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The St Mary's Heritage Project

Sermon - Contempt for National Religion criminated.
Preached by Andrew Macdonald,
A Minister of the Gospel at Glasgow, c. 1782.

SOURCE:

“Contempt for National Religion criminated” is Sermon X from “Twenty-Eight Miscellaneous Sermons” by A. Macdonald, Late Minister of the English Church at Glasgow, published by J. Murray, London, 1790 (second edition).

Spelling modernised, capitalisation reduced, and punctuation adjusted.

[RGE 2009]

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ADVERTISEMENT.

The author of the following sermons, Mr Andrew Macdonald, was a Minister of the Gospel at Glasgow, where his talents were held in great esteem, and his private virtues generally respected. These discourse were written during the time that he was employed in the duties of his sacred function, and several of them were composed for the improvement of his immediate congregation. They strongly exemplify the character of their author, being plain, perspicuous, fervid, and argumentative; adapted at once to instruct the unenlightened, and satisfy the intelligent reader.

As it was the design of the writer, to reform practice rather than to promote speculation, he has but seldom entered into deep investigations, which the generality of readers could not be supposed to comprehend, and which therefore would have been little calculated to suggest such religious meditations as are necessary for the conduct of this life, and for inspiring hopes of a better. Yet it may be fairly said, that few men, however elevated by talents, or embellished with literature, will read these compositions without deriving moral and intellectual advantages from them, as they exhibit conspicuous proofs of a mind warmed by piety, pregnant with various and extensive knowledge, and strengthened by profound reflection.

The author had attentively examined the best works of antiquity, as well as of modern writers, and constituted indeed the rare compound of the liberal critic, the acute philosopher, the refined scholar, and animated poet. As the duties of his clerical profession were by no means sufficient to occupy a mind active and excursive like his, he devoted the latter part of his life chiefly to literary pursuits; but, having no powerful friends to patronise his abilities, and suffering under the infirmities of a weak constitution, he fell a victim, at the age of three and thirty, to sickness, disappointment and misfortune.

2 Sam. I. 24.

YE DAUGHTERS OF ISRAEL, WEEP OVER SAUL.

These words are taken from the funeral eulogium of the first of the Jewish monarch, spoken by his antagonist and successor. They bear equal testimony to the candour of the living, and the merit of the dead: and the address they contain is not more pathetic than just; for of all the Israelitish kings, perhaps not one deserved more truly to be lamented by the daughters of his people than this unhappy prince. Whatever stains deform the picture which the sacred historians have given us of him, whatever defects appear in his character, yet of neglecting the temporal interest of his kingdom, he cannot with justice be accused. To dispense the blessings and encourage the arts of peace, he had little opportunity, as the country he was appointed to govern, from its situation, could not be long, in the course of human things, exempt from war: but when exertions of bravery were required, in the perilous hour of foreign invasion, in the fatigues of the tedious march, and the dreadful strife of battle, Saul was the first to bear the toil and brave the danger. There prevailed, however, in all his actions, a most remarkable unsteadiness of conduct, an irresoluteness and inconsistency which we can no otherwise account for than by supposing that he was not always in his perfect mind. Of this indeed we have some notice given in the relation of his being visited with a spirit of melancholy, which, though charmed away for a season by the music of David's harp, we may suppose returned afterwards with increasing rage.

He was raised to the throne expressly for his personal merit: "See ye him whom the Lord hath chosen, that there is none like him among all the people." It is not necessary for a great man to be the son of a great man. Virtues and genius go not by transfusion; they are the gifts of bounteous nature, and bestowed without regard to the distinctions of rank invented by man. Thus from the obscure cottage rises the philosopher, whose capacious mind can grasp the universe: thus from the nameless hamlet rises the poet, whose fame shall last coeval with the earth: and thus, from following his asses, Saul rose to be the leader of God's people.

In the discharge of that important commission, he shewed some noble virtues, which ought to adorn every prince and every man. His justice was very strict. We find him about to put his own son to death, for breaking an order, at the promulgation of which he was not present. Mercy, however, he also possessed. In one instance, at least, we know he disobeyed an express command of Heaven, and ruined his affairs for ever, to save a king whom he had vanquished in war; and this was certainly mercy, though widely misplaced. His temperance too was remarkable: he could support for a whole day the toils of battle, and lead on his warriors to reiterated conflicts, without tasting food. He had also but one wife; a circumstance in which I believe he was imitated by few of note among his countrymen. Yet these virtues were strangely sullied and contrasted by that inconsistency I mentioned. How shall we reconcile to that humane spirit which moved him to spare Agag, his cruel destruction of the city of Nob, where he butchered "men and women, children and sucklings?" A zealous panegyrist might perhaps extenuate this outrage, by comparing it with some more horrid deeds, perpetrated by other worthies of his nation: but no person of feeling, no person who is not dead to the love of mankind, can speak or think of it otherwise than with horror. How also can we reconcile to the idea of justice his deceitful and capricious treatment of David? There were, it is true, circumstances to excite jealousy. He saw him the

favourite of his son; he knew him for the favoured lover of his daughter; and he heard the common people praise him to the height of extravagant: but these cannot excuse the low cunning he practised, and the implacable resentment he expressed against him. We must observe, that in the latter part of his reign he seems to have been afflicted with a total failure of his mental powers. He had, like a wise prince, banished from the land those miscreants who pretended to sorcery and divination, who by tricks imposed on the credulous an opinion that they possessed more than mortal power: yet behold him repairing, himself, to one of those wretches for counsel in the affairs of his government. How weak! how inconsistent! How do we despise the king of Israel, stealing away from his encamped host, and wandering in disguise through the gloom of night, to enquire his fate of a miserable juggler! Who can imagine that this man, at night so faint and spiritless, should rise the next morning intrepid for the fight; and, though hopeless of victory, leads on his troops with the firm serenity of a conqueror? His soul seems, in this concluding scene, to have recalled its scattered powers, and, like the last flame of a dying lamp, burst forth in one bright momentary blaze, before extinction. The death of Saul on Mount Gilboa was equal to anything that we admire in the heroes of Greece and Rome. Let us think we see the unfortunate monarch long striving with fruitless valour to stem the tide of battle - his people fall around him; a general rout ensues; the chariots of the enemy come thundering on; and their fiery steeds trampling the corpses of the slain - wild havoc rages over the fatal mountain. Saul leans breathless on his spear, spent and weary, scorning equally to fly and to yield. His three sons lie dead by his side - dead in the cause of their country. What were then the feelings of the king? what were then the feelings of the father? - Let us draw a veil over the distressing scene. - "How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!"

Thus fell king Saul - a man raised from an humble, and probably a happy state, to all the splendours and the troubles of royalty, to waste many days of toil, and nights of anxiety - and then to die, with the flower of his family, in a disastrous battle: was he worthy of a fate so hard? Such events, indeed, are common in the history of every nation. Many a noble patriot, and many an excellent prince, with virtues more deserving, have had deaths less glorious: yet still, in the case of Saul, there was something particular. Some reason of more than common weight there must have been, to cause the man designed for the founder of the Jewish monarchy to be peremptorily rejected by the same power and authority from which he received his crown: nor is this reason difficult to be found. The character of Saul had one capital blemish, which I have not yet noticed - an overweening confidence in his own abilities, and a disregard to the religion of his country. To this spring may be traced those actions of his which are mostly severely blamed: his intrusion into the priest's office; his sparing of the king of Amalek; his extermination of the priests of Nob; his persecution of the Gibeonites; and his disrespect to the prophet Samuel. In fact, he seems to have paid no attention to the rites of national worship, but when he thought they might serve some political purpose; regarding religion, perhaps, as little more than an engine of state. By such conduct he plainly unfitted himself for the government to which he was appointed. In any nation, a king without religion is a most dangerous character; but in a nation which, till then, had been governed immediately by God himself, a king without religion was a very monster. The first and

chief of the regal duties there must have been a strict attention to all the prescribed rites of divine worship, and a most minute regard to those oraculous communications which the Almighty then deigned to give his favourite people. Accordingly, we may observe the sacred historians give us for the leading feature in the character of every prince - "he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord:" or, "he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord." The latter was applied to Saul - "Now thy kingdom shall not continue: the Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the Lord had commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the Lord commanded thee."

From this light sketch of the character of king Saul we may draw the following important observation that to neglect the duties of religion, even supposing we fully discharge those of morality, is a very great crime. We see what disasters that neglect brought upon this ill-fated monarch, which by a more judicious conduct he might have avoided, and fixed the sceptre of Israel securely in the hands of his family. I will not affirm that he never failed in the exercise of the moral and social virtues, though in that respect it is evident he excelled some of his more illustrious successors; yet, granting he had in this been blameless, we have reason to think his contempt for the national religion would still have drawn the same fatal catastrophe on his reign: and if this crime was so heinous, and its consequences so ruinous to a man placed in the foremost rank of earthly honours, what must it be to those who move in humbler sphere, unmolested by his temptations, unseduced by the specious excuses which his self-confidence, no doubt, could plead? What must be the guilt of those characters, too common in the world, who look on themselves as perfect in virtue while they are honest men and good citizens, although they forget their God days without number, and despise every established mode of paying him reverence? Have they the distractions of royalty to plead? the intoxication of unlimited power? or the jealousy of authority? No! none of these; nor anything but a miserable blindness, and most obdurate insensibility. This artificial separation of religion and morality is really a matter of violence. They are kindred beings, and, like righteousness and peace, ought to kiss each other. If religion had any tendency to lessen social happiness; if it blunted the delicious feelings of humanity; if it discouraged the generous sympathies of friendship; if it cut those dearer bands that connect us all together; we might be less surprised at this fine distinction between the religious and the moral man; but as nothing of that kind takes place, is there not some absurdity in practising the duties of morality, yet neglecting the God by whose appointment they are made necessary to the happiness of civil life? I can imagine cases, in which the absurdity will appear very palpable: I can imagine myself a man of this moral stamp; humane, just, and generous, but utterly negligent of religion; spending the hours, which my friends employ in praising their God and praying for his blessings, in walking about and gazing on the fun. I meet a man in extreme distress, attended with every circumstance that can move the tender soul to pity: he tells me his mournful tale; his complaints tear my heart with anguish. Perhaps I have it in my power to remove all his woe, by affording him assistance; which I therefore instantly do, and enjoy for a moment the finest emotion of which human nature is susceptible. But see the object of my bounty, with eyes and arms raised towards Heaven, with every impassioned gesture and expression that gratitude can dictate, praying for rewards on his benefactor's head; calling on the great

God of the universe to bless me. What a shock! - My enjoyment is gone. I turn away muttering and in pain, "What did I make such a request for myself? when did I think of the great God of the universe? or, whether in the universe there were a God at all?"

It is only the man who to the deeds of morality adds the duties of religion, who could enjoy this exertion of benevolence, and every other delight which our Creator has annexed to the practice of virtue, without alloy. The fervent prayer of gratitude, far from troubling, will increase his happiness; for in it he can with confidence join. Every blessing of life is sweetened to him, by the reflection that he has not been ungrateful for them; and if distress overtake him, it will not be embittered by the consciousness of having deserved it for failing in his duty to Heaven. Even in that last and awful hour, when Nature, trembling on the verge of life, looks often back with regret, and forward with anxiety - in that hour, when the marble heart of ingratitude shall be convulsed with horror, he will not, like Saul, wish for some friendly sword, to end at once his miserable being - but in that, as in all other dispensations, will adore, with submission and thankfulness, the Author and Giver of every good thing!