

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 317

A Visit from the King's Son

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day evening, 27th November, 2011**

Text: *"And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God" (1 Samuel 23. 16).*

David was in a deep, dark wood – literally, spiritually, providentially. These were days of darkness, and if he was in the wood in his circumstances, it was more like a maze, more like a labyrinth. There was no way through and no way out. He was being hunted by King Saul with all the power and might that the king of Israel had. You think of it, the king and his army seeking for one man. As we read through this chapter, Saul spoke some strong things. He would search him out through the whole of the land until he had killed him.

David had the grief of being treated so unkindly, so unfairly. He had it again and again in this chapter. He risked his own army, his six hundred men, he risked his own life to deliver the people of Keilah from the Philistines, from death, from destruction, from cruelty, and what did they do? Immediately they planned how they could hand him over to death at the hands of King Saul. Later in the chapter you have the inhabitants of Ziph doing the same. He was being treated unkindly and treacherously, even from those he was going to help. There was something else in this deep, dark wood. There had been a massacre of so many of the priests of the Lord just previously, and indirectly David knew he was responsible for their death and he felt it.

But you notice at the beginning of the chapter David was walking very tenderly in the fear of God. He was not always; in some places you think, David, why ever are you doing that? But David prayed what to do and the Lord showed him clearly. A few of his men came up and doubted whether he was doing right. What would "the old David" have done? You think, this great man – in one sense he was not great, but he was destined for greatness – and his own men doubted whether he was doing right, the commander of his army, and he prayed to God. Do you know you are right, David? What would "the old David" have done? But he did not. David enquired a second time of the Lord. It would be a wonderful thing if there were more of that spirit abroad in the church of God today – not the spirit of self, but that spirit: Am I right, or am I wrong? To go a second

time to ask the Lord to show us. If it be so, tell me, Lord, and if it be not so, tell me.

So which ever way you look with David, it was a deep, dark wood. Then to his amazement and joy who should he see coming unexpectedly into that deep, dark wood? His beloved friend Jonathan. Doesn't the Word of God emphasise it: "Jonathan Saul's son." It was an act of great condescension. He was a prince. It must have been hard for him to get there, hard for him to find where David was. But that was a real, faithful friend. But there is that emphasis that it was "Jonathan Saul's son," the king's son. His father was acting very wrongly, but Jonathan did not make excuses for him because he was his father. He walked it out very lovingly and graciously and tenderly even in honouring his father, but when he knew his father was wrong, he acted as if his father was wrong, and when he knew that David was right, he acted as if David was right. So you see this loving visit of a true friend. "Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God." That is just what David needed, because he must have felt weak, weak every way. He must have been weary. O but he must have been weak with disappointment, and weak with the continual fleeing from King Saul.

"And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God." And how did he do it? Well, one thing was just his presence and concern. Another thing: he talked with him. And another thing: the things that he said to him. "He said unto him, Fear not." And then they made a covenant together, and so he strengthened David's hand in God. I do not think David was the same man when Jonathan left him, when Jonathan went back home. It was a very blessed visit from a very faithful friend.

"And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God." Now then, beloved friends, these Jonathans are such a blessing to the church of God. What a mercy that God has always blessed His church with Jonathans, those with a spirit of love to the people of God, those who do not mind what lengths they go to to help them, those who are willing to condescend to men of low estate! There was a lot of condescension in the king's son, the prince coming here. He did not count it beneath him. And of course there is so much in that word: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." And what

does it say? “Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” These who seek to strengthen one another’s hands.

How are we going to strengthen one another’s hands? One way is in prayer – when we are able to pray one for another, but especially to pray for those who are in the deep, dark wood, who are caught up in the maze, in the labyrinth, and those who hardly know their way out. Because,

“Wrestling prayer can wonders do;
Bring relief in deepest straits!
Prayer can force a passage through
Iron bars and brazen gates.”

This strengthening of one another’s hands in God. It is a terrible thing if there is the opposite: weakening one another’s hands. May we ever be kept from that.

When we receive a person into church membership at Bethel, I always give them a little word, I trust from the Lord. Going right back to the early days of my pastorate, one of the first words that I had to give on an occasion like that was just one word: “Helps.” We read in the First Epistle to the Corinthians of those in the church of God who are helps. It is a long time ago – I cannot remember what I said – but I did say this: never be the opposite; never be a hindrance! It is the same point here. O to be found amongst those who strengthen one another’s hand in God, in prayer, and in help, and in encouragement, and in speaking a word in season. Because in former years we had those who were so blessedly able to speak a word in season to them that were weary and to them that were out of the way. O to be favoured in our little way and measure to be among the Jonathans in the church of God – the love, the faithfulness, the loyalty, the self-abasement.

And I believe this cost Jonathan a lot. What about his father? And this word: “He arose.” It cannot have been easy; and this long journey, and this wild, dark wood. But, “His servants shall serve Him: and they shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads.”

“And Jonathan Saul’s son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God.” Well then, that is Jonathan, and then that is you and me. But behold, a greater than Jonathan is here – *the King’s Son*, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and He visits His people, His poor, sinful people. He visits them. Well, He did in His matchless

condescension and His mysterious incarnation at Bethlehem. What a visit that was! The King's Son. So old Zacharias sang of it: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for *He hath visited* and redeemed His people." And as one of our little hymns says, "Thou visitest sinners still." What a mercy! That is what we want: the King's Son to favour us in His matchless condescension with a blessed visit.

Pondering on this word *visit*, what does it mean? What is a visit? Well, it is if you go somewhere, but you go all the way there, and you go with a reason, with a purpose. There are a lot of places you go, but it is not a visit, or someone calls at your house and it is not a visit. You know what a visit it. It is when you go somewhere and it is usually to a person and you have a purpose in it. And usually when it is a visit, it is a good purpose; it is a loving, a friendly purpose. "Thou visitest sinners still." The King's Son visits poor, unworthy sinners. Is there one person in this chapel tonight who could willingly, freely, lovingly pray that prayer: "I wait a visit, Lord, from Thee"? Or are there any of you know something of this prayer: "Remember me, O Lord, with the favour that Thou bearest unto Thy people: O *visit me* with Thy salvation"? O the King's Son with this loving visit, this visit of love and mercy to poor, unworthy sinners! Jonathan was a great man; he was a prince. But he was not the Son of God from all eternity. He did a lot for David, but he did not suffer, bleed and die for him. O the King's Son as we see Him here, and the wonderful way in which He visits sinners still! We hope when we meet for worship on the Lord's day and in the week that the King's Son visits us. We hope He visits us in our homes. O we do want Him to visit our souls. These visits of the King's Son.

Let me remind you of that little story I have often told you over the years. William Gadsby was once asked to go to see one of his old church members who was lying very ill, close to the point of death, and when he got to the place, it was a dreadful place. It was a cellar, and Manchester in those days was one of the worst cities in Britain for poverty and squalor. It was just like a hovel. He looked in and in the place there was a stench. He hardly felt he wanted to go in. The poor old lady was lying on a bundle of rags, not a proper bed. She had a lazy daughter who did nothing. There were bones and rubbish lying about. He just wanted to get out, but a feeble voice called out, "Come in, Mr. Gadsby. The Lord Jesus visits me each day in this place and His visits are most sweet!" Well, what did this visit

mean to David, and what would a visit from the King's Son, the Lord Jesus, meant to you and me?

"Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God." This was a friend. David and Jonathan have become famous, famous in history as two very close bosom friends. But what about the Friend of sinners? And what about that beautiful word, "A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity"? O the love of Jonathan for David, but the greater love of Jesus, the King's Son, for His poor, unworthy people! And never, never forget that word – may some of you take it home with you in your hearts tonight: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." O it is matchless condescension of the Son of God, the King's Son, to be the Friend of sinners, a Friend who loveth at all times, a Brother born for adversity.

And He does not forget His people, and He never will forget them. Jonathan did not forget David. They had been close friends, and Jonathan was not going to forget him. But he was the king's son, and the king hated David, but Jonathan could not give him up. Jonathan did not forget him. That is a beautiful word: "O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of Me." David's own wife forgot him. She did not want him. Michal his wife was Jonathan's sister, but she was the opposite of Jonathan. He was forgotten by many, but this one friend did not forget him; he could not forget him.

But you see, David had not sinned against Jonathan, but how you and I have treated our Friend – our sin, our failure.

"How shall I give thee up?
('Tis Jesus speaks the word).

"Rebellious thou hast been,
And art rebellious still;
But since in love I took thee in,
My promise I'll fulfil."

O the King's Son, the Friend of sinners, the wonderful love that He shows to them! But it is this, to keep to the language and the analogy here. He seems to have a special love and affection and concern for them when they are in the deep, dark wood.

Some of you know what it is to be in the deep, dark wood when you cannot see your way through, you cannot see any way out. Some

people have literally been in a deep, dark wood and they have walked for three or four hours. You read of it in the papers sometimes even today, and at the end of the three or four hours they come back to the place where they started. They had been going round in circles. Perhaps you feel you go round in circles sometimes.

But all these things that David had. There was the guilt on his own conscience because of what he had done, bringing about the death and the massacre of all those priests. He had that inward sorrow in his heart. And then the way he was so dreadfully treated, and the things he could not understand. There is a line in one of our hymns: "Yet God, my God, forgets me not." O but the Lord Jesus has a special delight in coming where His people are in the deep, dark wood. He "remembered us in our low estate: for His mercy endureth for ever."

"And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God." That is the great point, the vital point. We want the Lord Jesus, the Friend of sinners, the King's Son, to visit us, to come where we are, and we want Him to strengthen our hands in God. Let us be clear, it is only He who really, truly can do it. We talk about strengthening one another's hand in God and we know what we mean, but in its fullest sense it is only the Son of God who can do it; and He will do it, He has promised to do it. Those of you who are in the deep, dark wood, in the maze, in the labyrinth, feeling weak, what has He promised to do, and what is He going to do? He is going to strengthen your hands in God.

Now how does He do it? It is a vast subject. I should think Dr. Owen could have written one of his great tomes on this. How does the Lord Jesus strengthen His people's hands in God? Well, *His gracious presence*, just to be with them, to have the sense of His gracious presence, to have the sense that He is with them. Take an example: those two on the way to Emmaus. They were certainly in a deep, dark wood. They were confused, bewildered, full of sorrow. It was the presence of the Lord Jesus that turned their sorrow into joy. "Jesus Himself drew near, and went with them," and their heart burned within them as He talked with them by the way. It was His gracious presence that did it. It will do it for you.

He "strengthened his hand in God." Another way: when *He speaks*. Jonathan said to David, "Fear not," and the Lord Jesus, the King's Son, the Friend of sinners comes to this sinner in distress and says, "Fear not," as if He would say, I am with thee and I understand thy case. I am

going to help thee. I am going to be with thee. I am never going to forget thee. I am going to bring thee safely through and safely out.

And he “strengthened his hand in God.” The Lord Jesus has appointed *the gospel ministry* for this. One point, one purpose of the gospel ministry is to strengthen the hands of the Lord’s people in God. I hope that sometimes you come to chapel feeling your helplessness and weakness and sin, and through the preaching of the everlasting gospel the Saviour strengthens your hands in God. Because if you look at that beautiful chapter, Isaiah 35, there is a commission there to gospel preachers and it is this: “Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees.”

He “strengthened his hand in God.” But we read here that before Jonathan left David, he entered into *a covenant* with him. “They two made a covenant before the Lord.” And then they separated. “David abode in the wood, and Jonathan went to his house.” But there was a covenant made, and covenant truth, covenant faithfulness, covenant salvation, covenant blood will strengthen your hands in God. There is a very beautiful Scripture (Ezek. 34. 25), and interestingly, though it is on the covenant, it speaks about the deep, dark wood, and it is this. It is the Lord Jesus speaking there as the great Shepherd of the sheep, and when He establishes His covenant of peace in the hearts of His people, then “they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods.” Now a deep, dark wood is no place for sheep to go to sleep. But why is it that the sheep, the lambs of Christ’s fold according to that ancient promise can dwell safely in the wilderness? Why is it that weak and helpless and surrounded by enemies and foes, why is it they can sleep peacefully in the wood? It is because the Shepherd is with them, because He is watching over them, because He is guarding them, because He is protecting them.

O there was a covenant here, but there is that greater covenant that “stood ere time began, that God with man might dwell; eternal wisdom drew that plan,” the everlasting covenant sealed with the blood of Christ, confirmed with the solemn oath of God, which confirms every blessing a guilty sinner can ever need. And it is because of covenant blessings that sinners in all their weakness and helplessness, the sheep, the lambs of Christ’s fold can lie down safely and can sleep in the wood, and it is when these new covenant blessings are made known, as the Saviour Himself by His Spirit visits the sinner, that the sinner’s hands are strengthened in God.

It is a beautiful subject. There is a greater than Jonathan here. May you see Him, the King's Son, the Friend of sinners, the Son of God in all His love and mercy and the riches of His grace.

“And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God.” Ah but beloved friends, there is one great, vast difference between Jonathan's visit and the visit of the Saviour, between Jonathan strengthening David's hands and the Lord Jesus strengthening our hands. The difference is this: Jonathan with all his love and affection to David and all his desires for him could not *give* him strength. It was just beyond his ability. It is just beyond the ability of any one of us to *give* another strength. So when he strengthened his hand in God, there were many things, but he could not really give him strength, put the strength in him. But that is what the Lord Jesus, the Friend of sinners can do – not only wish His people strength, pray for His people's strength, but give them strength. That word that closes the 29th Psalm: “The Lord will give strength unto His people.” And you come to that great Isaiah chapter 40, the almighty God, and view it in the Person of Jesus the King's Son, the Friend of sinners, and at the end of the chapter, “He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might He increaseth strength.” It brings us back to the ancient, well-tried, well-loved promise: “As thy days, so shall thy strength be.”

Well, there is everything in the King's Son for a poor, helpless sinner in nature's deep, dark wood, and may we say with the hymnwriter concerning these visits,

“More frequent let Thy visits be,
Or let them longer last.”

“And Jonathan Saul's son arose, and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God.”