

The Greatest Bitterness

in

T . H . E O . L . D T . E . S . T . A . M . E . N . T

Walk with me to the ancient village of Bethshan and stand over against the side of Dagon's Temple. There to be seen are four bodies nailed to the wall, a father and three sons. Each has been slain by the Philistines, with the father being decapitated. Round and round, circle the vultures, wild beasts, flies, gnats, and worms . . . picking, pulling, twisting, tearing at the putrified human flesh. The four bodies have been brought to Bethshan by the Philistine army. The older man is Saul, first king of Israel, and with him his sons Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchi-shua.

We pause to ponder over such a sorry sight, wondering within ourselves how such a thing could ever have occurred. Saul had been king of Israel forty years, only to come at life's end seeking counsel from a witch at Endor. Samuel was permitted by God to return from the grave for an interview with Saul. He had, however, no word of comfort or hope, only a certain warning of death on the morrow. Indeed, the next day, while fighting at Mount Gilboa, King Saul was wounded by a Philistine arrow. In anguish and pain he fell upon his own sword and died. His three sons fighting at his side likewise were slain and his army routed. The vengeful Philistines, not content with having slain the royal family, bore the bodies to Bethshan, where they were made a public spectacle, fastened grotesquely to the wall of the Temple of Dagon. David learned of it and exclaimed, "How have the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!" (2 Samuel 1:27).

THE BEGINNING

How did Saul, *the bitterest man in the Old*

Testament, come to such an end? To find the answer, we begin at the beginning. The son of Kish, Saul was reared on a farm in the tiny tribe of Benjamin. He was "a mighty man of valor," "a choice and handsome man." In fact, "there was not a more handsome person than he among the sons of Israel; from his shoulders and up he was taller than any of the people" (1 Samuel 9:2).

When first we meet young Saul, he was searching in the land of Zuph for the lost donkeys of his father. Unable to locate them, he learned of a man of God nearby named Samuel and decided to inquire of him as to the whereabouts of the donkeys.

Now a day before Saul's coming, the Lord had revealed this to Samuel saying, "About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel; and he shall deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have regarded My people, because their cry has come to Me." When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord said to him, "Behold, the man of whom I spoke to you! This one shall rule over my people" (1 Samuel 9:15-17).

Upon meeting Saul, the prophet declared: "For whom is all that is desirable in Israel? Is it not for you and all your father's household?" To which Saul responded: "Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why, then do you speak to me in this way?" (1 Samuel 9:21). The next day, Samuel poured upon the head of Saul a vial of olive oil, proclaiming him king over Israel: "Has not the Lord anointed you a ruler over His inheritance? . . . The Spirit of

the Lord will come upon you. . . . Then it happened when he turned his back to leave Samuel, God changed his heart" (1 Samuel 10:1, 6, 9).

It was not long until Samuel summoned the people to Mizpah and introduced the new king. Saul, apparently modest and unassuming, hid himself "by the baggage." When discovered and brought forward, "he was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward." Samuel publicly insisted that "there is no one like him among all the people." Later that day Saul returned home to Gibeath "and valiant men whose hearts God had touched went with him" (1 Samuel 10:26).

THE EARLY REIGN

The first years of Saul's reign were marked by valor and victory. The Ammonites were overthrown and the Philistines driven back. Tall in stature, handsome in demeanor, and humble in spirit, he was proving to be an ideal leader. There was even about him a quality of mercy (1 Samuel 11:12, 13).

Sadly, from this point forward the life of Israel's first king was one long downhill slide. To begin with, he refused to wait for Samuel at Gilgal, assuming arrogantly the function of a priest (1 Samuel 13). Then he spared Agag and failed to utterly destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15).

SAUL'S UNDOING

The tragic unraveling of King Saul is surely traced to the bitterness that flooded his entire being. There appeared in Israel from out of the tribe of Judah a shepherd boy named David, who was destined to be the most talented man of the age . . . a soldier, statesman, singer, musician, and poet. As a youth he slew the Philistine giant, Goliath, and as an adult extended the border of Israel, making it for the first time ever a world power. David was declared by God to be a man after His own heart. His inspired songs fill the hearts and houses of worship generations after generation. Among the best known lines in lit-

Israel's First King

"Saul not only missed great opportunities, he deliberately abused them. His sun rose in splendor, but set in a tragic night."

Herbert Lockyer,
All the Men of the Bible

erature are Psalms 1, 23, and 100. No words of any other author in any age have been more widely known than those of David, the sweet singer of Israel.

From youth, David was destined for greatness. But, *there could have been room in Israel for both him and Saul.* It appears that David was willing to wait for his opportunity and did not seek the downfall of Saul. In fact, he spared his life on more than one occasion. Even the children of Saul found room in their hearts for young David. Michal became his bride and "loved him." Jonathan was his dearest friend; their souls were "knit together."

There was, however, no place in Saul's heart for David. The thought that he would someday wear his crown and command his army bred in Saul's soul a bitterness which nothing could pacify. From the day David severed the head of Goliath unto the day the Philistines severed his, *Saul lived for one reason and one alone—the destruction of David.* He dwelt on it by day and dreamed of it by night. "And Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on" (1 Samuel 18:9). Twice did he hurl a javelin at him and for several years pursued him throughout the land. Compassionate priests who shared their food with David were slain—eighty-five men with their wives and children. Saul could not be pleased, placated, pacified, or turned back from his cruel vengeance. Thus did he come at last to the steep slopes of Gilboa, there to die in defeat, despair, disgrace, and dishonor. The same Saul who forty years before stood head and shoulders above all the people fell like a giant tree in the forest.

BITTERNESS AND BLACKNESS

How we all need to see—truly see—the forms of Saul and his sons, decapitated, nailed to Dagon's wall. He died without a friend in the world or an intercessor in heaven. . . . the victim of foolish, festering, boiling, breeding bitterness. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice" (Ephesians 4:31).

I have somewhere read that no fewer than thirty-five thousand chemicals now available on the market are classified by the EPA as potentially or definitely hazardous to human health. But no poison compares to the age-old infection of bitterness.

Aaron Burr was defeated for President on the

thirty-sixth ballot in the House of Representatives in 1800, losing to Thomas Jefferson. Burr then became Vice-President. One of the determining factors in his defeat was the influence of Alexander Hamilton, who wrote in a letter: "I could scarcely name a discreet man of either party in our state who does not think Mr. Burr the most unfit man in the United States for the office of President." In time, Aaron Burr determined to have his revenge and in a spectacular duel slew Hamilton. But the fatal shot which ended Hamilton's life ended the career and peace of Aaron Burr. He would thenceforth be a fugitive and vagabond, broken in body and mind. In later years, Burr confessed that it would have been wiser for him to have taken the sensible view that the world was big enough for both Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton!

There is no issue which can arise, no disagreement which can surface; no slight which can be inflicted that is remotely sufficient to make one bitter. There is no job worth obtaining or keeping if the end result is bitterness.

At the peak and pinnacle of his career, "Saul eyed David." Is there someone whom you are "eyeing" at work or play? Is there someone whose presence brings a cloud across your face? In quiet moments, do you brood over a real or imagined injustice? *Then beware of bitterness.* Pray about it. Search the Scriptures. Separate yourself when possible from the cause of discomfort. Then pray more. Remember that the struggles and slights of this life belong to time and will be seen in eternity as useless and insignificant.

Paul was publicly declared to be "insane" by a governor, slapped by a high priest, and chased by a band of forty cutthroats who vowed his destruction. Alexander the coppersmith did him "much evil." Demetrius the silversmith initiated a riot in his honor. Even his own brethren accused him of being weak and ineffective. Yet Paul showed no hint of bitterness or malice. He wrote: "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. 'But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head'" (Romans 12:19, 20).

Living many years beyond America's Civil War, we have difficulty imagining the hatred which hovered over each side of the Mason-

Dixon line in those divided days. Open, ugly wounds festered in both the North and the South. However, in the decade following the war, a southern preacher was visiting in the North. It happened that his wife was a cousin to the wife of one of America's richest men, a railroad and shipping magnate. The preacher was granted an interview and opportunity to discuss with him a dream of establishing a university in war-ravaged Nashville for the training of young men. To his surprise and delight, the minister was awarded one million dollars by his wealthy host. For that act, many Northerners criticized the philanthropist, insisting that the funds should have been devoted to an institution that was not located in the "rebel" South. But the elderly gentleman, seventy-nine years old, wished only to heal the wounds of war and bridge the gap of distrust. Thus did the school begin, and for more than one hundred years it has proudly born the name of its benefactor, Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt University is to this day a monument to one who refused to be bitter.

CONCLUSION

At an early point in his career, King Saul confessed, "I have played the fool." How we wish he had followed that sentence to its natural conclusion and ceased to play the fool! But the fact is he did not. Rather, he bitterly and brashly played the fool, died the fool, and will be resurrected the fool! In the end, he was seared by remorse but not saved by repentance.

Beware of bitterness.

—Paul Rogers

QUOTATIONS

"Hypocrisy is pretending to be something you never intend to become."

Paul Faulkner

"The home is of divine origin; being a parent is a divine privilege; a child is a divine trust; and childrearing is a divine responsibility."

William R. Hufstedler,
Gospel Advocate, May 1988

"The three greatest letters in the English alphabet are—N-O-W."

Sir Walter Scott