

Human Remedies.

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon emphasizes the importance of obedience to God and the dangers of relying on human contrivances to solve spiritual problems.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 15:22, 1 Samuel 16:23, 1 Samuel 17:25, Romans 8:31, 1 Corinthians 5:5, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 6:10, Philippians 4:13, 1 Timothy 1:20, James 4:7

Topics: "Divine Strength", "Human Remedies"

Description

Horatius Bonar emphasizes the futility of human remedies in addressing spiritual afflictions, using Saul's disobedience and subsequent torment as a cautionary tale. He illustrates how Saul's reliance on external comforts, like David's harp, provided only temporary relief without addressing the root cause of his spiritual turmoil. Bonar warns against the modern tendency to seek solace in worldly distractions and religious rituals that fail to bring true healing and reconciliation with God. He contrasts this with David's reliance on divine strength, highlighting that true victory comes from faith in God rather than human contrivances. The sermon calls believers to abandon self-reliance and trust solely in God's power for true transformation.

Transcript

"And whenever the tormenting spirit from God troubled Saul, David would play the harp. Then Saul would feel better, and the tormenting spirit would go away." 1 Samuel 16:23

Of Saul we may say, "You did run well, who has hindered you?" He began well, but ended ill. His first days and works were better than his last. So with Demas; so with the church of Ephesus; so with the Jews, whose following Jehovah at first was belied by their last apostasy. So is it still with souls, churches, nations, ages.

I. SAUL'S SIN. For the root of all was sin. This sin was simply disobedience to a command of God. He was bidden slay Agag and his people. A cruel command, some would say, to which disobedience was better than obedience. But it was a divine command, whether the wisdom, or the justice, or the mercy were visible. God had His reasons for it, and that was enough. Saul's sin was not misrule, nor oppression, nor wickedness, but simply disobedience to a command which some might call arbitrary, if not harsh and stern.

Such stress does God lay on obedience, simple obedience, unreasoning obedience. His will must be done; for He is Sovereign, and He is the God only wise. Saul's sin was the preference of his own will and

wisdom to God's. Let our consciences be tender as to this; and let us beware of acting on our own reasons or ideas of fitness, or doing our own will. "To obey is better than sacrifice."

II. THE CONSEQUENCES. (1.) His crown is taken from him; he is rejected from being king. (2.) Samuel leaves him (1 Samuel 15:35). But the two special things mentioned here are these-

(1.) The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul. I do not take up the question as to whether Saul were a true child of God; this passage does not determine the point. He might be so; and these words might be like Paul's: "Whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme" (1 Timothy 1:20); "deliver unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (1 Corinthians 5:5). But certainly "the Spirit which departed from Saul" was good, not evil. It was the reversal of what is said: "God gave him another heart,"- a heart for governing, which He now takes away. The good Spirit is grieved, and departs. Saul's last act of disobedience has quenched Him; he is left without heavenly guidance.

(2.) An evil spirit from the Lord troubles him. He is not left alone; for as one Spirit departs, another enters.

(a.) He is troubled. His soul is now the abode of darkness and fear. He becomes moody and sad; he is vexed, perplexed, desponding. This is the fruit of sin!

(b.) He is troubled by an evil spirit. The clean spirit goes out, and the unclean spirit comes in- comes in to torment, and sadden, and vex. He is troubled by an evil spirit from the Lord. God lets loose Satan upon him. The unclean spirit returns with others more wicked than himself, and his last state is worse than his first. These words are very awful: "I will choose their delusions;" and "God shall send them strong delusion!" Thus is his chastisement double- negative and positive; a departure of the good, and the arrival of the evil. And this affliction is Jehovah's doing. Not chance, nor disease, nor natural depression of spirits, but a visitation from God; judgment for disobedience, judicial punishment.

III. HUMAN CONTRIVANCES. Here is music, religious music- the music of the harp, the harp of David. This is soothing but it does not reach the seat of the disease. It is something human, something external, something materialistic and earthly, something that man can originate and apply. It is effectual to a certain extent; it drives away the evil spirit, and restores temporary tranquility; thus possibly deceiving its victim.

In like manner we find the human spirit afflicted in every age, sometimes more and sometimes less. And in all such cases man steps in with his human and external contrivances. I do not refer to the grosser form of dispelling gloom; drunkenness and profligacy, in which men seek to drown their sense of need, and make up for the absence of God. I refer to the refined contrivances: those of art,

science, music, gaiety, by which men try to minister

to a diseased mind .

What is Romanism and Ritualism, but a repetition of Saul's minstrelsy? The soul needs soothing. It is vexed and fretted with the world, its conscience is not at ease, it is troubled and weary. It betakes itself to religious forms, something for the eye and ear; to chants, and vestments, and postures, and performances, sweet sounds and fair sights, sentimental and pictorial religion, which is but a refined form of worldliness. By these the natural man is soothed, the spirit tranquilized; the man is brought to believe that a cure has been wrought, because his gloom has been alleviated by these religious spectacles, these exhibitions which suit the unregenerate soul so well. They but drug the soul, filling it with a sort of religious delirium. They are human sedatives, not divine medicines.

IV. The RESULTS. A partial and temporary cure. It is said that the evil spirit departed, but not that the good Spirit returned. Saul's trouble was alleviated, but not removed. The disease was still there. The results of David's harp were only superficial and negative. So is it with the sinner still. There are many outward applications, which act like spiritual chloroform upon the soul. They soothe, and calm, and please, but that is all. They do not reach below the surface, nor touch the deep-seated malady within. Men try rites, sacraments, pictures, music, dresses, and the varied attractions of ecclesiastical ornament; but these leave the spirit unfilled, and its wounds unhealed. They cannot regenerate, or quicken, or heal, or fill with the Holy Spirit. They may keep up the self-satisfaction and self-delusion of the soul, but that is all. They bring no true peace, nor give rest to the weary. They do not fill, they merely hide our emptiness.

Our age is full of such 'remedies', literary and religious, all got up for the purpose of soothing the troubled spirits of man. Excitement, gaiety, balls, theaters, operas, concerts, ecclesiastical music, dresses, performances- what are all these but man's contrivances for casting out the evil spirit and healing the soul's hurt without having recourse to God's one remedy? These pleasant sights and sounds may soothe the imprisoned soul, but what of that? They do not bring it nearer to God, they do not work repentance, or produce faith, or fix the eye on the true cross. They leave the soul still without God, and without reconciliation. The religion thus produced is hollow, and fitful, and superficial, and sentimental. It will not save nor sanctify. It may produce a sort of religious inebriation, but not that which God calls godliness, not that which apostles pointed out as a holy life, a walk with God.

SPIRITUAL AND CARNAL WEAPONS

"Have you seen the giant?" the men were asking. "He comes out each day to challenge Israel. And have you heard about the huge reward the king has offered to anyone who kills him? The king will give him one of his daughters for a wife, and his whole family will be exempted from paying taxes!" 1 Samuel 17:25

Here are two men, and in these men two nations, two religions; two bodies or companies- the seed of the woman, and the seed of the serpent. Israel and Philistia are now brought face to face. There must be war, not peace; not even an alliance, not even a truce. The world's table is not spread for the church, nor the church's table for the world. The "earth" may sometimes help the woman, and swallow up the floods which would overwhelm her; but friendship with the earth is not to be cultivated or sought after. The friendship of the world is enmity with God.

Here are two men- the one the personification of power, the other of weakness; the one of self-reliance, the other of confidence in God. We see man, nothing but man, in the one; God, nothing but God in the other. In the Philistine we see man fighting against God, in David man fighting for God. What the world admires and prizes is to be found in the one, what it despises in the other.

One thing marks them both: they are full of courage and of confidence; both equally sure of success, though the one boasts, and the other boasts not. The sources and grounds of their confidence are very different; but their confidence itself seems very much alike. The object of each is, in one respect, different; in another, the same. They meet for battle- each bent on the overthrow of the other. But Israel has not provoked nor challenged the conflict; nor is Israel desirous of seizing Philistia. She has Jerusalem: why should she seek Gaza? But Philistia would sincerely have Israel and her land in her power, and she makes continual inroads for this end. She is not content with Gaza and Ashkelon; she must have Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

But it is not the Gentile giant that I ask you specially to notice, but the Jewish boy, the stripling of Bethlehem. In him we have-

I. THE REJECTION OF HUMAN WEAPONS. He was fully aware

(1.) of the greatness of the issue depending on this combat;

(2.) of the strength of the adversary;

(3.) of his own weakness;

(4.) of the great things to which he had pledged himself.

Yet he declines to avail himself of any of those things which would have helped to make up his deficiency, and made him, as man would say, adequate for the struggle. He takes only that which is expressive of feebleness- which would make him incur the imputation of being a fool, like the apostle in after years. He had to become "weak" as well as a "fool," that he might be both wise and strong. His taking unlikely and unsuitable human weapons was more expressive of his faith than if he had taken none; for, through such, God got the opportunity of showing His power- His power, not as directly coming down from heaven, but as coming through the feeble instrumentality of a shepherd, and a shepherd's sling. It was God identifying Himself with David, and using the sling as His own two-edged sword.

Thus the true beginning of all strength is weakness; the starting-point for success is the abnegation of self-power and human contrivances. How often is it true, of individuals, and of churches, and of societies, that they are too strong for God to work by or with; too well equipped, or too well organized; too rich, or too numerous, or too great, for God to get glory from! He must have His work done by hands, regarding which there will be no mistake as to who is the doer of the whole work, and the author of all the success.

David did not reject these weapons because they were sinful. He often used the sword, and the spear, and the shield, in fighting the battles of the Lord. He had built a tower for an armory, wherein there hung a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men. But, in certain cases, that which is lawful is not expedient. Lawful instruments sometimes become, if not unlawful, at least inexpedient and useless, when they give God no room to make bare His arm.

We are, generally speaking, far too solicitous about our strength, and forget that it is always by weakness that God works. We are too solicitous about intellect, learning, numbers, money, as if we could have no hope of success without these. No one is too weak to work the work of God; many are too strong. We are slow to believe this, slow to act on it. Yet it is one of the great truths on which God has set His seal during the ages past.

II. THE ADOPTION OF DIVINE WEAPONS. David leaves the human weapons to the Philistine; he prefers the divine. The sight of human weapons in his adversary had not made him afraid to do battle with him, nor made him say, Oh that I had a sword like his! And as he drew nearer, and saw the giant's whole strength and array, his confidence does not sink; it rises. He sees in the giant an enemy of the living God, and his weapons as, therefore, directed against Him. That sword, that spear, that shield, are used against Jehovah, the God of Israel.

David is not dismayed, but goes forward triumphantly, assured of being more than conqueror. He has a weapon- only one- framed by no human hand, brought out of no earthly armory. It is called "the name of

the Lord." With this he can face, not only Goliath and the Philistine armies, but Satan and the hosts of hell. This "name" is our weapon still. It is sword, and shield, and spear. Armed with it we can do any work, fight any battle, engage any foe. Only let us be sure that we are on God's side, and our enemy against Him, we can go forward with confidence.

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" is one side of the maxim. "If we are for God, who can be against us?" is the other. In using this name as a weapon, or as a plea, I come as if God and I were one; as if God, and not I, were on the battlefield. We stand in God's stead, and He in ours. We fight in God's stead, and He in ours. It is not so much we that work as He. Using His name, is simply confiding in His revealed character and sure word, and in nothing of ourselves- making use of no arm of flesh, no power of man's arm or man's intellect, but Jehovah's alone, the Lord God of Israel. Have faith in God! Not in man, nor in the flesh, nor in genius, nor in science, nor in numbers, nor in rank, nor in influential names, nor in great schemes, but in the living God- David's God and ours!

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