

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

VERY SINGULAR.

A Sermon

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“He . . . put his household in order, and hanged himself.”—2 Samuel xvii. 23.

AHITHOPHEL was a man of keen perception, and those who consulted him followed his advice with as much confidence as if he had been an oracle from heaven. He was a great master of diplomacy, versed in the arts of cunning,—far-seeing, cautious, deep. He was for years the friend and counsellor of David; but thinking it politic to be on the popular side, he left his old master that he might, like many other courtiers, worship the rising sun, and hold an eminent position under Absalom. This, to use diplomatic language, was not only a crime, but a mistake. Absalom was not the man to follow the warnings of sagacity, and Ahithophel found himself supplanted by another counsellor; whereat he was so incensed that he left Absalom, hurried home, arranged his personal affairs, and hanged himself in sheer vexation.

His case teaches us that the greatest worldly wisdom will not preserve a man from the utmost folly. Here was a man worthy to be called the Nestor of debate, who yet had not wit enough to keep his neck from the fatal noose. Many a man, supremely wise for a time, fails in the long run. The renowned monarch, sagacious for the hour, has ere long proved his whole system to be a fatal mistake. Instances there are, near to hand, where a brilliant career has ended in shame, a life of wealth closed in poverty, an empire collapsed in ruin. The wisdom which contemplates only this life fails even in its own sphere. Its tricks are too shallow, its devices too temporary, and the whole comes down with a crash when least expected to fall. What sad cases have we seen of men, who have been wise in policy, who have utterly failed from lack of principle! For want of the spirit of honour and truth to establish them, they have built palaces of ice which have melted before they were complete. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The wisdom which cometh from above is the only wisdom; the secular is folly until the sacred blends its golden stream therewith.

No. 2,995.

I desire to call your attention to the text on account of its very remarkable character. "*He put his house in order, and hanged himself.*" To put his house in order, showed that he was a prudent man; to hang himself, proved that he was a fool. Herein is a strange mixture of discretion and desperation, mind and madness. Shall a man have wisdom enough to arrange his worldly affairs with care, and yet shall he be so sapless as to take his own life afterwards? As Bishop Hall pithily says, "Could it be possible that he should be careful to order his house who regarded not to order his impetuous passions? That he should care for his house who cared not for either body or soul?" Strange incongruity, he makes his will, and then, because he cannot have his will, he wills to die. 'Tis another proof that madness is in the hearts of the sons of men. Marvel not at this one display of folly, for I shall have to show you that the case of Ahithophel is, in the spirit of it, almost universal; and as I shall describe sundry similar individuals, many of you will perceive that I speak of you. Thousands set their houses in order, but destroy their souls; they look well to their flocks and their herds, but not to their hearts' best interests. They gather broken shells with continuous industry, but they throw away priceless diamonds. They exercise forethought, prudence, care, everywhere but where they are most required. They save their money, but squander their happiness; they are guardians of their estates, but suicides of their souls. Many forms this folly takes, but it is seen on all hands, and the sight should make the Christian weep over the madness of his fellow-men. May the series of portraits which will now pass before us, while they hold the mirror up to nature, also point us in the way of grace!

See before you, then, the portrait of AN ATTENTIVE SERVANT. He is faithful to his employers, and fulfils well the office to which he is appointed. He is up with the lark, he toils all day, he rests not till his task is done; he neglects nothing which he undertakes. I see him among the throng, I will single him out, and talk with him.

You have been engaged for years in farming. You have ploughed, and sown, and reaped, and gathered into the barn, and no one has done the work better than you, and yet, though you have been so careful in your labour, you have never sown to the Spirit, nor cared to reap life everlasting. You have never asked to have your heart ploughed with the gospel plough, nor sown with the living seed, and the consequence will be that, at the last, you will have no harvest but weeds and thistles, and you will be given over to eternal destruction. What ails you to care for the clover and the turnips, the cows and the sheep, but never for yourself, your truest self, your ever-existing soul? What! all this care about the field, and no care about your heart? All this toil for a harvest which the hungry shall eat up, and no care whatever about the harvest that shall last eternally!

Or you have been occupied all your life in a garden, and there, what earnestness you have shown, what taste in the training of the plants and flowers, what diligence in digging, planting, weeding, and watering! Often has your employer congratulated himself that

he has so careful a servant. You take a delight in your work, and well you may, for some relics of Eden's memories linger around a garden still; but how is it that you are so choice with yonder tulip and so indifferent about your own spirit? What! care for a poor rose, which so soon is withered, and have no thought about your immortal nature? Is this like a reasonable man? You were very careful, in the winter, to keep up the heat of the greenhouse, lest those feeble plants should suffer from the frost; have you, then, no care to be protected from temptation, and from the dread storms of almighty wrath which are so soon to come? Can it be that you are diligent in ordering the walks, and beds, and shrubberies of your master's grounds, and yet are utterly careless about the garden of your heart in which fairer flowers would bloom, and yield you a far richer reward? I marvel at you. It seems so strange that you should be so good a worker for others, and so bad a carer about yourself. I fear your lament will have to be, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept."

It would be too long a task to dwell particularly on each of your employments, but I will hope that, in each case, you are anxious to do your work thoroughly, so as to secure approval. The horse is not badly fed, nor the carriage recklessly driven, nor the wall carelessly built, nor the wood ill planed,—you would be ashamed to be called a negligent workman. Put it then to yourself, will you watch over another man's goods, and be unmindful of your own highest good? What! do you mind the horse and the wagon, the parcels, and the errands, and all sorts of little matters, and shall that soul of yours, which will outlast the sun, and live when stars grow dim, be left without a thought? What! do you love others so much, and yourself so little? Are minor matters to absorb all your thoughts, while your own eternal concerns are left in utter neglect?

Some of you act as domestic servants, and endeavour to discharge your duties well; you have much to do from morning till night, and you would be ashamed for anyone to say, "The room is unswept, cobwebs are on the walls, the floors are filthy, the meals are badly cooked, because you are a bad servant." No, you feel rather proud that, when you have a situation, you can keep it, and that the mistress is content with you. Suffer me, then, to ask you, in the gentlest manner, Is your heart never to be cleansed? Are your sins always to defile it? Have you no thought about the "house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens"? Do you think God made you to be a mere sweeper and cleaner of rooms, a cooker of meat, and so on, and that this is all you were designed for? There must be a higher and a better life for you, and do you altogether disregard it? Will you weary yourself, day by day, about another person's house, and have you no interest in your own soul? Have you so much care to please (as you should do) your master and mistress, and no care about being reconciled to God? I will not think that you are so bereft of reason.

I address a still larger class, probably, if I say there are many here who will go off to the City, in the morning, to fulfil the duties

of confidential accountants. You never suffer the books to be inaccurate, they balance to a farthing; it would distress you if, through your inadvertence, the firm lost even a sixpence. You have perhaps been many years with the same employers, and have their unbounded respect; from your boyhood to this day, you have been connected with the house. I have known several admirable men, of high integrity and thorough faithfulness, whom their employers could never sufficiently value, for they laid themselves out with intense zeal to promote their commercial interests, and worked far harder than the heads of the house ever did. Had the whole concern been their own, they could not have been more assiduous, and yet these very men gave no heed to their own personal interests for another world; it was grievous to observe that God was not in all their thoughts, nor heaven, nor hell, nor their own precious souls. You good and faithful servants of men, will you perish as unfaithful servants of God? What! will you never look onward to the last great reckoning? Is it nothing to you that the debts due to divine justice are undischarged? Are you willing to be called before the Lord of all, and to hear him say, "Thou wicked and slothful servant, I gave thee a talent, but thou hast wrapped it in a napkin"? God forbid that I should diminish one grain of your diligence in your secular avocations; but, from the very zeal you throw into these, I charge you, if ye be reasonable men, see to it that ye destroy not your own souls. Be not like Ahithophel, who set his house in order, and hanged himself. Set not your master's concerns in order, and then destroy your own souls, for how shall you escape if you neglect the great salvation?

Look ye now to another picture,—THE PRUDENT MERCHANT. I must briefly sketch him. He knows the ways of trade, studies the state of the market, is quick to perceive the opportunity of gain, has been cautious in his speculations, has secured what he has obtained, and is now in possession of a competency, or on the road to it. He prides himself, in a quiet way, upon the prudence with which he conducts all his worldly transactions; and, my dear friend, I am sure I am glad to see you prudent in business, for much misery would be caused to others as well as to yourself by recklessness and folly. But I want to ask you, if you are thoughtless about religion, how it is that you can be so inconsistent. Do you study how to buy, and buy well, but will you never buy the truth? Do you put all that you get into a safe bank, but will you never lay up treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt? You are wary of your speculations, but will you play so deep at hazard as to jeopardize your soul? You have been for years accustomed to rise up early, and sit up late, and eat the bread of carefulness; will you never rise early to seek the Lord? Will you never prevent the night watches to find a Saviour? Is the body everything? Is gold your god? Why, you are a man of intelligence and reading, and you know that there are higher considerations than those of business and the state of trade. You do not believe yourself to be of the same order of beings as the brute that perisheth; you expect to live in another state; you have a Book here, which tells you what

that life will be, and how it may be shaped for joy, or left to be drifted into endless sorrow. Am I a fanatic, my dear sir, if I respectfully put my hand on yours, and say, "I beseech you, think not all of the less, and nothing of the greater, lest haply, when you come to die, the same may be said of you as of a rich man of old, who had been as cautious and as careful as you: 'Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall these things be, which thou hast provided?'" I charge you, if you be prudent, prove it by being prudent about the weightiest of all concerns. If you be not, after all, a mere bragger as to prudence, a mere child enraptured with silly toys, then show your wisdom by following the wisest course." I have heard of one, the stewardess of an American vessel, who, when the ship was sinking, saw heaps of gold coin scattered upon the cabin floor by those who had thrown it there in the confusion of their escape; she gathered up large quantities of it, wrapped it round her waist, and leaped into the water; she sank like a millstone, as though she had studiously prepared herself for destruction. I fear that many of you traders are diligently collecting guarantees for your surer ruin, planning to bury yourselves beneath your glittering hoards. Be wise in time. My voice, nay, my heart, pleads with you, for your soul's sake, and for Christ's sake, be not like Ahithophel, who set his house in order, and hanged himself. Take sure bond for enduring happiness, invest in indisputable securities, have done with infinite risks, and be assured for life everlasting.

A third photograph shall now be exhibited. This will describe a smaller, but a very valuable class of men, and if they were blessed of God, how glad should I be,—THE DILIGENT STUDENT. He seeks out the best of books to assist him in the pursuit of his branch of knowledge; he burns the midnight oil, he is not afraid of toil, he cares not for throbbing brain and weary eye, but he presses on, he trains his memory, he schools his judgment, and all with the hope that he may be numbered with the learned. The examinations of his university are to him the most important periods in the calendar; his degree is the prize of his high calling. Knowledge is sweet, and the honour of being associated with the learned is coveted. My young friend, I would not for a moment abate your zeal, but I would beg space for one consideration worthy of immediate attention. Ought the best of sciences to be left to the last? Should self-knowledge and acquaintance with God be treated as of secondary importance? Should not the Word of God be the chief volume in the wise man's library? Should you not burn the midnight oil to peruse the page infallible, written by the divine finger? With all your gettings, should you not get the understanding which cometh from above, and the knowledge which is the gift of God, and which will introduce you, if not among the learned, yet among the gracious; if not into the academy of *savants*, yet into the general assembly and church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven? Should there not be with you the wish to train your complete manhood, and to educate yourself to the fulness of the stature of what a man should be? Should not the noblest part have

the chief care? I speak to a wise man; I would have him be truly wise; I would not have him set his study in order, and tutor himself, and then forget the eternal life, and the destiny that awaits him. O student, seek thou first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and then shall thy temple of wisdom be built upon a rock!

I will take another character, a character which is very common in great cities,—I am not sure but what it is common enough,—THE REFORMING POLITICIAN. I value our politicians highly, but we scarcely need to be overstocked with those who brawl in public-houses and discussion rooms while their families are starving at home. Some men, who spend a great deal of time in considering politics, are hardly benefiting the commonwealth to the extent they imagine. I will suppose I am addressing a man who feels the home and foreign affairs of the nation to be his particular department. Well, my respected friend, I trust you occupy a useful place in the general economy, but I want to ask you one or two questions well worthy of a Reformer's or a Conservative's consideration. You have been looking up abuses, have you no abuses in your own life which need correcting? There is no doubt about the Reform Bill having been needed; but do you not think a Reform Bill is needed by some of us, at home, in reference to our own characters, and especially in reference to our relation towards our God and our Saviour? I think only he who is ignorant of himself will deny that; and would it not be a fine thing to begin at home, and let the politics of our house and our heart be set quite right, and that immediately! You have in your brain a complete scheme for paying off the National Debt, elevating the nation, remodelling the navy, improving the army, managing the Colonies, delivering France, and establishing the best form of government in Europe; I am afraid your schemes may not be carried out so soon as you desire; but may I not suggest to you that your own heart needs renewing by the Spirit of God, your many sins need removing by the atonement of Jesus, and your whole life requires a deep and radical change; and this is a practical measure which no aristocracy will oppose, which no vested interests will defeat, and which need not be delayed for another election or a new Premier? I daresay you have faced much opposition, and expect to face much more in agitating the important question which you have taken up; but ah! my friend, will you not sometimes agitate questions with your conscience? Will you not discuss with your inner nature the great truths which God has revealed? Would it not be worth your while at least to spend some time in your private council chamber with yourself thinking of the now, and of the past, and of the to come,—considering God, Christ, heaven, hell, and yourself as connected with all these? I press it on you, it seems to me to be the greatest of all inconsistencies that a man should think himself able to guide a nation, and yet should lose his own soul; that he should have schemes by which to turn this world into a paradise, and yet lose paradise for himself; that he should declaim violently against war, and all sorts of evils, and yet himself should be at

war with God, himself a slave to sin. Shall he talk of freedom while he is manacled by his lusts and appetites? Shall he be enslaved by drink, and yet be the champion of liberty? He that teaches freedom should himself be free. It is ill to see a man contending for others, and a captive himself. To arrange the nation's affairs, and to destroy yourself, is as foolish as Ahithophel, who put his household in order, and hanged himself.

We will pass to another character, and how much of what I am now to utter may concern myself I pray God to teach me,—THE ZEALOUS PREACHER. The character is no imaginary one, it is not suggested by bitterness, or coloured by fanaticism, there have been such, and will be such to the end; men who study the Scriptures, and are masters of theology, versed in doctrine, conversant with law; men who teach the lessons they have gathered, and teach them eloquently and forcibly, warning their hearers of their sins, pointing out their danger, and pleading with them to lay hold on Christ, and life eternal, and yet,—for all this, they are themselves unconverted! They preach what they never felt, they teach what they never knew by experience. Brother-ministers, I allude not to you any more than to myself, but of all men that live we are most called upon to watch lest our very office should help us to be hypocrites, lest our position as teachers should bring upon us a double curse. Do not let us seek the salvation of others, and lose our own souls. To preach Christ, and not to have him; to toll of the fountain, and not to be washed in it; to speak of hell, and warn men to escape it, and yet go there ourselves;—God grant it may never be so with any of us!

But, mark you, the point of this warning comes to many here who are not altogether ministers. You are not preachers, but you are Sunday-school teachers, tract-distributors, Bible-women, or city missionaries. Then hear ye the same warning. Will you go round with those tracts from house to house, and yet have no religion in your own houses? O miserable souls! who hath required it at your hands to teach others of God when you are not reconciled to God yourselves? What can you teach those children in the Sabbath-school? I say, what can you teach those children, when you yourselves are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity? May not the very words you spoke to your classes to-day rise up against you in the day of judgment, and condemn you? Do not be content to have it so. Do not point out the right way to others, yet run in another road yourself. Do not set others in order, and slay your own selves.

I have another picture to look upon,—it represents A CAREFUL PARENT. Many, who may not have been included under other descriptions, will be mentioned here. You love your children well and wisely; so far as this world is concerned, you are careful and prudent parents. You were very watchful over them in their childhood, you were afraid that those infant sicknesses would take them to the grave. How glad you were, dear mother, when once again you could lift the little one from the bed, and press it to your bosom, and thank God that it was recovering its health and

strength! You have denied yourself a great deal for your children. When you were out of work, and struggling with poverty, you did not so much grieve for yourselves as for them, it was so hard to see your children wanting bread. You have been so pleased to clothe them, so glad to notice their opening intellect, and you have many of you selected with great care places where they will receive a good education, and if you thought that any bad influence would come across their path, you would be on your guard at once. You wish your children to grow up patterns of virtue, and good citizens; and you are right in all this. I wish that all felt as you do about their families, and that none were allowed to run loose in the streets, which are the devil's school. Now, as you have been so very careful about your children, may I ask you, ought not your own soul to have some thought bestowed on it, some anxiety exercised about it? It is a child, too, to be educated for the skies, to be nurtured for the Father's house above. Look in the babe's face, and think of the care you give to it; and then turn your eyes inwardly upon your soul, and say, "What care have I given to thee, my soul? I have left thee unwashed, unclothed, unhousted. No blood of Christ hath fallen on thee, my soul; no righteousness of Christ hath wrapped thee round. For thee, my soul, my poor, poor soul, there is no heaven when thou must leave this body; for thee there is no hope but a fearful looking for of judgment and of fiery indignation. My soul, forgive me that I have treated thee so ill; I will now think of thee, and bow my knee, and ask the Lord to be gracious to thee." I wish I could call upon you personally, and press this matter upon you. Think that I am doing so; when you reach home, think that I am following you there, and saying to you, "If you care for your children, care for your souls." Look at the boys and girls sleeping in their cots to-night, and if you are unconverted, say to yourself, "There they lie, the dear ones, they are little sermons to me; I will remember what the preacher said when I look at them. My God, my Father, I will turn to thee; do thou turn me, and I shall be turned."

The last of my crayon sketches is one which may concern many, it is that of THE OUTWARD RELIGIONIST who yet is regardless of his own soul; it is oddest and strangest of all that there should be such people. I have met with Protestants, flaming Protestants, I might add, raving Protestants, who nevertheless know no more about Protestantism than about the Theogony of Hesiod; and were they questioned as to what it is that was protested against by the Reformers, they would guess wide of the mark. Yet are they very concerned that our glorious constitution in Church and State should be "thoroughly Protestant"—though I cannot for the life of me see what difference it would make to them. If they have no faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, what matters it to them how a man is justified? There are others, who are "Dissenters to the backbone," but yet sinners to their marrow. To ungodly men I say solemnly, What matters it what you are in these matters? The side which has the honour of your patronage is a loser by it in all probability. If you are leading bad lives, I am very sorry that

you are Dissenters, for you injure a good cause. What fools you must be to be so earnest about religions in which you have no concern!

Many, again, are very orthodox, even to being straitlaced, and yet are unbelievers. If the preacher does not come up to their weight and measure, they denounce him at once, and have no word bad enough for him. But now, my friend, though I cannot say that I am altogether sorry that you think about doctrines and churches, let me ask you is it wise that you should set up for a judge upon a matter in which you have no share? You are vociferous for setting the church in order, but you are destroying your own soul! If these things belonged to you, I could understand your zeal about them; but since you have nothing to do with them, (and you have not if you have no faith,) why do you look after other people, and let your own salvation go by default? It may be a very important thing to somebody how the Duke of Devonshire may lay out his estate at Chatsworth; but I am sure it is not important to me, for I am in no degree a part proprietor with his Grace. So it may be very important to some people how such-and-such a doctrine is taught; but why should you be so zealous about it, when you are in no degree a part proprietor in it unless you have believed in Jesus Christ?

What startles me, with some of you is, that you will cheerfully contribute for the support of a gospel in which you have never believed. There are those of you here to whom I am thankful for help in Christ's service; you put your hand into your pocket, and are generous to the Lord's cause; how is it that you do this, and yet refuse to give Jesus your heart? I know you do not think you are purchasing his favour by your money; you know better than that, but what do you do it for? Are you like those builders who helped Noah to build the ark, and then were drowned? Do you help to build a lifeboat, and being yourself shipwrecked, do you refuse the assistance of the lifeboat? You are strangely inconsistent. You keep God's Sabbaths, and yet you will not enter into his rest. You sing Christ's praises, and yet you will not trust him. You bow your heads in prayer, and yet you do not pray. You are anxious, too, sometimes, and yet that which would end all your anxiety, namely, submission to the gospel of Christ, you will not yield. Why is this? Wherefore this strange behaviour? Will you bless others, and curse yourselves?

I speak to the whole of you who as yet have not believed in Jesus, and ask,—what is it with which you are destroying your souls? Every unbeliever is an eternal suicide, he is destroying his soul's hopes. What is your motive? Perhaps some of you are indulging a pleasurable sin, which you cannot give up. I conjure you, cast it from you; though it be dear as the right eye, pluck it out; or useful as the right arm, cut it off, and cast it from you. Suffer no temporary pleasures to lead you into eternal destruction. Escape for your life. Sweet sin will bring bitter death; may God give you grace to cast it away!

Or is it some deadly error with which you are destroying your

soul? Have you a notion that it is a small thing to die unsaved? Do you imagine that, by-and-by, it will all be over, and you can bear the temporary punishment? Dream not so! Not thus speaks the infallible Word of God, though men would thus buoy up your spirits, and make your forehead brazen against the Most High. It is an awful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. God grant that you may not run that risk, and meet that fate!

Or perhaps some self-righteous trust holds you back from Christ. You can destroy yourself with that as well as with sin. To trust to ourselves is deadly; only to trust to Jesus is safe. I will explain that to you, and have done. Inasmuch as we had sinned against God, God must punish us; it is necessary that sin should be punished, or there could be no moral government. Now, in order to meet that case, to have mercy upon men in conformity with justice, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came into the world, and became man, and as man, he took upon himself the sins of all his people, and was punished for them; and whosoever trusts Jesus is one of those for whom Jesus bore the smart, for whom he paid the debt. If thou believest that Jesus is the Christ, if thou dost trust thy soul with the Christ of Nazareth, thy sins, which are many, are all forgiven thee; go in peace,—thy soul is saved. But if thou puttest away from thee the Christ, who says, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth," you may be very wise, and you may arrange your business very cleverly; but, for all that, you are no wiser than the great fool of my text, who set his house in order, and hanged himself. God teach both hearers and readers to be wise ere it is too late! Amen.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

2 SAMUEL XV. 12—37.

Verse 12. *And Absalom sent for Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counsellor, from his city, even from Giloh, while he offered sacrifices. And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Absalom.*

Absalom had, by craft, insinuated himself into the hearts of the children of Israel, and led a rebellion against his father David, that he might obtain the crown for himself.

13, 14. *And there came a messenger to David, saying, The hearts of the men of Israel are after Absalom. And David said unto all his servants that were with him at Jerusalem, Arise, and let us flee; for we shall not else escape from Absalom: make speed to depart, lest he overtake us suddenly, and bring evil upon us, and smite the city with the edge of the sword.*

It must have been a sore peril which compelled so brave a man as David to say to his servants, "Arise, and let us flee."

15. *And the king's servants said unto the king, Behold, thy servants are ready to do whatsoever my lord the king shall appoint.*

What a loyal spirit they displayed in the time of trial! Oh, that such loyalty could always be found in all the servants of King Jesus! But, alas! many of his servants pick and choose as to which of his commands they will obey. Some of them will not understand the plain letter of Scripture; and others of them know their duty, yet they do it not. There is reason to question whether we are the servants of Christ if we have not the spirit of