

Jonathan's Robe: A Humble Response to Being Surpassed and Overshadowed

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And Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt. - 1 Samuel 18:4

The significance of this action on the part of Jonathan can only be fully appreciated by consideration of the events in his life, as recorded in the previous chapters of this book. It will be remembered that in the fourteenth chapter is given the account of one of the most remarkable deliverances ever wrought on behalf of Israel. The Philistines had invaded the country in overwhelming force; the armies of Israel were not only completely subdued and disorganized, but were even deprived of their weapons of war by the conquerors. Never, perhaps, in the history of the chosen race do we find them in a more hopeless and humiliating position than that described in the closing part of the thirteenth chapter. SO complete was the disarmament that swords remained only in the hands of Saul the king, and of Jonathan, his son. Then follows the wonderful story of how, through the faith and courage of the young prince, the whole aspect of affairs was completely changed in the course of a few hours. The country was rid of the presence of its hated oppressors, their yoke broken, and the national honor and independence once more secured. It can be seen at once that Jonathan must have been the hero of the hour, and that the eyes of the whole nation must have been turned in gratitude and loyal devotion towards him. A great and glorious career lay before him. He was heir to the throne, and had proved himself worthy to occupy it, whilst the hopes of Israel were fixed upon him.

Soon afterwards a sudden and great change takes place. In an hour of threatened national danger and dishonor another individual unexpectedly achieves a great victory, and at once the enthusiasm both of the army and of the people at large becomes centered upon David. This was the crisis of Jonathan's life. What was to be his attitude towards the one who had suddenly surpassed and overshadowed him? There could be no more searching test of character. It is not easy for anyone to find his prospects of influence and usefulness interfered with by the appearance of another upon the scene. The natural spirit of self-assertion is too apt to rebel against what seems to be a usurpation of one's own rights. Alas! how easily the deadly seeds of jealousy and unkindness germinate in the heart under such circumstances.

Judged by the ordinary standards of the world, the career of Jonathan might be said to have ended prematurely in failure, and with the splendid prospects of his early manhood unrealized. Estimated in the light of God's word, its value and significance are far otherwise. The lesson which it teaches us is, perhaps, best expressed in the words of our Lord: "He that loseth his life shall save it." The real worth and completeness of a career cannot be reckoned in the light of its outward circumstances. Apparent failure may mean the deepest and most lasting success. In other words, it is the spirit in which the life is lived which

is the essential point. It is characteristic of the Holy Scriptures to be silent concerning the inward conflicts through which Jonathan must have passed in connection with his relationship with David. It is enough to know that he was a man of like passions with ourselves, and that, therefore he must have realized fully and keenly all that the acceptance of David as God's appointed man involved to himself. It would be a complete mistake to regard Jonathan as a mere weak, sentimental, facile youth, for whom the prospects of a great position held no attraction. The account already referred to of the national deliverance wrought by the Lord through him, sufficiently shows the fallacy of such a view. No; the secret of Jonathan's action lay in a deep subjection to the will of God, and in the habit of communion with the Lord, which produced in him a humble, unselfish spirit. Hence, when this supreme and searching test of his life came, he met it in a right way.

We, who are God's children in the present dispensation, are accustomed to regard ourselves as living on a higher plane than did His servants in the Old Testament times, and there is, of course, Scriptural ground for our so doing. And yet, as we contemplate this act of Jonathan's and consider his subsequent relationship with David, may we not take shame to ourselves for our slowness to "let the mind that was in Christ Jesus be in us," and to make ourselves of no reputation in order to make room for the gifts and ministry of others. Let us remember that God's arrangements for the co-operation of His servants in His work will be contrary to the mind of the flesh in each one of us, simply because they are in accordance with the mind of Christ. And as the Lord seeks to lead us each one on into a truer and purer fellowship with Himself, we shall most certainly find that the path opened before us involves an ever deepening and fuller measure of death to self and self-seeking in its manifold forms. Our relationship with others will be increasingly that of the bond-servant, who is expected to sacrifice himself and his interests on behalf of those whom the Lord appoints him to serve.

It is a solemn truth, that any refusal on our part to allow this spirit practically to govern us, of necessity means hindrance to the Lord's plans, and loss to His work. It is sadly possible to "seek our own," even whilst there may be a considerable measure of honest zeal and devotion to the service of God.

May we all have grace to perceive and loyally to respond to every fresh call which the Master may make upon us to go forward in the path of self-emptying. As we do so, we shall "win Him" in ever-increasing measure, and the quality of our life and service will correspondingly improve.