugly one, of dark and sinister intrigue in the court of Israel. The opening verses here tell of Jonathan's advocacy of David, and of the (at least temporary) revoking of the decision to kill David. It was well indeed for David that he had such a friend as Jonathan at the court; without this he would certainly have come to an evil fate, and it is a measure of the strong providence watching over David that such provision was made. Jonathan's sweet reasonableness in approaching his father prevailed in this instance, but as we are to see in the verses that follow, the respite was of brief duration and soon the frenzied king was gripped by his incontrollable jealousy as much as ever. Jealousy of this nature is a sin to which one has to die a thousand deaths, again and again, to keep it in check. From all this we may learn that it is not really possible to reason with someone who has sold himself to the devil as Saul clearly had. His remorse expressed to Jonathan was doubtless real enough, but it was no match for the terrible instability and growing disintegration of his mind, preyed upon as it was by the evil spirit. It could only at best be a temporary lull before a fresh outburst of demoniac hatred did more damage so far as David's position at court was concerned (7), and both he and Jonathan must have seen - in Jonathan's case however reluctantly - that the disintegration of Saul's mind and spirit was rapidly approaching a point of no return and that the only recourse left for David was to get as far away from the king's murderous hatred as possible.

103)19:8-18

These verses show the 'hate campaign' in Saul increasing in intensity, with the marks of God's favour on David and all the signs of the evil one on Saul's life. The second attempt made by Saul to kill David with the javelin (9) may conceivably have been construed as the sudden impulse of a disordered spirit (as in 18:11), but what followed this, in the next verses, was no impulse, but the cunning, diabolical scheming of a mind given over to evil. It is clear that the momentum of evil was increasing dramatically. The part played by Michal in David's escape (12ff) has to be read with some reserve. One commentator points out that the word for 'image' (13) used by Michal to deceive Saul's soldiers and to give David time to make a getaway 'was one of the class called 'teraphim'' and that its use by Michal in her household was in breach of the second commandment, implying an unspiritual or superstitious state of mind. We can hardly think that David could have either used or countenanced the use of such images. Genuine as her love for David seems to have been, it was nevertheless only natural and not spiritual, and their union was not one of hearts that were united in their deepest feelings (this becomes much clearer later in the story, when she mocked David's enthusiasm when he brought the Ark back from Kirjath Jearim to Mount Zion). And her blatant lie about David threatening to kill her (17) could only have been grist to Saul her father's mill - anything to put David in a worse light than ever and justify his own insensate hatred of him.

104) 19:8-18

Not to dwell further on the disintegration of Saul's mind and spirit - the fluctuation between remorse and renewed murderous hatred clearly showing that there was a demonic element involved, as the reference to the evil spirit from the Lord indicates (9) - there is an important lesson that needs to be underlined here, and it is this. Given our understanding of the over-all message of the divine revelation of Scripture, that is, the message of the history and fulfilment of the promise of redemption given first in Genesis 3:15, that the seed of the woman should bruise the head of the serpent, we are to view this devilish and murderous attack on David in this light: it was an attempt to frustrate the purposes of God in redemption for the world, by destroying this particular vessel and instrument of God's purpose. For David stood in the line of promise. A glance at the genealogy given in Ruth 4:17-22, shows that the Pharez mentioned there was the son of Judah, of whom it was said in Genesis 49:10 that Shiloh, the promised Messiah, should come - 'and unto Him shall the gathering of the people be'. This is a very beautiful thought and expression - and more than hinted at in the way the nation of Israel at that time were gathering to David! - and it was this that Satan was intent on preventing by his attack on David. We have often on different occasions made comment on the evil one's 'hidden agenda' in his repeated attacks on those who stood in the line of promise, culminating in the dramatic symbolism unfolded in Revelation 12:1-11. In this particular and special sense David was 'a marked man' in the evil one's eyes, and as such the object of his unwelcome attention.

105) 19:19-24

It is clear that we are now coming to a period in David's life marked by constant anxiety, insecurity and turmoil - a turbulent period that is reflected in many of the Psalms. It is significant that he betook himself to Samuel, doubtless because he felt the need for reassurance about his calling as the Lord's anointed, in face of the perplexity he was passing through in this turbulent period of his life. It is not difficult to imagine him asking the prophet, 'Does it really look as if I am in fact the Lord's anointed, with all this happening to me? Is there not a mistake somewhere?' This is a very real question. Sometimes we may feel that God has spoken to us and called us to His service, and we have responded in faith to His summons. But nothing happens, seemingly, to confirm this to us. What is more, things begin to go wrong, and difficulties emerge. This is when we are tempted to wonder whether we might have deceived ourselves after all as to the validity of what we thought was God's call to us. At such a time, it is good to have a Samuel to go to, to talk things through with. There is no record in these verses of what Samuel may have said to him, but here are some words (the source now forgotten) which surely express what David most needed to hear: 'Keep on believing God's word; never be moved away from it by what you see or feel, and thus as you stand steady, enlarged power and experience is being developed. The fact of looking at the apparent contradiction as to God's Word, and being unmoved from your position of faith makes you stronger on every other line. Often God delays purposely, and the delay is just as much an answer to your prayer as is the fulfilment when it comes'. Is this a word to someone today?

106) 19:19-24

There is a great humour in these verses, but also a great glory. The glory is seen in the wonderful assurance that the divine protection must have given to David's heart, as what must have seemed to him like an invisible wall of protection around him, as the Spirit of God guarded him from his enemies and from all harm. It was a truly astonishing phenomenon, almost unnerving in one way, but not without a certain hidden humour in the way in which Saul's messengers were so effectively subdued and rendered harmless, reminding us of the famous words in Psalm 2, 'He that is in the heavens shall laugh'. But what are we to say about such unusual manifestations of the Spirit? It has not been unknown in the history of the Church for such manifestations to appear, and one has known or heard of such 'happenings' from time to time when the Spirit of God has been abroad in the land. But it is important to remember that the apostolic warning holds good even in such circumstances, when we are told to 'try the spirits, whether they be of God'. It is true that we are told in these verses that it was the Spirit of God that was at work, but this does not necessarily mean that these messengers underwent a genuine 'conversion experience', still less Saul himself, as subsequent events make only too plain. For him, and perhaps for his messengers also, it was simply a supernatural divine restraint laid upon them in their murderous designs against David. All the same, the characteristic evidences of the Spirit's presence and working was seen for the time being. It may be that the best way of interpreting this strange phenomenon is in terms of the parable of the sower, in which it is said of the seed that fell on stony places that its growth was but transient and temporary (Matthew 13:20, 21), having no real root and therefore no lasting life. We must not exclude the possibility either that the patient Spirit of God was even then pleading with the maddened king to turn in penitence to God; if so, it was, alas, of no avail, for Saul was too intent on his evil designs against David to be decisively moved from them. He had, it seems, passed the point of no return.

107)20:1-23

This is the point in the ongoing story of David's life that he really became an out-law and exile from his own people, and it is particularly moving that it should have been marked by such a tenderness and love in the friend that God had given him. One can only marvel at the depth and beauty of this relationship between David and Jonathan. It was surely a preparation for all that David was going to have to endure in the days that follow, and a strengthening to him before the severe trials and tribulations he had to face. One readily thinks of the friendship given to the Apostle Paul by Aquila and Priscilla in the stressful days of his missionary labours, and also the special intimacy of friendship that the disciples Peter, James and John were given by our Lord, particularly in the experience on the mount of Transfiguration when they were given a foretaste of Christ's glory, to strengthen them for all they were to suffer in the years that lay ahead of them. The words of Psalm 23 come readily to mind in this connection, 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies', for this intimate relationship of love and trust given to David was surely an immeasurable enrichment to him in the trials of this period, and an evidence of the providential care of God for His servant. One wonders whether the Apostle Peter had this kind of experience in mind when he wrote the words in his first epistle, 'That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ'.

108)20:1-23

Further to what was said in yesterday's Note, the commentator Ellicott says, 'The way of suffering and of trial is in all ages the royal road to true greatness', and this is probably the aptest commentary on the general trend of this period of David's life, for it indicates that he was being trained by the disciplines of God for his future work. The sweetness of the fellowship that David and Jonathan shared at this time was to last the beleaguered servant of God many days, and we doubt not that the memory of it sustained and encouraged him many a time in the days that followed. In all reverence, one thinks of the ineffable intimacies of fellowship between the Father and the Son at the point when in the fulness of the time Christ was sent forth from the glory to face the lonely road of suffering and sorrow in the fulfilment of the Father's will for the redemption of the world. Was it not the consciousness of that fellowship that sustained Him in the loneliest hours of His humiliation and passion? The drama unfolded in the details given in these verses of Jonathan's 'arrangements' about warning David of Saul's attitude to him is very real and it is some indication of just how critical the situation had become, both for David and for Jonathan, as the verses that follow show, but the passage is suffused by the spirit of love and care that Jonathan showed to his men. Happy are those who in time of hazard and peril can count on such friendships.

109)20:24-33

As the drama unfolds, it soon becomes clear that Saul will no more forbear so far as David is concerned. Jonathan's advocacy of his friend proves unavailing and the king's anger and fury are such that his own son is not immune from peril (33). It is a measure of how abandoned Saul had become that this should be so. One thinks of the Apostle Paul's sombre and devastating catalogue of the extremities of evil in Romans 1:29ff when he includes the words 'without natural affection', implacable, unmerciful as descriptive of how far gone in sin men can become. This is how it was with Saul. The conversation between Jonathan and his father in these verses, particularly 30, 31, is significant. It is clear that Saul could not appreciate Jonathan's selfless devotion to David and his glad acceptance of the fact that David was to accede to the throne that, naturally speaking, would have been his. Saul can only assume that Jonathan does not see the significance of David's position, and that if he did, he could not possibly befriend the man who was to supplant him. But Jonathan did understand, and was happy to accept the fact that David was the Lord's choice for Israel. It was Saul who was lacking in understanding. This is so true to life. The bitterly jealous spirit can never understand magnanimity, for it belongs to a different world; nor can the carnal spirit, which is ever self-seeking, appreciate the selfless love which animates the spiritual and makes the will of God, however abhorrent to those who resist it, a source of glad joy and fulfilment to all who seek it with their whole heart. Belonging as they did to two such different worlds, how could Saul and Jonathan have been other than virtual strangers to each other?

110)20:34-42

The last sentence in yesterday's Note requires some qualification. It is true that there was scarcely any real point of contact between Saul and Jonathan in the things that matter most in life; but we must beware of supposing that this should ever mean a literal estrangement on Jonathan's part. On the contrary, the consciousness of a great barrier between the spiritual and the carnal kindles - or should - great and deep longings and yearnings over the carnal and the ungodly, and a tenderness of love that expresses itself in ways that the hardest heart can understand. Jonathan went back from his moving parting with David to the city (42) and his father, as a loyal son honouring the commandments of God. This has something to teach us in the spiritual life. We have sometimes felt that converted children might have more influence on their unconverted parents if, instead of preaching to them in a somewhat brash, insensitive way, and communicating, albeit inadvertently, an attitude of impatience, not to say contempt, because of their apparent obtuseness in spiritual things, they were to show them the natural affection and love which are their due, and for which most parents long and yearn. A true conversion to Christ makes us more, not less, human, and should intensify and purify our natural God-given affections, not stifle them. When Christ is the first love of our hearts, we will not love our parents less, but more, and in a more obviously loving way, however antagonistic they may be to the faith that has laid hold of us. This is how it was with Jonathan, and the Scriptures surely hold him up as an example for young Christians to follow. Jonathan was a wholly admirable son.

11)21:1-6

David is now really on the run, an outlaw from his own home and land. His story could well be summed up, as we have already said, in the phrase 'Through trials and tribulations to the throne'. From the spiritual point of view we can but view this time of trial as one of testing and discipline for him in which he was being shaped and fashioned for what the future held for him. There are two thoughts here. The first is that trials for him were the only way he could escape from Saul, they were his gateway to life. The second is that trials produced in him some real fruits of faith - an increase in stature, a faith that became increasingly sure of God, and some priceless Psalms for all posterity. But increase in stature, and being sure of God are not won lightly. They are the ultimate, long-term fruit; and on the way to this, there can be real problems and setbacks. And here, in this passage we see something of the moral dangers involved in trial and tribulation. There is, of course, no doubt that at this time David was under severe pressure. And it is the strain that tends to reveal the weak points. It is there that men tend to give way. After his moving farewell with Jonathan, David fled to Nob. And it is a measure of the tension in the situation that Ahimelech the priest should have been so afraid when David came on the scene. One cannot but feel the presence of the shadowy figure of Saul with his baneful influence overall. How conscious the priest was of all that might happen in such an explosive situation! And it was in this situation that David lied to Ahimelech.

112)21:1-6

It is a measure of the realism of the Scriptures that they do not seek to whitewash the heroes of the faith. David's mistakes and lapses are held up for all to see, because the Scriptures are written for our learning and admonition. No kind of justification can really be put forward for the lie that David told Ahimelech the priest, however much we may recognise that he was under great strain, and in jeopardy of his life at the hands of Saul. It may be that the fear and suspicion with which the priest received him made him doubtful of getting much help from him and tempted him to this subterfuge. But whatever the circumstances, and however hard pressed we may be, it is never justifiable to tell a lie. God is the God of truth, and He is not well served by anything less than the truth. If it is argued that David could have got help in any other way, we must reply, God never requires us to tell lies in order to get His help; and if there was no other way in that situation, then it is questionable whether he should have gone to Nob at all. One has only to read on in this chapter and the next to see the fatal repercussions that followed in the train of this matter. David saw too (22:22) what his action led to. It is never right to do wrong, and a good end never justifies a bad means. God is not honoured in this way, even when it is done with the best of intentions. No, David has moved somewhat from the position of utter faith and trust from which he essayed forth to defeat Goliath. Well would it have been for him - and for the others whom his action involved - if he had maintained his trust in the arm of the Lord, instead of leaning on the arm of the flesh.

113)21:7-15

The question mark set upon whether David should have gone to Nob at all, mentioned in yesterday's Note, seems to be reinforced by the brief reference to Doeg, the Edomite, in 7. Doeg was an evil man, as we see in the next chapter - not a good or safe man to have around watching when you were doing something you should not have been doing. It is generally when we are where we should not be that some hostile eye sees us, and uses what he sees, at a later date, with devastating force against us - as we shall see in the next chapter. Doeg saw the deception that David was practising on Ahimelech, and doubtless formed his own estimate of the Lord's anointed from this. It is so often true that - whether we realise it or not - we have witnesses for our behaviour at any given point, and often our unselfconscious demeanour is far more telling than conscious witness for God. At all events David, having committed himself to one lie, found himself obliged to commit himself to more in the court of Achish king of Gath, for there he had to feign madness to keep himself safe in another politically dangerous situation. The question that arises is whether God would have prompted His anointed servant to do this, in this way? Could not God have helped him in some other way? One of the psalms David wrote (Psalm 34) indicates in its title that it belongs to the incident at the court of Achish. Some of the verses of this psalm, particularly 12-14, may well indicate what David learned in this harrowing experience. We may learn from this that when we once do wrong we tend to get enmeshed in it. Why, of course, because sin is a power that takes control of our lives. We are never our own masters when we get involved in it. This is worth thinking about further, and we shall return to it in tomorrow's Note.

114)21:7-15

We need to realise that it can, of course, be an exercise in futility to look back upon past mistakes, and in this sense Paul is right in urging us to forget the things that are behind. The only value in looking back lies in seeing where we have made mistakes and went wrong, and in recognising this determining by God's grace that we will not make the same mistakes again, and facing the future armed with that knowledge and the resolve to meet the pressures that may come in the future in a new spirit and with a determination to have learned our lesson, at whatever bitter cost. But this whole issue raises the question whether it is ever right to assume or feel that in times of stress or emergency it may sometimes be legitimate to stretch a point, and whether to do so does not somehow matter so much at such a time. In fact, we sometimes, almost unconsciously, in stress of emotion, do things that we would not do in calmer moments. Those who can remember the terrible crisis days of the Second World War can remember that things were done and standards were lowered and many felt it did not somehow matter so much if they did something they would simply not have considered doing before in more normal circumstances. In this way moral standards began imperceptibly to slip. But this is the very time to be on guard, in time of strain, excitement, and crisis. David fell in such a situation - do we? Is this a danger point for us? What kind of emotional stress constitutes a temptation to 'let go' for us? And is not this a point where we should have a special guard? We shall see in the next chapter the fateful repercussions that followed David's actions and attitudes in this chapter, and the truth of the familiar words

The arm of flesh will fail you

Ye dare not trust your own.

15)22:1 2

In our readings in the previous chapter (21:1-15) we have seen David in a rather unpleasant, questionable light. Here, in ch 22, we see him very differently, and more in character with what we feel he should be, and what we read now makes us see how he was called 'the man after God's own heart'. Here is the authentic David! The main part of this chapter relates the sequel to David's visit to Nob and Ahimelech. That encounter, as we see here, had tragic consequences, but we also see something of the calibre of David, in the wholehearted remorse and grief he expresses for his responsibility for the massacre of the priest's family. But before we come to that, we must first of all pause at the opening two verses which tell us about the cave of Adullam; this famous incident has become almost a proverb. Any group of disgruntled, discontented people coming together in common cause are said to gather in a cave of Adullam. This is a charge that is frequently made against evangelical folk who, dismayed and disappointed by the poor fare obtainable in their own congregations, tend to gather together where they feel they will find food for their souls. It is true, of course, that some people have discontented spirits, and would be dissatisfied wherever they went, but the great majority do not fall into this category. Rather, they have been grieved away by the spiritual barrenness and prayerlessness of situations in which they have ultimately no point of contact, and from which they have virtually been driven out because of resentment at the protests, all un-availing, that they have made. What are such people to do? Are they to acquiesce meekly without hope of redress, and settle down to endure the chilling and, to them, soul-de-destroying experience of a ministry which makes light of and even denies the fundamental doctrines of the faith. This is never an easy question to decide, and in spite of what the critics may believe, few men who draw such people around them do so as a deliberate policy, but rather allow them to make up their own minds in the sight of God. More on this in tomorrow's Note.

116)22:1-2

Further to what we said in yesterday's Note, we have to concede that David did not invite these men to associate with him; they did so of their own freewill. And, in all fairness, we should realise that so far as they were concerned it was the right thing for them to do, for they recognised in David the Lord's anointed, and knew instinctively that they should be with him. Behind all - and perhaps they dimly discerned this, as doubtless David did also, and as we should - God was at work fulfilling His will and purpose for the future. And in such a circumstance, it is something to be on the right side! Furthermore - and this is significant - while the men that gathered round David were a motley crew, they were nevertheless the men that formed the nucleus of his army, and who - at least some of them - were later spoken of as 'David's mighty men'. Poor material for an army, we might think, yet by the grace of God they were knocked into shape and made into men, a highly loyal and disciplined band. This is surely a parable of the Church and the work of the Gospel. Adullam is in fact a picture of what every church should be, a gathering place for all in need and for every kind of need. Great David's Greater Son is in the midst of the church, He is the drawing power for all in distress, and He proceeds by the discipline of His Word and Spirit to fashion them into soldiers for His army. Many queer and odd people may be drawn by the grace of the gospel, but this should not be allowed to become an excuse for remaining queer and odd, for that is not a luxury that Christ is prepared to allow His people. He is set on change and transformation, and will not be content until He has made men and women of us. David became captain over his men, that is, they acknowledged his authority over them and gave him their obedience and loyalty; and when we own the Lordship of Christ, the training and discipline that will knock us into shape will begin.

117)22:3-5

Here is a different, and, we think, more authentic picture of David, and he is seen in a truer light in the tender affection and loyalty he shows for his parents. Tenderness and gentleness of heart does not always or even often accompany strength and greatness in the world's great ones, but in the truly spiritual man there is just this wedding of contrasting characteristics, and it is the sign of wholeness and the ultimate possibility of grace in the life of the believer. Natural affection is ordained of God, and is so important in life that to be without it is regarded (Romans 1:31) as a sign of reprobation. We are glad to see this filial loyalty in David, for it evidences not only the fulfilment of the law by the Spirit in his heart, but also the lineaments of true humanity, in an age which was not noted for its tenderness of feelings towards anybody. Such an attitude holds good for us today also. It is true that this sometimes presents difficulties in relation to Christian profession, when parents do not share our views or convictions and when they react adversely to us. But parents' opposition is often not to the gospel or to Christ but due to the fear that 'religion' may have gone to their heads and proving harmful to their bairns. We must do all we can to disabuse them of this fear. After all, our Christian testimony must make us more, not less, loving and filial, and this is best shown in moral categories of behaviour. It is never a good sign when young people criticise parents to others, and show public disloyalty to them. There is a certain kind of evangelical piety which seems to breed this, due to a mistaken interpretation of our Lord's words about 'hating our parents'. This is not, in my view, of the Spirit of God.

We note significantly in 5 that David is now guided by the Lord to return to Judah, and since this is the first indication of a word from the Lord it may tend to confirm our earlier surmise that it was a mistake on David's part to have fled as he did to Nob and Achish. God wanted him on the spot in the land which He had given him, and was assuredly able to keep him by His power from the anger and fury of the demented Saul.

118)22:6-10

It is difficult to decide which is the more striking here - Saul's contemptible outburst or Doeg's particularly offensive attitude as he turned informer. Both leave a bad taste in the mouth. What a sad declension has overtaken Saul since his early days of promise, and how he seems to have shrunk in stature from a man of war to a querulous, self-pitying whiner. So much for Israel's desire for a king like the nations! And, of course, he is taken in by Doeg, who is not really interested in taking pity on Saul, but has an eye on the main chance, so to speak, and is intent on any advantage he may gain from the situation and from the information he possesses. He plays his cards well; with deadly skill and cunning he misrepresents the situation, as ruthlessly and without mercy he deliberately incriminates Ahimelech, who is innocent of any fault in the matter, giving Saul the impression that he willingly conspired with David against the king. This is a particularly nauseating and disgusting kind of evildoing and, as we see from Psalm 52 (notice the heading), earns the condign judgment of God. How easy it is to give a wrong impression! By the turn of a phrase, by a gesture or even a look, we can lie shamefully, stealing a man's good name from him, and bringing ruin upon him. There are more ways than one of committing murder, and malicious misrepresentation for ulterior motives is one of the more common. Doeg the unscrupulous did a dastardly piece of work that day, and much harm and hurt came to many before he was brought to book.

119)22:11-19

The full force of Doeg's deadly work is seen in these verses as Saul savagely turns on the priest and in blind rage refuses to listen to reason. It is important to see that although Ahimelech spoke the truth to him - and his words must have had the ring of truth to all who heard them - he paid no attention. The matter was already prejudged in the mind of the king, and it is a measure of his implacable fury and frenzy that he could not listen to the voice of reason coming from God's anointed priest. The enormity of his intention must have struck the rough soldiery with horror (17), and they recoiled from such a blasphemous and inhuman command. Even they, brutal as they may have been in warfare, retained some respect for holy things and refused to obey. To any but a devil-possessed soul this must surely have given cause for reflection and reconsideration, but Saul was consumed with an unholy determination to wreak vengeance on those he thought had taken sides against him in the escape of his enemy, David, and he called on Doeg to do what the soldiers refused to countenance, and Doeg was ready; he had no scruples about holy things and, intent on gaining every possible advancement in the king's eyes, committed the nameless atrocity and slew the defenceless priest and all his house. And this to curry favour with a man who was already rejected by God - and manifestly so, to all who had eyes to see! It is extremely dangerous to want to keep in with such a man. But then, favour seekers are generally blind to the real issues. That is why they so often back the wrong man, and recognise their folly only when it is too late.

120)22:20-23

David's distress when he hears of the massacre of the priests is great, and one can imagine the recriminations with which he reproached himself for ever having gone to Nob. Doubtless the subterfuge he employed in deceiving the priest would rise up in accusation against him and make him take the responsibility for the massacre upon his own spirit. How careful we must be not to employ in the service of the Lord expedients which from their very nature He cannot honour! There is a nobility of spirit in the instant way in which David recognised his involvement in the death of the priests, and withal a realism, not only in his refusal to evade this, but also in the swill acceptance of the situation and the determination to make amends as far as he could to Abiathar, the sole survivor of the tragedy. His assurance to the desolate son of Abiathar is passing sweet and comforting, and we cannot but reflect on the contrast between this young man's position in David's favour and Doeg's position in Saul's. Doeg doubtless had his reward of the king and was enjoying (for the moment) what he had coveted, place at the court and financial gain; whereas all David could offer Abiathar was blood and toil, sweat and tears, in a grim and protracted campaign. But it is better to suffer with, and for, a king who is destined by God to reign in the end, than enjoy (temporary) ease with one whose days on the throne are numbered. And this, surely, is a graphic parable of Christian life. Infinitely better to be with One Who says, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation...', knowing that if we suffer with Him we shall reign, than with him who lures us with lying words, 'All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me', knowing from the Scriptures where his promise 'Ye shall be as gods' ultimately leads.

121)23:1-13

In the last chapter, we spoke of the discipline by which the motley company that gathered around David in the cave of Adullam was shaped and fashioned into an army that featured largely in the establishment of this kingdom. The events of this chapter give some indication of how that ongoing discipline worked and was fulfilled not only in David's men, but in David himself. The ongoing process of the equipment of David for the task of kingship was an ongoing process, involving many differing experiences. Here is David in the crucible, being made into God's anointed king. And we, who are, as Christians, called to reign with Christ in a spiritual royalty, can see the relevance of the chapter for us, in the ongoing disciplines of our lives, and in the provision God makes for us in them. In this regard, the emphasis here is - and should be - not so much on the trials, as on the provision of God in them. There is a twofold thrust in the message of the chapter: first of all, an enormous assurance and encouragement to the people of God in all the disciplines that come upon them (cf the emphasis in 1 Peter 1 on 'the trial of your faith being much more precious than of gold that perisheth'); and secondly an invitation to pilgrimage, to those not yet committed to the Christian faith, as they see the sheer attractiveness of what is on offer to those who enter the Christian Ede. A glance at a map will give some indication of the geography of the area in which David was pursued and on the run from Saul. The wilderness of Judea was in the main an inhospitable place, as may be gathered from the maps of those days. Keilah, mentioned in these verses, was some 20 miles east of Grath, the Philistine city, and Ziph some 20 miles southeast of Keilah and some 20 miles west of Engedi, on the shores of the Dead Sea - altogether an inhospitable and barren area which would certainly have laid considerable demands on a company of 600 men, in terms of survival and adequate provision of food and water. Such were the hazards that faced David and his men at that time - an arduous and perilous time indeed, but one in which they proved the faithfulness and provision of God.

122)21:1-13

There are two 'incidents' or 'movements' in these verses one, the relief of Keilah and the defeat of the Philistines; the other the treachery of the men of Keilah and the prospect of their betrayal of David to save themselves from being sacked by Saul. In both we see the guiding hand of God at work on David's behalf. The whole passage is invested with a sense of crisis. These were hazardous and perilous times for David and his men, who were clearly feeling the strain of them, as may be seen from what they said to David in 3. Saul was never very far away, either geographically or in their thoughts. There are several points to note. Saul's unholy preoccupation with David in his jealousy and hatred of him had beguiled him from his proper duty to protect his realm. He had become neglectful of national security because of this, and the Philistines were not slow to take advantage, as we see from their incursion upon Keilah. It is sad when a preoccupation or obsession makes us derelict in our duty (this often happens in spiritual life!). Just as evident in these verses is the fact that David was intent on leaning upon God. We are told that he 'enquired of the Lord' (2). Perhaps the consciousness of his past mistakes in ch 21 made him doubly careful. Do we learn from our mistakes as David clearly did? Now, he was conscious that unless the Lord was in a thing it would prove abortive, and it would in these circumstances be disastrous to do it. And when his men protested (3) about his proposed course of action, he enquired of the Lord again (4) to make sure he was in the right way. This was surely wisdom on his part.

123)23:1-13

Interestingly, on the third occasion of seeking the mind of the Lord (9-12) David made use of Abiathar the priest and his ephod. On the first two occasions (2a), guidance may have come through Gad the seer or by secret prayer; here on this third occasion it was through the ephod, which seems to have been another accepted way of obtaining the mind of the Lord. This may have been a supernatural provision in the old economy, which some think refers to the stones on the breastplate of the ephod gleaming supernaturally to give the Lord's leading; others that in the pouch of the ephod two flat objects, one side of each called Urim the other side Thummim, were taken out of the pouch by the priest. If both showed Urim this meant 'no'; if both showed Thummim, this meant 'yes'. If one of each was shown this meant no reply. It is significant that between the early monarchy and post-exilic times, the Urim and Thummim are not mentioned - and that was the age of the prophets. The spirit of prophecy seemed to make the Urim and Thummim superfluous. Be that as it may, these are ways of guidance not given to us now, nor do we need them, for we have a surer word and way: guidance through His Word, guidance by the intimation of the Spirit, guidance in circumstances surrounding the situation. And in the intersection of these three, we may certainly know the Lord's leading, for when God is in something there is no contradiction between them. Guidance by the word is something more than 'getting a word' - it is living by the principles of the Word of God. It is an indispensable necessity to know the Word well and be familiar with its inner heart, to be so much at home in it that its dictates become 'second nature' to us. As to the leading of the Spirit, we must be able to recognise the Spirit's voice, and distinguish it from the voice of the evil one. Given this, however, the Spirit's intimations are always in agreement with the principles of the Word. It is not a question of 'hearing voices' or 'promptings', but being so one with Him that His will becomes ours, and we 'think His thoughts after Him'.

124)23:14-18

The previous passage in this chapter showed us the reality of the guiding hand of God, showing David what he should do in times of perplexity and doubt as to the right way forward, and we saw how pertinent this is in the ongoing disciplines of the Christian life. On other occasions, however, the circumstances may be different, and it will not be the need for guidance that is apparent. Sometimes we feel the ongoing pressure, and we will be conscious of being so 'up against it' and even at our wits' end and at breaking point, that it overwhelms us. We may not always be aware, at the time, of how much the pressure is upon us but the constant turbulence of our experience, being hunted day by day, with many anxious moments, may suddenly bring us to a point when something seems to be about to snap within us. The sensation of 'going to pieces' is one that can come very suddenly and without warning and we feel we simply cannot go on any further. This is indeed 'a dark night of the soul', but it is also just where God meets us, in great tenderness and compassion. It was so with David, for Jonathan came to him and 'strengthened his hand in God' (16) - took David's nerveless hand, as it were, and put it in the strong hand of God and brought him peace. That is a great and wonderful ministry for anyone to fulfil for God's buffeted servants at such a time. Sometimes God does this through others, and sometimes directly by His Word and Spirit. But we must not underestimate the incalculable good we may do by speaking words of help and encouragement, for they may be the very word of God to a soul in conflict that will mean all the difference between despair and peace. Dwell much on the content of Jonathan's 'Fear not' in 17: 'thou shall be king over Israel' - this to a man on the run and so little like a king at that point! But this was the great end in view. What encouragement!

125)23:19-29

In 1-13 we saw David being guided by the hand of God; in 14-18 we saw him strengthened by His grace; and now in these verses we have a glorious testimony to the power of God in protecting and delivering His people. This is probably one of the most exciting and dramatic of all David's experiences. Betrayed by the Ziphites, and well-nigh hemmed in by Saul's forces, it looked as if evil was to triumph, and David be slain, when suddenly, at the decisive, critical moment, there came the news of the Philistine invasion, and in an instant he was safe. God is the God of the miraculous, and how effortlessly He does it! It is no problem to Him to do the impossible, especially when the urgent cries of His servant are in His ears. We are not told here that David prayed to the Lord for deliverance, but we may see from Psalm 54 (read the heading) how faith in a wonder-working God rose up in his heart and moved the Almighty hand in his defence. How astonishing that a Philistine invasion was mounted at God's behest in order to procure the deliverance of his persecuted and harassed servant! If this is the extent to which God is prepared to go to help and vindicate us, how little need there is ever to be afraid of what man may do to us! God is faithful. 'Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord' (Exodus 14:13). One point arises here, however, which constitutes a real problem for many. Why did God leave it so long before bringing deliverance to His servant? There are two things that can be said in answer to this. The first is that it was to test David's faith. Let us remember that this is what puts lustre into our lives, and virtue and strength into our character. Do not forget our Lord's own dealing with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Matthew 15:21-28) and how, by not at first answering her plea, he drew out her faith and brought it to full expression. The second reason is to show how easily and effortlessly He can bring to naught the well-laid plans of evil men, even at the point of their fulfilment. Well might David say, 'He that is in the heavens shall laugh: The Lord shall have them in derision!' (Psalm 2:4).

126)24:1-15

In the previous chapter we have seen David in a variety of testing circumstances and under considerable pressure, in which he was (i) led by the Spirit, (ii) strengthened by His grace, and (iii) kept by His power. The chapter before us now continues, as it were, in the same vein, and if we were to use another caption, it would be (iv) conformed to His image. There is, however, a significant difference. What we read in ch 23 was the story of things that happened to David and of God's grace to him in what he had to endure, when he was the passive recipient, so to speak, of 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'; here we now are told of something that David did. This reminds us that there is a spiritual life and testimony that has to be maintained amid the trials and testings of our experience. It sometimes seems - and it was so here - that God surrounds us with the most unpromising circumstances, in which temptation is most keen, and opportunity to yield to it at the maximum, and He says to us: 'Now live as a man of God should, there'. This is the relevance and the importance of David's behaviour towards Saul in the cave at Engedi, when Saul was clearly at his mercy. What is seen in this dramatic episode is the work of grace that was taking place in David's heart, and the effect of the testings and disciplines he had been passing through. This is the link with what we have already read in ch 23 and its true explanation. The disciplines there tend to produce the behaviour that we see here - the gracious, godly, Christlike spirit of forbearance and generous forgiving love; when he might so easily have succumbed to the temptation to rid himself forever of Saul his enemy, David refused to be overcome of evil. This must surely have delighted the heart of God, Who, after all, is intent on producing for the throne of Israel a man after His own heart. And here we begin to see the lineaments of godly character appearing in him. We remember once hearing about a display of Wedgwood china, in which a piece of dull-looking clay was set beside a beautifully finished piece of exquisite design; and in the window there was a caption which read 'The colouring comes out in the firing'. This is how it was with David.

127)24:1-15

We can hardly suppose that David's sanctification and conformity to the divine image was a painless process, unattended by pain or distress. Rather, we have to recognise that such a discipline is never without its cost. Two of the Psalms may well reflect this. The titles of both Psalms 57 and 142 speak of 'the cave', and this may well be the cave mentioned in 3 (or perhaps the cave of Adullam in ch 22). In either case it is this time in general that the psalms reflect and we see something in them of the distress of David's soul. Phrases such as these 'calamities' in Psalm 57:1 and 'my soul is bowed down' in Psalm 57:6, and 'my spirit is overwhelmed' (142:3), 'no man cared for my soul' (142:4), 'I am brought very low' (142:6), serve to indicate the intensity of his struggles in those days. But these same psalms give us the expressions of his faith - 'in the shadow of Thy wings' and 'my heart is fixed' (Psalm 57:1, 7), 'Thou knewest my path', and 'Thou art my refuge' (Psalm 142:3, 5), and in these references we see David's faith rising magnificently to the challenge. In such circumstances, when stress was at its greatest and his spirit at its lowest, it would have been very easy to give way, especially when temptation and opportunity came together as suddenly as it did in the cave when Saul was lying asleep and defenceless. But David did not yield. Faith triumphed, and he would not lift his hand against the Lord's anointed. We have only to recall how we so often yield to sudden temptation when adverse strain is upon us to realise the magnitude of David's triumph here, and how deeply God's discipline had wrought in his soul. Suffering enlarges our capacity and adds depth to our character. God trusted him with this temptation, as if to display His handiwork in him to the world.

128)24:16-22

What was said in yesterday's Note about David's stout and resolute resistance to the temptation to harm Saul represents the real heart of Christian experience, and a truer index of character than we often realise. And in this regard David's integrity stands in marked contrast to Saul's emotional and maudlin outburst (cf also a similar episode in 26:21ff) which by this stage in the story surely no one with any sense or discernment would be taken in by. This prompts the reflection that there are two kinds of sins - sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit; the one is often represented by acts, the other by attitudes.

Sins of the flesh are real, dangerous, and often disastrous. But so often they come from frailty and weakness of nature, and are mixed with this. But the sins of the spirit - hatred, malice, envy, and spite - are truly corrosive and deadly. Moral failure, sudden loss of temper, the hasty word - these are often sincerely mourned and grieved over, and repented of, with real efforts being made to retrieve the situation, and many who have been victims of these sins, have deep feelings of unworthiness, and weep much before God for them. But others habitually live with wrong attitudes of heart - malice, bitterness, spite - and these corrode life for them and bring blight upon their souls. These are the terrible things that defile a man and keep him from being 'after God's own heart'. And Saul illustrates the deadly danger of sinful attitudes: his heart was corroded and consumed by his bitter envy and hatred of David.

129)24:16-22

Saul's reaction to David's disclosure of himself is an interesting study. We should not lightly assume that this was a reconciliation between the two. It is significant that after the promise was elicited from David concerning the safety of Saul's house, David returned, not to the court, but to his stronghold (22). He was not so sanguine as to think that the enmity was over. What, then, are we to say of this? Simply that a copious effusion of tears may on occasion mean little or nothing, and that we should not allow ourselves to be taken in by them. It is a widespread fallacy to assume that tears are necessarily the sign of a tender heart and that those who shed them are really melted within. On the contrary - and Saul was a case in point - it may be simply a matter of emotional instability, and this is quite unrelated to tenderness of heart. Saul was mentally disturbed if not deranged through the pressure of the evil spirit that troubled him, and in such a condition it is not to be supposed that any expression of emotion on his part could be regarded as reliable. The real state of his heart is seen in the next episodes recorded of him in chs 26, 27, and when we read them we shall find ourselves saying, 'So much for Saul's tears and cries!' No, real tenderness of heart is a mark of nobility of character, not of meanness, of strength, not of weakness. And it is the meanness and weakness of Saul that appal us in this story. Such an one is incapable of tenderness as he is incapable of greatness and his tears sentimental, never great-hearted. We should endeavour to learn this distinction when we meet with tearful protestations from people who are really hard and ruthless at heart.

130)25:1-13

The story of David's encounter with Nabal the churl is well known, and affords a number of important lessons for us, some obvious and on the surface of the account before us, but others that emerge when we reflect a little more deeply on the story's setting. We have, for example, in the last few Notes, been considering David's path to kingship, and have coined the phrase 'Through trials and tribulations to the throne' - a journey in which David has known the leading of God's spirit, the strengthening and encouragement by His grace, and the experience of being kept by His power, in the process of being conformed to His image. But conformity to His image is a gradual, ongoing process. One recalls Paul's words in Philippians 3:12 - 'not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect...' - these are words that could well be written over his story at this point. What we mean is this: the incident with Nabal comes between the two great moral victories he won in his attitude to Saul, first in the cave (ch 24) and then on the battlefield (ch 26), on both of which occasions he had opportunity to kill his enemy but refrained. And in between these two moral victories, we see a David exploding with anger at the shabby treatment meted out to his men by Nabal's churlishness, and vowing condign vengeance upon him. It is surely clear from this that David's conformity to the image of God was a gradual process, and that the work of sanctification in him was very partial, and marked by not a few stumblings along the way, as we shall see later still in his story.

131)25:1-13

What was said in yesterday's Note might make us tend to 'raise an eyebrow' when we read of David being referred to as 'a man after God's own heart', for there were unquestionably lapses and blemishes in his ongoing story. But this is to miss the point the Scriptures are making. In the absolute sense, no man could be after God's own heart inasmuch as there is no man that is not sinful. But there are sins and sins, sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit, sins that are momentary lapses due to the weakness of the flesh, and sins that express heart attitudes, and are therefore the evidence of entrenched evil in the spirit. The difference, for example, between David and Saul, is that these deep heart attitudes were being dealt with in the former, in a way that certainly was not the case with Saul. And this is also true if we compare David and Nabal in this deeply interesting narrative which affords us such a fascinating study in character contrast. Without doubt David had much provocation for his outburst against Nabal's churlishness, for it was a particularly mean and shabby attitude to adopt towards one to whom he was indebted for protection but this must not blind us to the fact that David erred and sinned in his passionate reaction to the calculated insult done to him. We could have wished that this man to whom our hearts are warming more and more had shown a better spirit than he did. His words in 21 'He hath requited me evil for good' were to be the basis of his revenge against Nabal; but then he could have said as much of Saul in the previous chapter (as also in the one that follows), yet he 'turned the other cheek' - and how much better it would have been if he had done so on this occasion also.

132)25:14-35

David's angry outburst against Nabal was certainly wrong; but it is the swiftness with which he came to recognise this that is one of the most heartening and instructive lessons of the chapter, and that enhances our estimate of his character. But the 'positioning' of this story between the two moral victories described in chs 24 and 26 teaches us that the true spiritual life is a day-to-day matter, and that yesterday's grace will not suffice for today. There is no position of spiritual attainment from which it is not possible to fall away. It can never be true to say that spiritually we have 'arrived', and even momentary carelessness can reap a bitter harvest. But if it is true that yesterday's grace will not do for today, it is also true that today's failure need not cloud tomorrow. As Proverbs 24:16 puts it, 'a just man falleth seven times, and riseth again' (see also Micah 7:8). This should teach us not to be discouraged in the Christian life, for discouragement can sometimes be a greater hindrance to us than the sin that so often brings us down. One battle lost does not lose a war, or even many battles lost. We should take heart from David's experience, and have faith that we shall go on to greater victories.

133)25:14-35

There is one simple, decisive difference between David and Nabal. David could be entreated (32-34), but Nabal could not be spoken to (17), nor was he fit to be lived with, because of his incivility and churlishness. By definition, a churl is a rude, surly, sullen, selfish, rough-tempered, unfeeling person, and this story in fact pinpoints an area of life where it seems that even the grace of God finds difficulty in penetrating. Every believer claims that grace has touched his life, saving, delivering, and changing him. But the question that needs to be asked is: 'Has the grace of God made him gracious?' The New Testament speaks of the 'things that accompany salvation', and this is surely one of the most important. It is recorded of the early disciples that 'great grace was upon them all', but this has not always been true of those who have followed them in the faith down the years. Courtesy and good manners are not optional graces for the Christian, and when dourness and plain incivility characterise the life, it is more than time to take stock. Nabal's attitude was quite inexcusable on any count but especially in view of his servants' testimony about David's generous and honourable treatment of his property. Not to be grateful for the blessings that come our way through the good offices of others is one of the sadder, as it is one of the more sinister and ominous, indications that all is not well in the soul. We should not forget that the phrase 'neither were thankful' (Romans 1:21) occurs in a passage dealing with reprobation and the judgment of God. Is our name Nabal in this respect?

134)25:14-35

The character of Abigail (whose name means 'source of delight') stands out in great relief against the dark and sombre background of her home. She must be one of the most gracious ladies appearing in the Old Testament story. Peacemakers are always attractive people! One marvels that her spirit seems to have been so little dulled and embittered by having to live in such circumstances as this disastrous marriage must have ordained, and it is a measure of how worthily she had graduated in the school of faith that a union which would have spelt misery, hopelessness and despair for many had wrought in her such grace and refinement and wisdom. One readily thinks of a notable passage in one of Alexander Whyte's Bible Characters, in which he says so trenchantly of Nabal, 'A devil at home' is one of the sure marks of the evangelical hypocrite. He shines like an angel in the church. Christ and mercy are never out of his mouth. He is much to be heard on closing with Christ. He is raised up to heaven with liberty and joy on Sabbath, and especially on communion days. But he is a devil at home.... There is this in all genuine and inbred churlishness and obstinacy, that after a time it comes out worst beside those we love best. A man will be affable, accessible, entertaining, the best of company, and the very soul of it abroad, and then, the instant he turns the latchkey in his own door, Nabal himself was not worse, he sinks back into such an utter boorishness, and mulishness, and doggedness. He swallows his meal in silence, and then he sits all night with a cloud on his brow. He is silent to no children but his own; he is a bear to nobody but his own wife. Nothing pleases him; nothing in his own house is to his mind.... There is a law of obstinacy that still makes him a devil at home.'

135)25:36-44

There are two possible interpretations of Nabal's death. One is that he was seized by an apoplectic stroke, brought about either by fear, in the realisation of what had nearly befallen his house through his churlishness, or by anger and fury that his wife should have so dealt with his enemy. The other - and this is by no means improbable - is that the phrase 'his heart died within him' has a spiritual reference, and means that this was where Nabal passed the point of no return, and beyond the hope of any improvement; and this being so, God took him away. The lesson, then, is twofold: Nabal's churlishness led to his death, and it did so by leading to the death of all the finer and nobler feelings that can dwell in the human heart. David is in no doubt that it is the hand of God that has come upon Nabal in judgment (39), but our modern climate of thought is not at all willing to allow God either the ability or the right to do so to men today. This is a measure of the sentimentality of our stony-hearted age and of its basic misunderstanding (not to say repudiation) of biblical categories. The fallacy lies in assuming that judgment must necessarily be regarded as harsh and arbitrary and 'unchristian'. Not so. The judgments of God are right, because He is a just God. The real problem is that underlying the modern man's dislike of the idea of judgment is a basic objection to justice itself. This is seen very clearly in the sneaking (and often openly declared) sympathy shown for evildoers in society. Violent criminals may often get much more sympathy than the prostrate and sorrowing relatives of their victims, and there are those who are more prepared to gather signatures for a petition to be sent to the Home Secretary than to inaugurate a fund for the relief of the unfortunate victims of crime and violence. This is the spirit which, in spiritual matters, objects to the idea that Nabal was cut off by God for his sins.

136)25:36-44

We wonder whether a lesson is meant to be learned from the fact that this chapter begins with the death of Samuel and ends with that of Nabal (compare 1 and 38). The wonderful thing about the story of Samuel is that his heart was ever responsive to the voice of God - 'Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth' - whereas Nabal's, cold and churlish to man and God alike, became like a stone; and both, within a short time of each other, were called into the presence of God to give account of his stewardship. But what an eternity of difference between the two! In this light, we may see how foolish it is to imagine that somehow everything will work out right in the end, irrespective of how we have lived. We are all, in fact, making our future now. Nabal shaped his eternal destiny by the way he lived on earth, and died a lost soul, beyond the hope of any improvement or change. It is ever so; when a man refuses spiritual influences and closes his heart to the entreaties of the gospel, he hardens himself against God, endangers his soul, and seals his doom. Well might David afterwards say (Psalm 95:7, 8) 'Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your heart'.

137)26:1-12

The lessons of this chapter are very similar to those of ch 24, and the incident in which David spares Saul is almost a repeat of the earlier one. Again it is the Ziphites who seek to betray David, and it is clear that they had an implacable grudge against him. The Lord's anointed ones will never be without those who are intent on harming and hurting them. One is tempted to wonder why David went down into Saul's camp (6), a hazardous and dangerous exploit. Was it an example of his courage, or of an impetuous spirit, or was he now sufficiently confident in the justice of his cause to be able to take the initiative with Saul, and show him how baseless were the charges against him? It would almost seem that he sought the opportunity to spare Saul's life a second time, to prove to him, and to his own followers, that his heart was devoid of offence towards the king. This is perhaps a dangerous thing to do, for few of us know our own hearts sufficiently well to be sure that when opportunity and temptation coincide we will not be overcome by an urge to do harm, whose strength we had not realised. If this, however, was a real issue for David, he was utterly triumphant, and his words in 9-11 reveal how content he was to leave his enemy in the hands of God, for Him to deal with and bring to naught as and when He would. How wise he was, and what depth of understanding of the ways of God he had attained in the long disciplines and testings he had endured! It is something to be able to refrain from taking matters in one's own hands when a golden opportunity to do so presents itself. How much we could attain in Christian life if only we learned this lesson!

138)26:13-25

Idealism and realism stand together in this story. What we have just read in 9-11 affords a demonstration of the ideal in spiritual life, whereas in 13 we see a very much 'down-to-earth' realism in David's attitude. He knew it was best to have a reasonable distance between himself and Saul, in view of the latter's erratic and dangerous behaviour. Contrary to many people's assumption, deep spiritual consecration is not only not incompatible with wisdom and practical common sense, but is in fact their ultimate basis and guarantee. David's words are open to more than one interpretation. He may mean, 'If the Lord has stirred you up against me for any fault of mine, let me know my offence and I will make an offering to the Lord, that I may be forgiven.' On the other hand, he may mean, 'If it is the evil spirit from the Lord that has stirred you up against me, make an offering to God - i.e. get right with Him - and you will be restored and healed even yet'. This latter interpretation may well accord with what David adds in the remainder of the verse, when he suggests an alternative source for the king's hatred of him, in the evil tongues of men around the king. This is a nice distinction, but a real one, for it bears witness to two different dimensions of evil, namely the 'old nature' on the one hand and the enemy of souls himself on the other. All this is an interesting commentary on the hatreds and strifes that arise among men.

Sometimes we are influenced by our dislike for people by what other people tell us about them; but sometimes we may be the victims of direct influence by evil spirits, which can cause deep misunderstanding between the best of friends. It behoves us to ask ourselves, 'Am I being wrought upon by the powers of darkness, and are they causing me to misunderstand the situation and impute unworthy and wrong motives where none exist?' Well, that is some thought for today, isn't it?

139)26:13-95

We should not pass from this chapter without thinking about Saul's damning verdict upon himself in 21, 'I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly'. It is true that he was referring to his attitude of envy towards David, and the extraordinary lengths to which it had driven him; but he spoke more truly and deeply than he knew, for he was making a solemn confession about his whole life and experience as a man who had heard and known the call of God. Here was a man greatly endowed by the Divine Spirit, gifted and cut out for a high and noble destiny in God's service. Among his many privileges, none was greater than that of a long association with Samuel, the man of God. But these were privileges that were belittled and neglected and lightly esteemed. And with these there were the opportunities that were wasted - opportunities to redeem the time, and make sure his position in the economy of God. Then there were the commands of God that he disobeyed, crass, wilful disobedience persisted in, in face of all warnings. Thus was his heart hardened in sin. What a story...privileges neglected, opportunities wasted, commands disobeyed! And in the end the sorry confession, 'I have played the fool....'! And, saddest of all, it could have been so different, if only he had hearkened to the voice of God. If only...! These are words that can mean an eternity of regret. Wise is the man who makes sure that they will not be said of him!

140)27:1-12

The options in the matter of interpreting this chapter are really only two: either we take it in terms of the continuing saga of David's experience as a fugitive from Saul - comparable to modern resistance movements, and subject to the hazards that such guerilla warfare must inevitably encounter. If we look at it in this way, we face the same kind of problems in the ethical realm that we have already touched on earlier in the story - problems as to whether it could be morally defensible in a war or crisis situation to act deception, as David did here, and continue to do over a considerable period of time. Or, we take it as indicating strong evidence that David made a wrong move at this point, and suffered a lapse of faith. Taken thus, the value of the chapter for us is considerable, for it shows how this can happen, and why, and the consequences for spiritual life. Perhaps it is useful and pertinent, by way of introduction, to look back to something Saul said in 26:21, 'I have played the fool' - fateful words indeed, at the near end of a life that went terribly wrong - for the next time we read of Saul is at Ender, in the macabre scene with the witch, dabbling in occult practices - an inglorious end for the man who was once the Lord's anointed! But there are different ways of playing the fool - and there is a sense in which it could be said that David 'played the fool' in this chapter (and its consequences in ch 29), and it was only by the providential mercy of God that he was extricated from the consequences of his folly (the difference between Saul's behaviour and David's is analogous to the difference between that of Judas Iscariot and that of Simon Peter...Peter went out and wept bitterly, but Judas went out and hanged himself - the one in heart-broken repentance, the other in unavailing and graceless remorse. Now, it is all too easy to sit in judgment on Bible characters. But our concern must be not to be critical of David here, for the chapter mirrors what we ourselves so often do in similar circumstances - and the pot can hardly call the kettle black, as we say. Rather, we seek to learn from the chapter, in such a way as to be forewarned, and forearmed, against similar mistakes in our own lives.

141)27:1-12

First of all, then, a word about whether this was a mistake, a wrong move, made by David here. For a time, indeed, it might have seemed that David benefited from the move, for we read in 4 that Saul no more troubled or pursued him. As we read on, we become aware of some telltale and fateful signs that indicate to us that something was wrong. What we mean is this: in the story of Saul one of the impressive and solemn things we see is that his was a story of privileges neglected and belittled, and of opportunities wasted, and commands of God disobeyed, leading inevitably to a hardening of his heart, and his finally becoming a castaway. And something of this alarming pattern is seen also in David, in this chapter, for what we see is a gradual change in David - unwanted acts of cruelty and barbarity, an implacable attitude to enemies, lying and deceitfulness - all these are 'straws in the wind', as it were, and gradual evidences of the hardening power of sin. And it comes to a head, as we shall see in chapter 29, when David finds himself, through his own duplicity, arrayed unavoidably with the Philistines against his own countrymen. And only the providence of God, intervening to help him, saved him in such a situation. This is the inevitable pattern of sin. When we step out of the Lord's will, even though not in open rebellion, perhaps only through waywardness and foolishness, there is inevitably a loss of spiritual stature, and in indefinable, yet unmistakable, ways the life is marked, if not in our own eyes, certainly in others. Then, sooner or later, comes a real dilemma, when we see to our cost how foolish and wayward we have been, and how wrong our action was. Ah, let us learn from David that lapses of faith can be very costly in the life of a believer.

142)27:1-12

The first point we should notice is that this decision to escape was not voiced, only thought (1). He said it in his heart, and this bears witness to the distorting power that certain kinds of thought may have. Instead of speaking to himself, he allowed self to speak to him, and it speedily gained the upper hand. We know as a matter of fact (see many Psalms), that David would never have said such a thing as this in his better moments. It was, then, a period when depression laid hold upon his spirit. Was this depression an aftermath of overdue strain flowing from the daring exploit mentioned in ch 26. One thinks of Elijah after Carmel. The fearless prophet had dared and defied all the priests of Baal, magnificent and superb in faith; then he ran from Jezebel's threats, lay down under the juniper tree and wanted to die. It was delayed reaction after an enormous strain, and God tenderly ministered to his overwrought prophet. Elijah chose more wisely than David and ceased all activity. David, however, drove himself on. It is very difficult when one is over-strained and tired simply to stop in one's tracks and rest. When we fail to do so, then of course the whole picture will be suffused with lurid colouring and become an unreal one. This is what we see in the opening verses of this chapter.

143)27:1-12

There is another factor in David's situation here from which we may learn a deep and valuable lesson. We should note particularly the word 'speedily' in 1. The impression we are given is that David did what he did on impulse, and in an instant. It was panic reaction, and we must in the Christian life learn to beware of this, for this is generally the work of Satan, who delights to stampede us into rash and ill-considered behaviour. We would not be far from the mark if we said that the whole situation seems to have suddenly hit David, and devastated him, driving him to this panic reaction. We could point to several instances in Scripture by way of illustration. We have already referred to Elijah's sudden panic in face of Jezebel's threats on his life. Another Old Testament illustration is afforded in Nehemiah 4:10ff, in the sudden dread that paralysed the builders of the wall of Jerusalem, and we should recall how in particular circumstances Paul, hard-pressed and labouring in the Word and, it would seem, at breaking point in his discouragement, doubtless felt he could not go on any longer. It is in this kind of situation that the phrase 'the straw that broke the camel's back' becomes relevant. In David's case, we find ourselves saying, 'If only he had shared it with someone, instead of keeping it bottled up within his own mind!' If he had, and had articulated his thoughts, saying, 'Oh God, I can't take any more of this' he might have heard God say in reply, 'Oh yes you can, my son'. David deprived himself of divine help and succour by not sharing and communicating at this time. One of the important lessons for us to learn here is that, in such a state, under tension and 'up-against-it', we are in no fit condition to be making decisions about our future. Such decisions ought not to be made on the impulse of a moment, for the impulse is very likely to be wrong. Wait! Consult! Think! Especially wait!

144)28:1-6

These verses belong to the thought and events that have occupied us in the Notes on ch 27, and one can imagine with what sinking of heart David realised his predicament, trapped as he was into engaging in battle against his own kith and kin (1, 2). A fuller discussion of this must wait until we come to ch 29, where the outcome is recorded and we leave David in his quandary, as God apparently did here, to learn from his mistake before He finally intervened on his behalf. In the meantime, we turn again to Saul, and the melancholy and tragic nemesis of his inglorious career. The reference in 3 to Samuel seems to indicate that in the mounting crisis of imminent warfare with the Philistines, the hapless king was desperately missing the counsel of his former friend. The statement in 3b is surely an indication that it was under Samuel's influence in earlier days that Saul had 'put away' unhallowed spiritist influences from the land and that, with Samuel's influence removed, there was no moral bulwark left for him, so that when faced with the crisis represented by the Philistines' approach, and the ominous silence when he sought counsel of the Lord, Saul inevitably came out into the open and had recourse to consulting the witch of Endor. It was a fateful evidence of just how far his continuing disobedience had brought him down. Perhaps the saddest note in all this is struck in 6. There was no answer from the Lord for Saul, when he enquired of Him, only a long silence. Saul had sinned away his day of grace, and was now rejected. A time comes when the Lord will not be enquired of, and when He will no longer be found when sought. For Saul, this time had come, and all was darkness, with no ray of light anywhere. Well might David cry, in his lament for Saul (2 Samuel 1:27), 'How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!'

145)28:7-25

The story of Saul's encounter with the witch of Endor is one which grips us with its tremendous dramatic intensity. But it also raises problems in our minds, which require some discussion. Spiritualists believe they are in communication with the dead. In challenging this belief it is, however, misleading to suggest that spiritualism is a hoax or delusion. The Christian objection to spiritualism is not that it is false, but that it is wrong. There is a grim reality in spiritualism, but it is not in fact what spiritualists themselves believe it is, for it is not communication with the dead, but traffic with evil spirits. Having sold themselves to the devil, they become tools of his evil purposes, and God sends them 'strong delusion, that they should believe a lie' (2 Thessalonians 2:11). There is no communication with the dead as we may gather from references such as Job 16:22; 2 Samuel 12:23, and particularly Luke 16:26 where Jesus indicates that there is no passage between the blessed and the damned, and presumably none between either and this world. In our Lord's parable father Abraham refused to let 'one from the dead' go back to warn Dives' five brothers. The only message allowed them was to be 'Moses and the prophets', that is, the Scriptures. Besides - and this is an important point seldom emphasised - how should it be thought that evil men or witches have the power to disturb the rest of the saints, and bring them 'back' into the world, when they please. This would be to make Satan stronger than God. No; the 'messages from the dead' are not from the departed, but from demons who 'impersonate' the dead, with a view to misleading and entangling those who receive them. We shall continue this discussion in tomorrow's Note.

146)28:7-25

The reason why the Scriptures set themselves so unequivocally against trafficking with spiritualism is that it represents something we ought not to pry into, because it is so evil. It is forbidden territory. Saul himself had earlier banned it, under Samuel's influence, because of the dangers inherent in it. 'Seeking forbidden knowledge' was the primal sin, as we see from Genesis 3, because it meant becoming 'as God': and represents a lust for lawless power. In practical terms, when anyone becomes conscious of 'leanings' in this direction they are to resist it with all their might, and regard it as a dangerous and potentially fateful tendency and liability. God can deal with it, and keep it under, but it must not be encouraged in any way. The truth is that the contemporary preoccupation and obsession with the occult represents a perilous distortion of the need for the supernatural that is inbuilt in our nature, as part of the image of God in us. When the good supernatural is at a discount, the bad supernatural tends to take over. When all that is said, however, the problems that arise with regard to Samuel's appearance before Saul are not cleared away. If spiritualism involves impersonation by evil spirits, are we to say that it was not, in fact, Samuel who appeared, but some demonic deception. One might think, from what has already been said, that such a conclusion was inevitable. But this involves difficulties with 15-19, for these verses seem certainly to indicate that this is the authentic Samuel. There is, however, another possible interpretation, which is that it was Samuel indeed who confronted Saul, and that he had been sent by God, in a vision, to the hapless king and not summoned up by the witch. For although evil spirits cannot bring back the dead, God surely can. This view seems substantiated in 12 by the cry of terror from the witch. Would she have been afraid of a normal 'calling up' of the spirits? Obviously she did not expect this that appeared before her gaze, and her fear is evidence that some power other than that to which she was used was at work. On this view, then, Samuel was sent by God, not raised up by the woman, and what happened was a real vision, not a séance.

147)28:7-25

Saul got more than he bargained for when he consulted the witch of Endor, and the burden of having the future revealed to him was almost more than he could bear, and certainly more than he could accept with anything but the most extreme fear and foreboding. This is the practical danger involved in the consulting of witches ancient or modern - and this includes fortune-tellers (not all of whom are fakes), horoscopes and suchlike. We are not meant to know the future. Doubtless some basic instinct within us makes us desirous of knowing what is to happen to us, but generally we are concerned that it should be good, not bad, fortune, and if what is foretold is grim and sorrowful, it is likely to make life unbearable. Some have suffered ruin of health physically and mentally in this way. Not for nothing does Jesus say, 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof' (Matthew 6:34). Furthermore - and this is even more sinister - if what is foretold originates with the devil, it can only be something which he wants and intends to happen, and by prying into it and learning of it, and being deceived into thinking it is going to happen, we play into his hands, and give him our unwitting cooperation in it, so that the possibility of its happening thereby increases. This is why it is so important to learn how to 'refuse the wiles of the devil in the powerful name of Christ', and bring them to naught.

148)29:1-11

We pointed out in the Note on 28:1-16 that the opening verses there introduce a fateful note for David, in the imminent war the Philistines were about to wage on Israel, and Achish's intimation to David that he, David, was to engage in it against his own people. This was a brief, anticipatory glance at a situation which is now unfolded in 29:1-11. This chapter and the next go together, for they belong to the one movement of the ongoing history. But we look at what 29:1-11 say first before going on to what follows. It will be remembered that we interpreted the events in chapter 27 as a lapse of faith on David's part. He made a wrong move then, and through panic and impulsive action he committed himself to a course which proved very hazardous for him and fraught with peril. It would seem, as we said earlier, as if the Lord left him in his quandary, before finally extricating him from the difficulties that came upon him. We read these verses before us now, therefore, with a sense of great relief that David was rescued from what could have been an intolerable and even tragic situation, and in this we are taught the inestimable truth that the kindly providence of God overrules the mistakes we make in His work and service, when frailty of the flesh rather than rebellion and wilfulness, makes us commit them. We have already seen that David's lapse of faith issued from a moment of depression - not that this excuses him, of course, but it does put him in a different category from Saul, whose whole attitude was one of revolt against the divine will, and therefore everything he did was tainted by it; whereas the general direction of David's life was towards the will of God, and a lapse prompted by depression did not change this. For all that, it was an act of grace and mercy that he was extricated from the consequences of his own ill-advised action. God is far kinder than we have ever deserved.

149)29:1-11

Something else, however, needs to be said on this matter before we continue into the next chapter. We indicated that David's predicament here arose from the frailty of the flesh when under pressure. This is true; but we may observe how this can progress to something more serious and perilous, as we see in 6ff. After God's providence is clearly at work in getting David 'off the hook' with the Philistine hosts, he seems deliberately to labour the point, and continue in his attitude of duplicity towards Achish. He should surely have held his peace altogether, and not spoken as he did, and let well alone. One would have thought he would have learned from his mistake by this time, and been grateful for the deliverance God was providing for him, and not endanger himself all over again by this perverse persistence in duplicity. What if Achish, on the basis of this, had gone to plead his cause again with the Philistine lords, and won them over. How foolish and ill-advised can one get? Does not this indicate a progression in sin, and the development of some qualities of perversity in it? We cannot be too careful! What starts as a frailty of the flesh can become something very different, with the slightest of encouragement. Think of Peter in the Judgment Hall: his first denial could be interpreted as a momentary, impulsive lapse; but the second and the third - how are we to interpret them?

150)30:1-8

Before we turn to a consideration of these verses we should note that, David's lapse of faith in 29:1-11 notwithstanding, Achish bears testimony to the worth of David's character during his sojourn in Philistia. David had witnessed a good confession, in spite of being in the wrong place. This bears witness to two things: one is that God is prepared to bless us within the limits we set on Him by the mistakes we make; the other, that one mistake does not vitiate the whole of a life. A wrong act and a wrong attitude are two different things; and David was still a man after God's own heart even though he had erred, and the divine anointing was still on him.

David's deliverance from taking part in the battle was providential in two ways, as we see in chapter 30: not only was he spared the agonising dilemma of having to face his own kinsmen in battle, but also he was able to return to Ziklag in time to pursue the marauding Amalekites and rescue the captured families of Ziklag from their clutches. These verses are full of allusion and instruction for the spiritual life. Everything centres on Amalek, the descendants of Esau (called in Hebrews 12:16 a 'profane person'), and the hereditary foes of Israel down the years. One inevitably thinks of the words in Exodus 17:8, 'Then came Amalek', for Amalek ever comes on the scene at significant moments. He is the type of our constant foe, Satan. In the Exodus story, Amalek came (i) when Israel had murmured against Moses and tempted the Lord. This murmuring spirit opened the door to the enemy, and he caused havoc in Israel before being finally driven off; and it is perhaps significant that it was when David was spiritually disturbed - and not a little disaffected - that the enemy came to discomfit him. But there is another consideration also; Amalek came (ii) when the Israelites had received water from the smitten rock. It was a time of spiritual refreshment and blessing for them and they were rejoicing in the bountiful provision of God when the enemy came. David had also experienced the deliverance of the Lord in being saved from the horns of a dilemma, and it was in the wake of this blessing that the Amalekites attacked. It is significant also that David did what Moses had done long before him - brought the whole matter to God in prayer (8) and sought His leading and guidance. This is ever how the Amaleks of the spiritual life are dealt with.

30:6-20

The David we see here is much more like the David we have learned to love and respect as the man after God's own heart. We might almost say that what we have in these verses is the evidence of a great spiritual 'come-back'. His encouragement in the Lord his God (6) was in fact a complete casting of himself on the divine mercy, and his enquiring of the Lord (7) the evidence of a new submission to the will of the Lord, echoed centuries later by Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road in the words, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?' How wonderful to see the assurance of God coming to him in 8 that he would recover all! Happy is the man to whom such a word comes after losing ground spiritually! The outcome is seen in 19, in the complete reversal of the Amalekites' victory, but the manner in which this was brought about is full of interest. Travelling in hot pursuit of the enemy, who by this time had three days' start on them (13), they chanced upon an Egyptian slave who had been abandoned by his Amalekite master in brutal, heartless fashion. It was in fact the cruelty of the Amalekites in leaving this slave to die that proved their undoing, and this is a parable of spiritual things, for it is often the heartless lengths to which Satan drives his hapless victims, and the callous, heartless, and contemptuous way in which he casts them aside when he has no further use for them, that proves his undoing, for in their misery and wretchedness they are found by Christ Who, good Samaritan-wise, tends their wounds and heals them, restoring them to life and health once more, and brings them into His service. David, having 'found himself' once again, becomes as before, the humane and merciful servant of God, treating the hapless slave with royal and Christlike compassion. In this transaction, David truly recovered all, in the spiritual as well as in the material sense!

151)30:6-20

There are other spiritual lessons also that we may learn here, not unconnected with our studies in 1 Peter. We have made a number of comments on Peter's emphasis on the costliness of 'taking up the cross', and although it is clear from what the Apostle says about the joy as well as the fruitfulness of experiencing 'the cross' there is no doubt about the reality of the heart-bruising challenge of it. But what we read here, and see in David's experience indicates that we should not be dismayed or discouraged by the challenge of the Divine Word; for look at what can happen when we do make moves to get right with God. For instead of following the dictates of impulse and willfulness, he now seeks the mind of the Lord (8). Is not this always the way forward? When we take that road the Lord is swift to say, 'I will restore unto you the years that the locusts have eaten'. This is how eager God is to meet us in mercy, and this is the encouragement of the chapter for us, and it tells us not to look at dedication to Christ in a sombre, forbidding light, in terms of the costliness of surrender but rather in terms of the great eagerness of God to bless us when we do come back to Him. He is waiting to be gracious!

152)30:21-31

The argument about the spoil in these verses is highly interesting, and affords an intriguing and profitable illustration of Christian service and its rewards. There are different kinds of service, with each of us having different tasks to perform, and none may be regarded as insignificant. As well as the front line soldiers there are the 'back-room boys', and there are those who also have to tarry 'by the stuff' (24). It is true in both natural and spiritual warfare that there are some jobs strategically more important than others, but there is only one quality of service that passes muster. Whatever we do, we are to do with all our might. In spiritual life, our Lord's own teaching in His parables bears this out, as for example the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), in which those taken on at the eleventh hour were rewarded equally with those who had worked all day, while in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) the man with the five talents and the man with the two received equal commendation. Here, those who tarried by the stuff did so to the best of their ability, and did what they could. All this corresponds in the New Testament to the conception of the church as the body of Christ, in which we are all 'members in particular', with each of us having his unique contribution to make and service to perform. Rewards are promised, not to success, but to faithfulness. The amount of gain made by the man with five talents was much greater than that of the man with two; but the quality of the gain was identical - it was supreme faithfulness in each, not success, that was rewarded. The great and supreme need in the Christian Church, whatever the task is that we are called to perform, is for faithful hearts.

153)30:21-31

As a further comment on this passage we add the following, from the Congregational Record of Sandyford-Henderson Church, by the Rev George M. Philip: 'It is amazing how men who have been blessed of God so wonderfully far beyond their deserving can in turn be quite inhuman and legalistic in their dealings with others. The victorious warriors were not interested in the men who had been too faint physically to go any further, and would have denied them the share of the spoil of battle. But David would have none of this, for the spoil had not been won by human effort, but by the grace of God. None of them deserved the spoil, and all of them were to receive a fair share. Here is the true David emerging, and his character begins to shine again as a light of righteousness to all in his company. You will see from 22 that all David's followers were not good and true men. Some were motivated by carnal principles, and all the dealing of God with them in grace and judgment had made no real impact on their characters. It reminds you of Judas and warns that there are many reasons why men associate with a work of God; all the more cause for the leader to preserve himself in absolute integrity and equity so that Satan might not gain advantage. David had now to be reconciled to all his old friends in Judah, not least to show them that in his restoration to God he was restored to them, to lead them. If God had taken him back, would they do likewise?'

154)31:1-6

What is recorded for us in this chapter is the final denouement of the story of Saul the king - the man whose story started bright with promise and hope, but now ends in ignominy. His own words in 26:21, 'I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly' are an apt summing up of his sad, unhallowed career. It is a grim reminder that not all stories have a happy ending, and that things do not always work out somehow in the end. This is a very salutary lesson, in view of the false optimism that so often does duty in modern life, expressed in the caption 'Cheer up - it may never happen'. Well, it did happen, so far as Saul was concerned, and it happened because life is subject to inviolable moral and spiritual principles, and governed by them. This is one great lesson the book of Samuel teaches us: 'Them that honour Me, I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed' (2:30). Indeed, it is a lesson writ large on the pages of the Old Testament in general. In this respect, and in the fact of the triumph of the Philistines over Israel, we are really taken back, spiritually, to the time of the book of Judges, and to the sorry pattern of the rise and decline of the fortunes of Israel. Viewed thus, 1 Samuel is simply an enlargement of one of these phases of ebb and flow in which the nation, when it sinned, was plunged by God into distress and discomfiture by her enemies. Think of the general pattern in 1 Samuel - the declension of Eli's time and the fall of the Ark, then Samuel's ministry and the renewal of the nation after 20-25 years of hard faithful labour by Samuel; then the demand for a king and the beginning of the great decline and the declension of Saul and his final doom. Then consider today's pattern in our own land - is there no discernment to see something of this ebb and flow in our 20th century with its two world wars? Behind and beyond all the political, economic and social factors, are there not moral and spiritual trends? One has only to think of the immense yearning in so many hearts at the end of the last war for moral and spiritual renewal - and yet, what have we seen? A steady declension in these post-war years, in which the moral and spiritual fibre of the nation has been sapped. It is hardly necessary to labour the point, it is so obvious. We shall continue in this vein in tomorrow's Note.

155)31:1-6

There is a solemn warning exhortation in Hebrews 12:25: 'See that ye refuse not him that speaketh'. In the inter-war years of our time, must not that voice have been refused? And in our post-war era, has there not been a turning away from the offer of 'better things', in the refusal of grace in the gospel, the refusal of a 'spiritual' solution to the problems of our society? And so the steady erosion of moral and spiritual capital has continued, and our resultant chronic 'stop-go' economic crises, the threat to law and order, violence, the clashes between right and left in politics. We have come pretty near to the level of the time of the Judges when 'every man did that which was right in his own eyes'. But - and this is a very important consideration - there is a significant difference in the situation in 1 Samuel from the earlier 'ebb and flow' pattern and it is this: even as Saul lay dead on the battlefield of Gilboa, God's man was ready in every way to step into his place, trained and prepared indeed, before the defeat of Gilboa had ever taken place, to be a greater scourge of the Philistines than they had ever known. Through trials and tribulations David now comes to the throne, and the story goes on to recount his mighty exploits as king of Israel, as he leads the nation back to greatness. Are we able to see any parallel today? Is there any hope for our future? Is there any way out of the ebb and flow pattern of inevitable decline? We may look in vain for any sign of this in the political field; but opportunity lies before us in this: that God is at work. Out of the turmoil, and in the darkness, God's purposes are unfolding. For, parallel with the undoubted declension all around us, there is also undoubtedly something being prepared by God, Who is raising up a gospel testimony in the land. Over the years, steadily, inexorably, uninterruptedly God has been preparing His men and placing them in the pulpits of the nation. It is a time of opportunity that we believe is given us in these days. It may not be given again.

156)31:1-6

Here is the sad and final act of this tragic story of Saul the king, and perhaps the saddest part of it is to read that Jonathan, the noble, gentle, great-heart friend of David, fell with him on the battlefield. One feels, somehow, that he was inevitably and inextricably involved in his father's disintegration and was its innocent victim. And God allowed his chosen people to be humbled and routed by their enemies - an awful and frightening reminder of the disastrous consequences of their determination to have their own way (see 8:19). The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small.

The record of Saul's death here seems to be contradicted in 2 Samuel 1 (which see), where he is represented as having been slain by an Amalekite. There are two possible explanations of this. One is that the armour-bearer mistook him to be dead, but in fact life was still in him and he revived sufficiently to ask the passing Amalekite to slay him. The other explanation is that the record in this chapter is the correct one, and that the Amalekite came upon Saul's dead body, robbed him of the crown and regalia and brought them to David, telling him the story recorded in 2 Samuel 1 in the hope of being rewarded handsomely for ridding David of his famous and implacable enemy. If this be so, then he paid dearly for his calculated falsehood, hopelessly misjudging the man he was dealing with. Like Agog his fellow-countryman before him, his eye was on the main chance, and he came speedily to grief as if to teach us how despicable in God's sight such a calculating attitude is. Strange, is it not, the blind spot that such chancers have?

157)31:7-13

The last words of this tragic and gruesome chapter recording the extremity of the Philistines' barbarity towards the flower of Israel's royal house is offset by the respect and esteem shown to the memory and remains of the dead king and his sons by the men of Jabesh-Gilead. They had good cause to remember Saul (see 11:1-11), and they honoured the man they knew in earlier days when he was still a man of God. They recovered with great courage and no small hazard and danger the bodies of the king and his three sons from the wall of Bethshan for worthy and reverent burial. There is something very touching about this: to be sure, it underlines the grief of Saul's tragic story, but it also reminds us that even in his sad declension there were residual elements of greatness in him; and it would seem that God would somehow have us think of the good he did in these early days as well as the evil. Is it fanciful to think that the men of Jabesh-Gilead were being used by God to express His sorrow and grief over one of His people who, sinful and rebellious as he had been, was nevertheless still the object of His love and care? There are different views held by commentators as to whether Saul was ever in a genuine state of grace, it is true; but if we may say that Saul was 'saved, yet so as by fire' (1 Corinthians 3:15) may we not say also that this touching incident indicates that even then God was sifting what gold there was from the dross which had all but obscured it, and which had not been entirely consumed by the fire?

158) I Samuel

Before we conclude our study of this book it may be helpful to pause in order to remind ourselves of its general and main lessons. We have seen how 1 Samuel marks the transition from one phase to another in Israel's history, from the priestly to the kingly (after David's time, and the declension of the kingdom, there came the transition from the kingly to the prophetic). Each of these phases in its own way bears witness to Christ, in Whom alone they find their fulfilment; and each plays its part in God's over-all plan in the working out of His redemption, in the preparation of a Redeemer to come in the fulness of the time. The kingly phase stretches from Saul to Zedekiah, a period of some five hundred years during which, if we have understood and interpreted the election of Saul aright, Israel was out of God's best will, in that He did not originally intend them to have any earthly monarch like other nations (8:7). The period of the kings represents therefore God's permissive, rather than His directive, will. He gave His people their request, but sent leanness to their souls. It is significant, in this connection, that after the Captivity, when Israel returned from Babylon, there was no king until Messiah came. The whole period therefore represents a great detour which, nevertheless, in the sovereignty of God, was incorporated by Him into His grand design and made to serve His purpose.

159) 1 Samuel

It is the fact of the sovereignty of God that constitutes one of the main lessons of the book. God was working His purposes out, and He took hold of the new situation, controlled it, and turned it to His glory. Israel rejected God (8:7), but they did not thereby dethrone Him. The detour which they made necessary in no wise affected the ultimate purpose, plan, and victory of God. Our attitude to the good and perfect will of God does not ultimately affect His final victory; what it ultimately affects is our own final destiny. God will get there in the end; the question is, will we? We see this lesson both in relation to Israel as a nation and Saul as an individual. As G. Campbell Morgan puts it, 'The sovereignty of God presses into His service all souls that are loyal to Him 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'. This is the great lesson of 1 Samuel, and indeed of the whole Bible. God makes the wrath of man to praise Him, and man is obliged to cooperate with God even in His own rejection of God. Our God is marching on. Nothing can stop Him. If individuals, fellowships, or nations say No to Him, He still goes on, and men break themselves upon the rock of His inflexible purposes.

160) I Samuel

Another message of the book, quite different from the above, is the word of hope that it proclaims for dark times: 'Light in the darkness'. In a time of moral and spiritual declension and apathy, the presence of 'the good of the land' in Hannah, Elkanah and others like them, proved a 'point of contact' for the working of God in mercy and grace. From Hannah's consecration there came, humanly speaking, the delivered and the deliverance Israel so sorely needed. One of the most heartening and encouraging factors in the whole story is the realisation that it was in the place which had been the scene of such declension and darkness - Shiloh - that the Lord appeared again and spoke His mighty word of hope and deliverance. Is it too much to hope that history will repeat itself, and that ere the last dying flickers of the light that was lit in the 19th century in spiritual awakening subside, God will once again speak in blessing in our land? If we are tempted to think there is little sign of such a thing happening, we should remember that the time between Samuel's call and the ultimate restoration of the nation was more than twenty years. A work such as this is not done overnight, and long and arduous disciplines of faithful labouring are involved. We must not be weary in well-doing; we shall reap if we faint not. But before the reaping must come the weeping (Psalm 126:6), and there may be much more of this yet before we see our heart's desire in a national renewal (see James 5:7).

161) 1 Samuel

Another lesson that should be noted is David's own trust in the sovereignty of God. When one thinks of David's anointing in place of Saul, one is prompted to think how easy it would have been for him to have organised a revolt and take over the kingdom by force. But instead, he left matters entirely in the hands of God, in a passive, almost quietist way. He was not prepared to lift a hand against the Lord's anointed even when he was driven by an evil spirit. Great, far-reaching changes are not helped on by well-meaning though misguided hands interfering with them. In this connection, we have sometimes wondered whether there is something to be learned from this with regard to the question of organising evangelical witness throughout the land. We put on record here our own sense of misgiving when this has been proposed - not because we do not think that coming together for fellowship and prayer is either important or desirable (how could anyone think this?), but lest in such an organising we should inadvertently set out ahead of God Himself, and by anticipating His wise and unerring counsel we should actually hinder and frustrate the very thing we wish to achieve. David was content to allow God to work His own purposes out, and there can be no doubt that he was divinely guided in so doing. Isaiah tells us that he who belies shall not make haste, and one wonders whether in fact our first concern should be to go quietly on with the work God has given us to do, and leave Him to initiate movements of significance in the land for the furtherance of His purposes. When He begins to work, we shall then be sure that the timing is right.

162) I Samuel

Let us take one last look at the three outstanding characters in the book. Samuel, the son of a mother's prayers and tears, a mother consecrated to God before the birth of her son, was given to God without reserve for His work. And, significantly - doubtless influenced decisively by such secret consecration - the great characteristic throughout his long life is his consistent witness. The King of all kings laid hold of him and claimed him for Himself from the early temple days, and when he was old and grey-headed he was still faithful, as he ended his days as an intercessor. Saul, in contrast, began well, but was hindered in the race by his own impetuous folly and waywardness. The story of 'the bleating of the sheep' (1 Samuel 15) is symbolic in that it demonstrates how the things that are left undealt with when God has commanded them to be done away proved fatal to spiritual growth and well-being and lead to shipwreck of faith. Saul never allowed the ploughshare of the Cross to go deep into his heart, and the carnal elements of his nature rose up and overpowered him. The story of David, the man after God's own heart, affords us in the trials and tribulations through which he passed to accede to the throne, a parable of Christian life and experience. First, the long period of solitude and obscurity in the desert with his father's sheep, then the years of fugitive wandering in the fastnesses of Judah, proving the sufficiency of God in the leading of the Spirit, the strengthening of His grace and the upholding by His power. Such was his preparation for the position of responsibility which he was to occupy with such distinction as ruler of Israel. One has only to read into 2 Samuel to realise what the arduous disciplines of which we have been reading were designed to make him. Happy are those who are able to see such meaning in the trials they pass through, and to understand that when God applies the pruning knife He purposes a crop in our lives for His glory.