

IS THERE NOT A CAUSE

by G.S. Byford

A collection of articles and writings by G.S. Byford from Is There Not a Cause, covering various biblical topics and Christian teaching.

3 Chapters

Table of Contents

- 0. Is There Not a Cause
- 1. Is There Not a Cause? Part 1
- 2. Is There Not a Cause? Part 2

Is There Not a Cause

Is There Not a Cause? Part 1

David was introduced to Saul, the first king of Israel, as “a man that could play well upon the harp.” Saul was seeking such, an one. David was a musician, and much more. Indeed the description given of him by one of Saul's servants seems to have been almost prophetic, viewed in the light of his subsequent history. May we not say that the Spirit of God was prompting that servant to the utterance of thoughts beyond his own?

“But the Spirit of Jehovah departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from Jehovah troubled him. And Saul's servants said unto him, Behold now, an evil spirit from God troubleth thee. Let our lord now command thy servants, which are before thee, to seek out a man, a cunning player on the harp; and it shall come to pass, when the evil spirit from God is upon thee, that he shall play with his hand, and thou shalt be well. And Saul said unto his servants, Provide me now a man that can play well, and bring him to me. Then answered one of the servants, and said, Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is cunning in playing, and a mighty man of valor, and a man of war, and prudent in speech, and a comely person, and Jehovah is with him. Wherefore Saul sent messengers unto Jesse, and said, Send me David thy son, which is with the sheep. And Jesse took an ass laden with bread, and a bottle of wine, and a kid, and sent them by David his son unto Saul. And David came to Saul, and stood before him: and he loved him greatly; and he became his armor-bearer. And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, Let David, I pray thee, stand before me; for he hath found favor in my sight. And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took the harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him” (1 Samuel 16:14-23).

The desire of Saul, the rejected king, was not a godly one; he should have sought in his own conduct for the cause of his trouble. But in his own sad condition we have only too truly a prophetic picture of the nation in the last days of the kingdom. Judgment had already set in. Divided, disorganized, and ruined, they nevertheless turned a deaf ear to all God's solemn warnings by the prophets. Especially was this the case when, the first captivity having taken place, God continued to plead with His people by His servant Ezekiel. Would He not have been to them, as He said, “as a little sanctuary” amongst the heathen whose captives they were? But they refused to take it seriously, or to allow their consciences to be exercised by what God had to say to them.

“Also, thou son of man, the children of thy people still are talking against thee by the walls and in the doors of the houses, and speak one to another, every one to his brother, saying, Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth from Jehovah. And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they show much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument; for they hear thy words, but they do them not. And when this cometh to pass (lo, it will come), then shall they know that a prophet hath been among them” (Ezekiel 33:30-33).

Judah in the days of Ezekiel, and Saul in the days of Samuel, were alike in this—they refused to own their sin before God and to bow to His righteous judgment. Had they done so, Saul, as well as Judah, would have been healed. God had other work for His servant David than playing upon the harp to relieve the king's malady, as later He had a serious and solemn message for the Judean captives by Ezekiel the prophet. The necessary preparation of David for the kingdom comes before us in 1 Samuel 17. Saul had had no such disciplinary exercises, and he showed himself to be morally unsuited for the position to which he had been exalted. David must be a prepared servant—a vessel sanctified, and meet for the Master's use. No doubt those who knew of the anointing of David to be king over Israel would regard the circumstance of the shepherd boy's introduction to the royal palace as most providential. For would it not in the most favorable manner accustom him to the responsibilities and surroundings of royalty? So the adoption of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter, with his subsequent education in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, might have been considered a providential preparation for the part he was to take in relation to Israel. But God's direct preparation of Moses was not carried on in Pharaoh's palace, but in the backside of the desert. So it is written of him, "By faith he forsook Egypt."

And now, we see how God had similarly prepared David, whom He Himself had chosen for the kingdom—not in the palace of Saul, but in the wilderness, and the valley of Elah. It is not that preparation is unnecessary, but that the preparation must be divine if we are to have divine suitability. Though David's ministry and music might be used of God to the relief of Saul and (it may be) to his own profit also, yet it did not advance things at all. David leaves Saul's house and is forgotten by those whom he had benefited. He went back simply and naturally enough to keep his father's sheep. There had been a false start, and so there must needs be a beginning afresh. Not that blame attaches to David in this matter. But we are given to see the worthlessness of Saul's character, and the incompatibility of human cooperation with divine purpose. It was particularly important that from the very beginning David should owe nothing to the reigning monarch, for God had rejected Saul; and the two houses must be kept distinct and separate.

We find, then (chap. 17.), that God begins with David by calling him from the comparatively humble occupation of a tender of sheep into the very midst of Israel's difficulties that He might see how he regarded them and in what way they would affect him. "Now the Philistines gathered together their armies to battle, and were gathered together at Shochoh, which belongeth to Judah, and were pitched between Shochoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammin. And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered together, and pitched in the valley of Elah, and set the battle in array against the Philistines. And the Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side; and there was a valley between them. And there went out a champion out of the camp of the Philistines, named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. And he had a helmet of brass upon his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of brass. And he had greaves of brass upon his legs, and a target of brass between his shoulders. And the staff of his spear was like a weaver's beam; and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron: and one bearing a shield went before him. And he stood and cried unto the armies of Israel, and said unto them, Why are ye come out to set your battle in array? am not I a Philistine, and ye servants to Saul? choose you a man for you, and let him come down to me. If he be able to fight with me, and to kill me, then will we be your servants; but if I prevail against him, and kill him, then shall ye be our servants, and serve us. And

the Philistine said, I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together. When Saul and all Israel heard those words of the Philistine, they were dismayed, and greatly afraid" (1 Samuel 17:1-11).

The incompetence and helplessness of Saul is made manifest—personally and officially. As king, he should have been the one to take up the challenge of Goliath. Faith in God would have more than compensated for the physical inequality, of which he was painfully conscious; for faith is the only safe principle on which to act. The reasoning of nature is always at fault, but faith has a line of reasoning all its own (Romans 8:31-39), and David is the one to employ it here. Let us trace his way. In the first place, we have to discern and test the motives by which we are governed. Are they according to God, or for the gratification of self? Is my object Christ's glory or my own? In what way does David come upon the scene? Was it not in obedience to his father, and in love to his brethren? As far as we know, he was entirely in ignorance of the state of affairs as between Israel and the Philistines, except, of course, that there was war. Could we have more excellent natural motives than these? Filial obedience and brotherly love are surely calculated to comfort the heart and to strengthen for action. Yet it may be that even these excellencies may arouse jealousies and even unjust accusations against their possessor. A keen sense of injustice rendered me may prompt me to wash my hands of the particular business, and so, by relinquishment, fail in one's duty. Or, if vindicating oneself from a false charge, we need to guard against conduct in oneself that may be equally reprehensible, only in another form. May we not say that Paul himself—apostle as he was—on a memorable occasion, in his resentment of injustice, exposed himself to the just rebuke of a bystander, from which God would surely have preserved His servant had he been more watchful? How different the lowly Jesus, when He was reviled! But only One is perfect (John 18:22; Acts 23:3).

[G. S. B.]

(To be continued)

Is There Not a Cause? Part 2

“And David spake to the men that stood by him, saying, What shall be done to the man that killeth this Philistine, and taketh away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God? And the people answered him after this manner, saying, So shall it be done to the man that killeth him. And Eliab, his eldest brother, heard when he spake unto the men; and Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, Why camest thou down hither? and with whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thy heart; for thou art come down that thou mightest see the battle. And David said, What have I now done? Is there not a cause” (1 Samuel 17:26-29)?

Not only was David blessed and strengthened of God for the service rendered to Israel that day, but through grace he was preserved in a spirit which was altogether excellent. He does not resent the imputation of his elder brother; but conscious of the integrity of his motives, he leaves his character and himself in the hands of God for their due manifestation in God's good time. His strength here, as subsequently in the kingdom, lay in the acknowledgment that Israel was the one nation God had chosen and redeemed for Himself. So, to him, it was not merely the Israelites who had been insulted and defied, but—the “armies of the living God.” And this was faith. Saul; on the other hand, spoke of them after the manner of their enemies—Let “the Hebrews” hear. David takes up the position that God cannot deny Himself. He had pledged His word to the establishment and protection of Israel as a nation, and faith manifested itself in David in the very face of the enemy by the open and public acknowledgment of this truth. God's immutability, and faithfulness to His sure word of promise (Hebrews 6:16-20), has ever been the resting-place for faith amidst all the failures of the creature, “for wherein is he to be accounted of.” So it was in the darkest hours of Israel's history in the past, and so will it justify divine interference in the future. This latter we may see in such scriptures, amongst others, as Zechariah 3; 13; 14

No doubt the portion of scripture we are considering is typical of that final catastrophe of the enemy and decisive victory for God's people when the antitype of David shall suddenly and unexpectedly appear, to the surprise and discomfiture of their enemies, but for the relief of those who have waited for Him. Faith will, alas! be at a very low ebb (“when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”), yet there will be a waiting people (prefigured here by Jonathan) who will say, “Lo this is our God, we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” In an evil day faith finds its encouragement in all that God is, and will manifest Himself to be, for His people.

This then was David's answer to the senseless taunt of Eliab. Was there not indeed a ground of action? Israel insulted, the God of Israel defied, the enemy triumphant and blasphemous! Well might David query, “Is there not a cause?” Saul was not equal to such an emergency as this. David takes up the challenge in a simple way, but in the reality of faith, having a clear perception and grasp of divine principles such as evidently impressed even the heart of Saul, who found it easier, no doubt, to bless and encourage another than to go himself. God was making way for His

own king; He was introducing him to the nation, but in such a way that faith alone could own him and appreciate his motives. A most severe test had yet to be applied. The man of God will find himself more cast upon God and shut up to Him when the world is generous and patronizing than when he has to encounter its opposition. It is the friendship of the world we have to fear, and its offers of assistance may often have to be refused. "The friendship of the world is enmity with God" (James 4:4). Faithfulness to Christ will strengthen the soul against its open attack, and will preserve from its ensnaring influence. The confidence of the man of faith is considered extravagant and without foundation in the eyes of the worldly wise. It is beautiful to see the youthful David, a vessel in course of preparation for the honorable position he was destined to fill, brushing aside one difficulty after another—the contempt of his brethren, the abject terror of Israel, the arrogant boast of his contemptuous opponent, the fear and unbelief of Saul—finally clearing himself of the last vestige of fleshly confidence and standing on the only safe ground of faith.

"And Saul armed David with his armor, and he put an helmet of brass upon his head; also he armed him with a coat of mail. And David girded his sword upon his armor, and he assayed to go; for he had not proved it. And David said unto Saul, I cannot go with these; for I have not proved them. And David put them off him" (vers. 38, 39). "Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield; but I come to thee in the name of Jehovah of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will Jehovah deliver thee into mine hand, and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. And all this assembly shall know that Jehovah saveth not with sword and spear, for the battle is Jehovah's, and he will give you into our hands" (vers. 45-47).

There is no doubt that the pretended kindness of Saul concealed a real and dangerous snare of the enemy, for God's purpose had been openly declared (chaps. 13:14; 15:28). It was within the knowledge of Satan, who sought in every possible way to corrupt the man after God's own heart, so as to bring about, if possible, his downfall, or at least to compromise him at the very commencement by committing him to human principles, expediency, and worldly methods. Saul could then have said, It was my armor and my sword that was superior to the armor and the sword of the Philistine. But God watched over His servant who trusted Him, and overruled all, so that a blessed experience of the faithfulness and power of God was stored up in David's soul to find expression at the right moment in worship of God, in and for Israel's instruction and edification. This we see in David's song of praise (2 Samuel 22). "As for God, his way is perfect; the word of Jehovah is tried; he is a buckler to all them that trust in him. For who is God, save Jehovah? and who is a rock, save our God? God is my strength and power, and he maketh my way perfect. He maketh my feet like hinds' feet, and setteth me upon my high places. He teacheth my hands to war, so that a bow of steel is broken by mine arms. Thou hast also given me the shield of thy salvation; and thy gentleness hath made me great. Thou hast enlarged my steps under me; so that my feet did not slip. I have pursued my enemies, and destroyed them: and turned not again until I had consumed them; and I have consumed them, and wounded them, that they could not arise: yea, they are fallen under my feet. For thou hast girded me with strength to battle; them that rose up against me hast thou subdued under me" (vers. 31-40).

The lesson for us is singularly appropriate in the present day, when man and his doings occupy such a large place, and faith and obedience are so little thought of. It was not that David despised any reasonable precaution or instrumentality—even the sword of Goliath had its use, “There is none like that; give it me.” But the best service we can render to God and His people, when His word has lost its value in the eyes of professors, and is in danger of losing its authority over the hearts of His own, is to contend earnestly (as Jude writes) for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. By a self-sufficient world, intoxicated with its brilliant discoveries and its imaginary knowledge, the word of God may be treated as antiquated and obsolete, but our wisdom and duty is to maintain its divine authority and sufficiency both for faith and practice, whatever may be the claims of anything new either in doctrine or methods of service. “Every scripture is given by inspiration of God [“who cannot lie”], and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.” Here is the divine competency of God's word for every good work. And “if a man therefore purge himself from these [vessels to dishonor], he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, meet for the Master's use, prepared unto every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17; 2:21). David could say with regard to Saul's resources,

“I cannot go with these; for I have not proved them.” All that is worth doing is what God approves and commends to us in His word; it is proved also in the experience of all Christ's faithful servants. May we then “hold fast that which is good; abiding in the things which we have learned, and of which we have been fully persuaded, knowing of whom we have learned them. For evil men and impostors shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.” “We are of God,” says the apostle; “he that knoweth God, heareth us [the apostles]; he that is not of God heareth us not. By this we know the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.”

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(Concluded from page 325)

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