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Jonathan and David.

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TEXT:—1 Samuel xxiii., 16: "And Jonathan, Saul's son arose and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God." The histories of the Bible are largely the histories of the lives of individual men and women. So many of the Scripture characters are conveyed to us almost as imaginary, or, at all events, they become men and women with whom we dare have nothing in common, that we lose in large measure the lessons of their lives. But the whole tendency of the sacred record is to bring these personages very near to us. It never omits their weaknesses or their failings, it never portrays them as pure and perfect saints but as men and women of like natures and feelings with ourselves, beset by the same temptations, liable to the same passions, and could we only always remember this and realize their common brotherhood with ourselves, we should gain from them new light for life's way, new strength for life's duties, and new courage for life's battle, and of no story in the whole Bible is this truer than of the story of David, the story, no doubt on a large scale, but still the story of the common difficulties, the common struggles, the common aspirations of the human heart in all ages and in all climes. There are to be sure experiences and vicissitudes in that life of his that are somewhat strange and thrilling, which seem to cut him out from us and make him stand out in an atmosphere of wonder and glory, and yet there is no man on the page of history, sacred or secular, that comes nearer to our frail humanity. His life was composed of experiences very similar to our own. We know him to have been called the man after God's own heart, and his psalms in their profound lamentations, in their wail of tribulation, in the joyous outbursts of exultation, have been felt by all men to be the most faithful record of the changing conditions which form the experience of the soul through every age and time, and if only we realize that David was such a one as ourselves, and was the temple of the earnest human soul struggling as we have all to struggle, falling down as we have all to fall, and yet faithfully struggling on and up, we shall find his life full of lessons and meaning and direct power to ourselves. In the accident of his life, in connection with which our text was written, we learn that the most heroic heart may sometimes be overpowered with fear. Few men had a more intrepid daring than the conqueror of Goliath, and yet we find him driven by cowardly fear into the wood. We are all subject to such variations of mood. It is an instance, though a striking one, of what is common enough, the deep depression of a true heart. His soul was cast down and his spirit was disquieted within him. And has not this been true of all the Bible's great and good men? Did they not nearly all pass

similar experiences springing from a variety of causes? In one case it may arise from seemingly adverse circumstances in life, in another from apparent inconsistencies in the ways of providence, in another from failure in religious work, in another from deep consciousness of moral unworthiness, in another from physical infirmity. These are the hours in life, as you know, when a man craves for sympathy and if we have the picture of a true man in need of sympathy we have also the picture of a true man giving sympathy. We all love Jonathan, and it makes us love him so much is just his brotherliness, and in what can this be more beautifully shown than in strengthening a brother's heart in God. There is a whole religion in that one short phrase. That was what Jonathan did in the wood. There are many ways in which we can all of us do this. We can do it by going to our friend when he is in trouble, doubt, darkness or depression, and speaking of God, His ways and His dealings. We can do something to assure our brother in his gloom that God's ways however dark are ways of kindness, that His discipline is the discipline of a father. How then have we to do this in homes of sorrow? You can strengthen a brother's hand in God by a practical expression of a genuine sympathy. There is nothing in this world of ours more strengthening than the practical manifestation of a living sympathy. It infuses new life into the heart and we can conceive how the very sight of Jonathan and the grip of his hand helped and cheered David in that lonely wood.

There is no more beautiful power that a man can exercise in this world. It is an essential characteristic of the true man. It is an easy thing, such a sadly easy thing to weaken a brother's faith. It is a sadly easy thing to undermine a man's principles and how much of that is being done daily amongst us. How many young men are there in this country of ours,—I have no doubt there are many in this city,—who after having their hands strengthened in God, are being tempted out of their faith, out of the light and life of a holier day. Day after day we see this thing going on, and it is an easy thing, as I said, to weaken a man's faith. The sceptic with little knowledge and absolutely no conviction can do that, but it is the

power of true men alone that can strengthen a brother's heart in God. Are we using that strength whenever and wherever the opportunity occurs, or do we find ourselves speaking where we should be silent or silent where and when we should be speaking? Jonathan proved his friendship to David by seeking him out in that lonely wood, and it was no easy thing for Jonathan to do that. Remember he was looking for the man through whom he was to lose his inheritance. It was a heroic and brilliantly unselfish thing. It would have done us all good to have been present at that interview. What passed there is not recorded. We love to imagine, but this we know, that the words that came from Jonathan were no mere orthodox commonplaces from the lip, but burning words of comfort welling up from the heart. He meets his friend with a calm brow and we can fancy Jonathan gently, yet honestly, reminding David of all the past providence of God, of all the way by which He had hitherto led him, reminding him of how other good men whom God had loved and led, had had to pass through similar trials, reminding him of how God had called him from the sheepfold, and how in many a past encounter and in that lonely wood. He was with him. I can fancy Jonathan reminding David of an earlier experience in his lifetime when it was his mission to cheer the heart of Jonathan's father, and when he was in deep depression and gloom to try and lead him back to life and hope and energy. The story of that scene is thrillingly told, as some of you may know, by one of our great poets. The shepherd boy is portrayed as trying by every means in his power by music to touch that heart. It goes out in pitying tenderness to the suffering monarch, and it rises at last into a prophecy and confession of God's love. If I would willingly suffer for my friend would not infinite compassion move so. Divine love is wider, holier than the human. So he at last professes to find relief in this divine love. Can we not fancy David with his hand in Jonathan's praying under a tree. This is the kind of friend we all of us need. Who, tell me, is my best friend in this world? Not the man who seeks to shake my faith, to put perplexing questions intensifying the doubt in which my heart is already shrouded, not the man who seeks to create difficulties and discouragements. No, but the friend whose aim it is by sympathy, his prayers, his words and his deeds to place my faith anew, the man, the shake of whose hand and the glow of whose eye tells me that in him I have a brother, a brother helping me to bear my burdens by taking some himself. And in doing this we know, and it is a good thing to know that we have the Almighty God on our side. And if we think of God and His purpose we will know what to do and what not to do. We well know that it is not God's will that we should never by word or example, by silence or speech, strengthen the principle or the power of faith. That is not God's work; that is the devil's work. But let us consider of every brother whom we meet, how would Christ have acted, how did He act towards anyone with whom He came in contact. These efforts of which I have spoken are within the reach of all, the power to carry a message of Scripture to some tried soul, a voice of encouragement and comfort. We can go to our sister in doubt, depression and gloom, and tell how such trials have been transferred to Him, how weakness has been oftentimes changed and may



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be changed again into strength. That divine power of sympathy of which Jonathan has left us such a beautiful example is within the reach of every man, woman and child here, and there is nothing in which we can be more Christlike. We can all do something to help along some sister or brother on life's thorny way. We can all speak some gentle words of kindness to some heart-broken, wounded, trembling spirit. We can all speak the word in season for the cause of God. We can all of us do this. We can add to the happiness and contribute to the strength of some brother or sister every day and sometimes every hour of the day. We can drop a little seed of kindness along their path. It will spring up and blossom and grow and one flower will bring another. We can all thus strengthen our brother's hand in God. And remember there are some to whom the written word is well-nigh unknown, but they cannot fail to read the living epistle that speaks in looks and words of sympathy and acts of self-denial, self-sacrifice and charity; they cannot but see and feel the love which shines in the passionate eye and breathes in the sympathetic spirit, and takes living form in the Christ-like being. They cannot fail to see and appreciate the beautiful unselfishness which leads men or women to go from a home of comfort down to the hovels of squalor and disease and finds its expression in gentle word and pitying look and loving sympathy. We need not try to think of some other sphere in which if we had only been placed we could have done so much. It is not in some other sphere but in the sphere in which we are placed that we can do good. Circumstances after all are very little either of help or hindrance to a spiritual life. There is no one of us that can complain that we have not around us abundant opportunities to do good. Let us try all the time to be strengthening some brother or sister's hand in God. I know no more beautiful epitaph to have recorded of a man than this, "Strong himself or herself in God, he or she did much to strengthen a brother's or a sister's hand." Amen.

No man has a right to trust that God will keep him from all trouble. God keeps his child in trouble, which is a better keeping.