

David, at Mid-Passage<sup>1</sup>  
1977

The morning of his life was over. It had been one, long, hard climb – straight to the top ... a brilliant ascent, from peasant to King, all the way from his father's thorn-infested sheep farm in the forsaken hills of Judea, to the throne, as his nation's greatest King. He was standing on the summit now, a mid-passage, not regretting that his youth was over, that the morning of his life was spent, for it had been well-spent, and not spent in vain. He was standing on the site of his new capital, which his people, proud of him, proud of his deserved success, proud that he was still going strong, loved to call, "the City of David." It was his – he took it, build it, made it the center of a new national and religious life for the people – and they gave him full credit. And if his people were proud of him, he had leaped over too many hurdles not to be proud of himself. His life was at high noon – and he knew it. His was a golden middle age, based on solid achievement. He was no longer a peasant, a fugitive freedom fighter, but King of the Jews, as old Samuel, with strange prescience, knew he would be: "Arise, anoint him, for this is the man."

And Samuel was right. David's life seemed anointed at its noonday, for "this is he:" a man matured and tempered by hostility and betrayal, a man strong and secured in the loyalty of a people, a man finally relieved of the burden of war, a man free to develop the resources of his country in a new era of prosperity and peace, a man facing the afternoon and evening of his life with every promise that it would be rich and bright. "Behold the man." This is he indeed: a strong man whose heart was gentle, who could make and hold friends like Jonathan, whose soldiers risked their lives to bring him water, who loved sturdy, intelligent women like Abigail, a man who loved truth and was so sensitive to nature, that starlight, and sun, and rain spoke to him. "This is he:" a man, conscious above all else, of God, of G's being, G's will, G's presence, in the history of his people, in his own life ...

... So that, when he stood at the top, at mid-passage – high noon, at the point where his life arched into fulfillment, out of the depths of him, came expression of the religious passion, the faith in the great God that had motivated, guided, sustained him in his long, hard road up: a prayer as natural, as transparently honest, as authentic as David himself, the humble, child-like prayer of a strong man: "I love thee, O Lord, my strength ... thy gentleness have made me great!"

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How right was Samuel's intuition: "Arise, anoint him, for this is he." (Is 16:12)

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<sup>1</sup> This was a modified version of a sermon delivered in 1967, titled "Destruction at Noonday"

And we would like to leave him here, a great, good man, a gentle man, standing at the top of his life – a tall man, a man of God.

Lovers of happy endings, of fairy tales, might wish he could have died right here – poss. an assassin's arrow to end it all in glory, while he was still standing on the summit, and never know the slow decline, the long evening's journey into night.

Some men seem almost fortunate to die at just the right time. We say – and shudder: “at the height of his career,” but ... before discord sets in, before failure, before the fall, before guilt, before loneliness, before despair, as though a man might say at the Gate of Eternity, “Thanks, God, I am dead – just in the nick of time.” Unfinished symphonies, indeed, may not be altogether sad – the ending may have been disappointing, may have failed to resolve the grandly stated theme. As your grandmother says, “there are things worse than death,” and you know what she means.

And yet ... and yet ... – unless you like fair-tale endings, maybe the O.T.'s frank recital of the aftermath of David's success, its open, existential account of “the destruction that (often) falleth at noonday,” may be – its story of David at mid-passage – will do you + me some small good, - - -

For there is “a destruction that (often) falleth (precisely) at noonday.” That is to say, there are stresses and strains to which people become particularly susceptible at the moment of their most conspicuous success. After they have won so many battles from so many obvious enemies, after they have defeated their Goliath of physical strength, after they have outwitted their insane Saul, after they have outmaneuvered a host of Philistines by brilliant strategy, and after they have consolidated their gains, and just begun to take their leisure in peace, in prosperity, at the height of themselves – just at that very moment, they succumb, to far smaller, far subtler, more sinister, even silly enemies: they are like the lion, gorged and drugged on his own kill, who cannot awaken enough to shake off fire ants that swarm over him and devour him alive: the king of the beasts destroyed by such stings - better he should have died in battle ... may be ...

But the real experience of David, from the point of his mid-life on – may be far more instructive to some of us than his romantic meteoric rise to success.

He did not know the small and sinister dangers especially present after one has attained “status.”

When you are quite confident that you are making a success in life – just when you presume you have outlived the usual temptations, that you have passed beyond the danger zone, that you have attained unassailable position as good worker, good spouse, good parent, churchman, and you think, as Carlyle put it, “How healthy am I!” – you are in danger.

David started a long road down when he decided he had reached the point of being able to do as he pleased. The big enemies without he could deal with, but the small ones within, he didn't know how to cope with.

I will spare you the sorry detail of his story – you know them well enough- How he mixed lust with lying, lying with murder, murder with deceit. In order to have his momentary desire, he planned the death of one man who admired him, in collusion with another man who despised him, and suffered not only blackmail but a broken conscience all the rest of his life, with never-ending family strife.

Because of his public achievements, he thought he could live his private life as he pleased. But it doesn't work out that way. It is perfectly possible to make a mess of things at the moment of greatest success.

The medieval monks used to say one is mostly likely to fall, not in the morning of one's life, when one is fighting one's way up, not in the evening of one's life, when one's work is done, but at mid-passage at the top of one's career, when one can control everything but one's self, when one confuses morals with pleasure, and thinks anything beautiful and desirable is one's own – by rights to take.

Maybe the old monks were right – mid-passage is just the time for a fall.

And the worst of all is – it slips up on a person.

How different David is in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Psalm. In the 18<sup>th</sup>, he's exalting at the height of his powers. In the 32<sup>nd</sup> he is wringing his hands.

Joab betrayed him, of course. His sons lost respect for him, of course. The people began to fall away from him, no longer to love and trust him, of course. He thinks God must hate him also. He loathed himself. He cannot sleep at night.

How difficult for a succ. man at mid passage – to repent – to put his faith and life back together + begin again. That's something to think about, – isn't it? Especially if you are at mid-passage --> and it's still some years before you can make it safely home.

Amen