

Destruction at Noonday¹
1967

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, 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 them – 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 he.”

And this was true. His 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. 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, 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 his being, his will, his presence, in the history of his people, in his own life ...

... So that, when he stood at the top, at his 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!”

¹ A modified version of this sermon was delivered in 1977, titled “David at Mid-Range”

#

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

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 here – an assassin's arrow to end it all in glory, while he was still standing on the summit of the 18th Psalm; a spear in the back, while he was still going strong, so that he would never know what hit him, or what was to happen in the long afternoon of his life, never know the slow decline, the long evening's journey into night.

Some men seem almost fortunate to die at just the right time. Some say – and shudder: "at the height of his career," but ... before discord sets in, before failure, before a fall, before guilt, before ostracism, 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, or are contemplating suicide at the point of your own highest success ... unless the afternoon and evening of your life are going to be a little bit more than you can take ... maybe the O.T.'s coarsely frank recital of the aftermath of David's success, its open, existential account of "the destruction that (often) falleth at noon-day," will do you some small good, and me too - - -

For there is "a destruction that (often) falleth (precisely) at noonday." That is to say, there are stresses and strains to which a man become particularly susceptible at the moment of his most conspicuous success. After he has won so many battles from many obvious enemies, after he has defeated his Goliath of physical strength, after he has outwitted his insane Saul, after he has outmaneuvered a host of Philistines by brilliant strategy, and after he has consolidated his gains, and just begun to take his leisure in peace, in prosperity, at the height of himself – just at that very moment, he succumb, to far smaller, far subtler, more sinister, even silly little enemies: he is like the lion, gorged and drugged on his own kill, who cannot awaken enough to shake off fire ants that swarm over him and eat 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 status as good worker, good husband, father, 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.

The sorry detail of his story, I do not have to tell you – 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 a man who admired him, in collusion with a 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 a man is most likely to fall, not in the morning of his life, when he is fighting his way up, not in the night of his life, when his work is done, but at high noon at the top of his career, when he can control everything but himself, when he confuses morals with esthetics, and thinks anything beautiful and desirable is his by rights to take.

I remember a little boy, son of a very successful man, who said to me, “I wish my daddy were a failure. I wish he were poor. Then maybe he’d be proud of me, and maybe he’d love my mother.”

Some time ago I overheard a very serious conversation between two students in the cafeteria. One said, “I’m worried about my father.” “Why?” said the other. “He’s 45” said the first,” and he’s just bought a Jaguar.” “Whew! that is a bad symbol,” come the reply. “Yeah, I know ... suddenly he buys this Jaguar, when all his life, he’s driven a plain old Thunderbird. What do you think the old geezer’s up to?”

Maybe the old monks were right – high noon is just the time for a fall.

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

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

You can never do in private what the public won't soon know. Already, the gossip was flowing. 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. He loathed himself. He cannot sleep at night. Only an honest and humble repentance returns him to his senses