



The
School of God

by J. L. Harris

THE SCHOOL OF GOD.

“He teacheth my hands to war, and my fingers to fight.”—Ps. cxliv. 1; 1 SAM. xvii.

THERE is one feature common to all those who have been trained of God for His own service; they have had to do with Him in secret before they have become prominent in the eyes of men. The contrast to this is that restlessness of the flesh which seeks to attract attention before the soul has had this needed discipline. They run without being sent; and have to learn themselves by their own painful failures. If Paul is a chosen vessel of the Lord to bear His name, his training is in the school of trial: “I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.” Thus God has His secret ways of training for His service. It was so even with His perfect

Servant, His beloved Son. "He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground."

Just so was it with David. In the previous chapter we find David in perfect obscurity—nothing thought of among his brethren, or by his father; away from the family, keeping sheep; not thought worthy to be called unto the sacrifice. Yet he was the chosen of the Lord. And he had not been alone in the wilderness. He had been under God's teaching. He had been preparing for public service in the secret school of Him who looketh not on the outward appearance, and who seeth not as man seeth. Now so it must be with us. There must be a living before the Lord. Unless our souls are exercised before Him, He will not use us as instruments in His service. We may think He will; but it will not be so. God will always have to do in secret with that soul which He intends to serve Him in public. The excellent wisdom of our God in this may be seen in the history of many of His most eminent servants. They are found calm, wise, and enduring,

when all around are perplexed and in fear. All they say and do tells us that they have been prepared for their work. Men, who have been living in secret before the Living God, can move onward unhindered through the confusion and the strife of men. They have learnt how to stand in the breach before terrified Israel ; or to meet face to face Goliath of Gath. And their preparation for this has been their living in secret before Him who is so infinitely greater than all, even before the Living God !

Thus is it here with David. In the desert he has learnt the resources which faith has in God ; and now he is to be the champion of God against the champion of the uncircumcised. The lion and the bear he has slain already, unseen by men ; now he comes forth to triumph over Goliath, in the sight of the armies of Israel and of the Philistines.

How fearful a foe had Israel before them in Goliath ! Morning and evening he defied their armies, and his defiance was unanswered ; for they were dismayed and sore afraid. Saul might set the

army in array ; the hosts might go forth to the place of fight, and shout for the battle (*vv.* 19-21) ; but, behold, there came up the champion (the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name) out of the armies of the Philistines, and spake according to the same words ; and all the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him, and were sore afraid. (*vv.* 23, 24.) This occurred just as David reached the camp. David heard the proud defiance of Goliath (*v.* 23), and he saw the dismay and dishonour of Israel. Their loud shout for the battle was soon over, and all the people were in utter consternation. But David was calm and undismayed amidst all. The *stripling* David is the only one who feared not. He whom his brothers despised, and spoke lightly of, in the naughtiness of their hearts ; he whom the Philistine disdained and cursed. Now there was nothing that any could see in David as a reason why he should put himself forward to meet the Philistine, when none else dared to do so ; nothing that men, who judge by “the outward appearance,” could discern

as *power* ; but quite the contrary. The flesh would see power in “the host,” in numbers, and in armour, or in the mighty Goliath ; but never in the *stripling*, just come from his “few sheep in the wilderness !”

Beloved, mark this : David had had to do with the Living God ; and now he saw that the name of the Living God was implicated. Israel looked to Israel’s resources ; and what were the resources of Israel compared with those of the Philistines ? But here was one who had the mind of God—one who looked to the resources of the Living God. It was not that there was natural courage in David more than in Saul ; but there was faith in David. It is true that David had been in obscurity in the wilderness ; but there he had learnt communion with God. And now he came forth as one fresh from the Living God, and viewed all around him according to God ; and what he had learnt of God in secret he brought out into the circumstances before him. And this was the secret of his strength and of his victory. The cir-

cumstances were well considered, their difficulty and danger weighed ; but his faith brought God into them, and acted amidst them in His wisdom, and in His power. Thus it is that David here looks on all around him. He views the army of Israel as the army of the Lord of hosts. He looks at it in the light of Him from whose presence he had just come. (*v. 26.*)

And I ask whether our failures are not invariably here, that we have not been in secret with the Living God? This is the essential and primary matter. Do we esteem communion with God our highest privilege? Do we value living with God even more than living before the saints and with the saints? I believe we prefer living before the saints to living before God and with God. We may be comforted when surrounded by the saints ; but our strength is in walking in fellowship with the Living God, knowing that we are to endure as seeing Him who is invisible. The flesh itself may seek its own, and find a response, too, among the saints ; but the flesh withers,

it is truly *grass*, in the presence of God. Hence it is our security, as well as our joy, to dwell by faith in "the secret place of the Most High," and to come forth into service, in strength gathered up there. Then shall we be able to look at every foe, as David here looks at Goliath; "for who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the Living God?"

But the language of faith instantly excites the flesh. So was it with Joseph, when telling his brethren his dreams. So it is here with David and his brethren. This we see in Eliab's words: "I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thine heart." The moment the flesh sees a power greater than its own (as Eliab here sees in David), all it can do is to talk of it as pride. Now Eliab was the eldest brother, and he stands forth here in that prominence which the flesh always loves and seeks. He was a man distinguished for natural attractions; but however goodly his countenance or his stature, God "had refused him" (chap. xvi. 6, 7.) The Lord's anointed was not he

whom man esteemed. And how constantly are we taught this lesson in the Word, by God's rejection of the first-born, and His choice of the younger. Eliab stands like Ishmael or Esau, as the representative of the natural title of the flesh. In the exercise of this title he thus scornfully rebukes David. But David was speaking according to a wisdom, moved by a power, of which Eliab knew nothing. David was speaking the language of *faith*. The Living God, the Lord God of the armies of Israel, filled his eye ; and by Him he measured the Philistines and their champion. Eliab had no such standard before him as this : he spoke and felt *as a man* : and therefore the language of faith was to him "pride and naughtiness of heart."

And the flesh always thus mistakes faith. The flesh angrily replies to us, "It is pride," as often as we speak of confidence in the Living God. That very confidence which is the deepest humility, is always condemned by the flesh as pride. For there is no depth of humility so great as self-abandonment, in order to

bring in the Living God. David, in the whole of this action, loses sight of himself, seeing only God and the armies of God. It is the power and the privilege of faith to have *self* cast entirely out of sight, and God alone filling its vision. "No flesh shall glory in His presence ;" "he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." *This* is what David had learnt ; *this* David is now displaying ; and *this* it is which Eliab calls pride. Now the truth is, that the flesh is the proud thing. I trust that we know this ; and that we know also that faith is a self-emptying thing ; because faith receives every thing from God ; yea, beloved, more even than that ; faith receives God Himself, as beyond every blessing which God can give.

"David said, What have I now done ? Is there not a cause ?" Had David gloried in himself ? No, indeed. And was there not a cause for his speaking as he did ? If ever the name of the Living God is brought in question, there is always a cause. The very purpose for which we are left here in the world is, that we may

confess the name of Jesus before men, and set aside our own name. Oh, that the hearts of all God's saints were united in this one thing---the confession of the name of the Lord Jesus !

But let us follow David as he passes from Eliab to the presence of Saul. What conscious dignity, what entire self-possession, are now seen in David. "And David said to Saul, Let no man's heart fail because of him ; thy servant will go and fight with this Philistine." (32.) While the whole army of Israel trembles, one stripling stands before the King and says, "Let no man's heart fail because of him." Yes, there is in faith that self-possession which enables us, not only to feel, but also to minister comfort and confidence amidst the most trying circumstances. Faith draws from resources untouched by circumstances. And therefore, instead of being overcome of trial, is able, as the apostle says, "to comfort others with the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." (2 Cor. i. 4.) David had already gone through trial, and had already, therefore,

proved the God in whom he trusted. "He knew in whom he had believed." He had been in danger before, and had been victorious ; therefore is he confident now. There had been dealings between his soul and God in the wilderness ; dealings, it would seem, never brought out to public light until this moment (*vv.* 34-37.) Oh, beloved ! where is it that the saints learn really to get the victory ? I believe, where no eye sees us save God's. The heartily denying of self, the taking up the cross *in secret* ; the knowing the way, in the retirements of our closets, to cast down imaginations, and every thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God ; *these are our mightiest achievements.* The closet is the great battlefield of faith. Let the foe be met and conquered there, and then shall we be able to stand firm ourselves, and to comfort and build up others also, in the hour of outward conflict. He who had already slain the lion and the bear in the desert is the only one unterrified by Goliath in the valley of Elah.

How does this disclose to us the real

secret of David's strength—the true strength of faith? Now we can tell what the apostle Paul meant when he said, “I am a fool.” He was obliged to speak of himself, *that* was his folly. His great strength in service—the reason why he was able to bear so much from the petulance of the saints, was because there had been exercise between Paul's soul and the Lord, which no one was a party to save himself and his God. For the like reason David can now say to Saul, “Let no man's heart fail because of him.”

“And Saul said to David, ‘Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him.’” Saul looks at David and then at Goliath; and, speaking *as a man*, Saul was right. But Saul knew not the secret of God which David had learnt. Saul never knew what David was now going to tell. If Eliab had done such exploits, he would not have kept it secret for a day; but David had learned in another school—a school in which he had been taught not to make much of David, but of the Living God. David, therefore, so far as the Scriptures

inform us, had never boasted of, or even mentioned, his victory; but when the occasion demands it, he can come forward and tell of the Lord's goodness unto him. So with the apostle, "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth); such an one caught up to the third heaven." For fourteen years no one, it seems, knew he had been up to the third heaven; but when an occasion comes to bring it out for his Master's glory—not for his own glory—then he declares it. A great deal more was going on between the Lord and Paul than any one else knew. So it was with David. Who knew what this stripling had done? Who knew that he had triumphed already so wondrously? Who knew that he had delivered the lamb of his flock out of the mouth of the lion, and that both lion and bear had fallen by his hand? Eliab knew not this. Saul knew not this. It might possibly have been known to keen discernment of individual faith (1 Sam. xvi. 18), but it had gone

no further. Beloved, be assured that if you would really be strong, it must be secret living before God. I believe that the reason why we are all so weak is, that we care so little about secrecy before God. We are ready and eager to run into some service to be seen of men, but do we esteem unseen communion and discipline before God beyond all? Depend on it, if there is not the slaying of the lion and the bear in secret, there will be no killing of Goliath in public; no power or wisdom in our public service.

This should lead us to understand that little word, "taking up the cross *daily*." People can take up the cross, they think, on some great occasion; but doing this on great occasions is nothing like taking up the cross *daily*, daily denying self, daily hating and losing one's life in this world. God's eye is *always* on us; it is our privilege to walk always before God, and thus we have hourly opportunity of taking up the cross before Him; confessing Jesus before Him, and denying self.

"David said, moreover, The Lord that

delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, He will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine." (v. 37.) David knew that one was as easy to God as the other. When we are in communion with God, we do not put difficulty by the side of difficulty ; for what is difficulty to Him ? Faith measures every difficulty by the power of God, and then the mountain becomes as the plain. Too often, beloved, we think that in little things less than Omnipotence will do ; and *then* it is that we fail. Have we not seen zealous and devoted saints fail in some trifling thing ? The cause is, that they have not thought of bringing God by faith into *all* their ways. Abraham could leave his family and his father's house, and go out at the command of God, not knowing whither he went ; but the moment he meets a difficulty in his own wisdom, and gets down into Egypt, what does he do ? Constantly fails in comparatively small things. Once in a wrong position, one which *we have chosen*, and how weak are we ! Faith knows

no little things. Faith discerns our own weakness so clearly, that it sees that nothing less than the power of God can enable us to overcome in anything. So that faith never makes light of danger, for it knows what we are; just as, on the other hand, faith never faints at the danger, because it knows what God is. This true estimate of our weakness and peril always gives a chastened tone to the confidence of faith. Measuring ourselves by our foes, what do we appear? "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but *against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*" (Eph. vi.) And what are *we* compared with *such*? what our strength compared with theirs? "We were in our sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight!" "*Therefore, put on the whole armour of God.*" Thus does faith discover the reality of our own weakness, while it rests secure in the might of the Lord. Thus faith knows what the flesh is, though the flesh knows not itself; and consequently, he

who is strongest in faith will least glory in self. "When I am weak, then am I strong."

Thus it is here with David. He well knew that he was no match for Goliath. None need tell David that. David was not acting in pride of heart. Far from him was any thought of his own strength, when he saw the terrible giant of Gath. He felt himself to be less than either Eliab, or Saul, or Goliath thought him to be. Nevertheless, he could go forth in most perfect confidence. He knew that he should be delivered. Out of weakness he was made strong.

"And Saul said unto David, Go, and the Lord be with thee." Having said this, Saul clothes David in his own armour. "He put an helmet of brass upon his head; also he armed him with a coat of mail." Saul could *say*, "The Lord be with thee;" but Saul knew not how to trust in the Lord as David knew. He sought to arm David as Goliath was armed; he brought forth these his own carnal weapons. But these will not suit

the soldier of faith. The moment David had got Saul's armour on, he could not move at all. All was constraint ; all was effort. Now, beloved, there is no effort in faith. Whenever you and I are acting beyond our faith, we are conscious of effort, we are awkward. Wherever there is simple faith in the living God, we see saints go on quietly, easily, unobtrusively, and (it seems to me) victoriously. There is a happy liberty in the service which faith renders unto God, which no skill or effort of the flesh can assume ; and we must watch against mistaking effort for faith. There are *many* modes in which such effort is made to imitate the faith of others ; for example, to make sacrifices because another has made them, is *one* mode. I believe that all this is truly awful. Whenever there is real strength from the Lord, persons move on easily and quietly ; laying aside and relinquishing all other resources, because of what they have learnt in the cross.

“ And David said unto Saul, I cannot go *with these*, for I have not proved them.” David feared not to go, the *Lord*

being with him, as Saul had said ; but he could not go *with these also*. Faith never trusts in part to the Lord, and in part to man. David had no helmet of brass, no coat of mail, when he slew the lion and the bear ; *then* he went, the Lord alone being his strength. And, as he says, "The Lord delivered him." Just as Paul said, "No man stood with me" but "the Lord stood with me and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion." In like manner had David proved the faithful arm of the Lord, but Saul's armour he had never proved.

But how often have we clothed ourselves, or allowed ourselves to be clothed with such encumbrances, without detecting at once, as David did, their unfitness, and casting them from us. Have we not often worn them complacently ; yea, gone forth to fight in them ? Have we not often acted as though God's work needed help by this or that form of human power ; as though what was begun in the Spirit could be made perfect by the flesh ? and therefore we have had to learn our folly and unbelief, in our discomfiture and

loss. But it was not so with David here. He instantly detects that the wrought and polished armour of Saul befits not the soldier of faith. The word of Saul was good, but that word was belied by such arming as this. And I believe that those with whom God deals much in secret will be like David here; they will quickly, intuitively, as it were, discern and reject the advances of the flesh. They will thus distinguish between the precious and the vile. There will be an acuteness of spiritual *sense* (Phil. i. 9) in such, which is acquired nowhere but in direct communion with God. And hence, when out among the snares and wiles of the foe, if a film pass for a moment over the eye of their faith, and so a false object attract them, its falseness will be *felt*, even when not *seen*. Thus it is here with David. He stands a moment, indeed, to put on the whole armour of Saul; but just when Saul must have thought him armed for the battle, David feels himself fettered and burdened. The world's most skilful aids are faith's surest hindrances.

“And David put them off him.” Thus does faith strip itself of all carnal weapons. For faith stands entirely in the power of God. Now our learning this is often the hardest part of our lesson ; that which we most slowly learn, and soonest forget. But if we knew more of secret dealing with God, we should much more speedily rid ourselves of all carnal weapons. The soul which, like David, has been much exercised in secret before God, knows the utter worthlessness of every thing but God’s own strength. And having thus learnt this blessed lesson, it readily casts off those things which the flesh so esteems as aids, and feels itself set free by their loss. How far more blessed this way of learning the flesh, and denying it, than any other. But for want of such direct living before God, we have to learn this in painful discipline, and after many failures ; and it is the hardest part of our discipline to be stripped of those things which by habit and education we have all thought necessary ; to stand aloof from modes of action in which, after the manner of

Saul, the name of the Lord and human authority, or human wisdom, are combined; such combinations, often called judicious and useful, are most delusive and dangerous. How do we see the apostle rejoicing to count all those things esteemed by men loss for the sake of Christ. Why was not this a hard thing to him? How could he thus thoroughly renounce and put from him these things? He had learnt to "*rejoice in Christ Jesus;*" to be "*strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might.*"

Remember therefore, beloved, that he who has much to do with God in secret *cannot use these carnal weapons.* And surely this should show us the importance of coming forth from the presence of the living God into all our service; that we may be thus prepared to detect and to mortify all the pretensions and advances of the flesh. For it is sad indeed, through want of this, to see a saint trying to fight in the Lord's name, but clothed in the world's armour. Thus the world obtains a place in the church. Its principles and its powers are recog-

nized in the very place where God has written, "Love not the world." "All that is in the world is not of the Father." "The friendship of the world is enmity with God."

This is often done in controversy. Argument is met by argument, instead of the simple use of the word of the Lord; Saul's helmet of brass and coat of mail, instead of the sling and the stone, and the arm of faith, are opposed to Goliath's brass and mail. How often does the Lord vindicate His own word when used in faith, carrying it with divine power to the heart. And how often does He humble us by showing us how little our strong arguments avail, save it be to stir up heats and strife. The Lord in all this make us more simple.

But David goes not forth unarmed to the fight, though he casts from him the armour of Saul. He took his staff, the five smooth stones in his shepherd's scrip, and his sling; thus armed, he drew nigh to the Philistine. (v. 40.) Thus he strips himself of one sort of armour, only to

array himself in another. But what simple armour is this? If David overcomes Goliath with this, surely the victory must be the Lord's. This armour was never wrought by art and man's device; the running brook had given these stones their smoothness. But faith is always thus armed. The armour of faith, therefore, is always weak and foolish in the eyes of men. God's mightiest victories have been won by instrumentality which man has most despised. The foolishness of preaching (a foolish thing in itself, and a foolish subject, Christ crucified) man treats with disdain; yet it is "the power of God, and the wisdom of God." Preaching has ever been as foolish as David's sling. But what we want is much more of such simplicity; remembering that we have the truth of God to address to men's consciences. We have weapons "mighty through God," if we had only simple faith to trust to them alone, rejecting the armour of human energy, wisdom, and authority.

"And the Philistine came on, and drew

near unto David." (*v.* 41.) And disdain-
ing David and his armour, Goliath says,
"Am I a dog, that thou comest to me
with staves?" Remember this, beloved,
that the flesh always thinks itself in-
sulted, because our weapons are not such
as itself uses.

The flesh likes to see sword opposed
to sword, helmet against helmet; the
flesh loves its own. But David said,
"Thou comest to me with a sword, and
with a spear, and with a shield: but I
come to thee in the name of the Lord of
hosts, the God of the armies of Israel,
whom thou hast defied." Thus David
puts the question on its true basis. It
is now simply a question between the
Lord of hosts and the Philistine. David
puts David quite out of the question, and
brings God Himself in as the antagonist
of Goliath.

Thus should it always be with us.
What are we? What is the foe? It
matters not what we are, or what is the
power of the foe; it signifies not however
mighty the one, or weak the other; will
not God vindicate His own name? David

came in the name of the Lord of hosts ; and will not God be jealous of His own name ? Will He allow the Philistine to triumph over that ? Never ! Here then is the might of faith. Faith always brings in Omnipotence. “If God be for us, who can be against us ?” is ever the word of faith.

Now David had never stood thus at this hour if he had not learnt God as his God in secret. Therefore could he say, “Let no man’s heart fail because of him ;” and therefore could he thus meet Goliath. The name of the Lord must be our strength against every evil, whether without or within. Suppose the worst kind of evil, sin by a saint (and I trust that we all know that sin in a saint is far worse than sin in another), and what is our refuge ? “For thy *name’s sake*, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity, for it is great.” You have only to put God in remembrance of His own name, and He will be jealous for that name. Thus faith can always use the name of the Lord as its strength against every foe. So that instead of there being pride in David’s

heart here, he was shrinking himself into nothing, and making God everything. His most confident words are his most humble ones. And is it not the name of Jesus that we have to set against every thing—against every trial, every anxiety, every enemy? Is it not this which God is teaching many souls in secret now? Leading them into a sense of pollution and weakness they never knew before—into trial they never knew before, in order that they may know the value of what they have in the cross? Not as though they had got everything, but to *prove this in them and unite them.*

Thus many are proving experimentally what redemption is, by being made to feel the necessity of such an almighty friend as God. God is thus in secret now instructing many souls in the value of the cross. And why? In order that they may be strong in the conflict.

And living before God in secret will ever make us act, if I may so speak, on the aggressive. This is remarkable in David. He says (*vv.* 46, 48), “This day will the Lord deliver thee into my hand ;

and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee ; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel." And David hasted and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine. David tarried not, faltered not ; but instantly used his simple arms, and smote his foe to the earth. (v. 49.) "So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and smote the Philistine, and slew him ; but *there was no sword in the hand of David.*" (vv. 50, 51.)

It was not, then, that David merely waited to be attacked, but he hasted, and ran to meet the Philistine. The confession of the name of the Lord proceeds most powerfully from us, when we have learnt in secret the value of that name. Then grace and wisdom are often given, even to act aggressively against evil. But surely we have learnt how much grace, how much of Christ, it really requires to stand in testimony against evil. How do we fail in this for lack of more cultivated communion with God. Mark how calmly and deliberately, though instantly, David took the stone. There

was no show of effort. It was done just as though he had been in the wilderness, with no eye upon him but God's. And the Lord directed that stone, just as He had enabled him to overcome both the lion and the bear.

Thus David prevailed; and thus does faith ever prevail. I believe that at this present moment there is much opportunity for such service of faith; but power for it must be sought by secret living before God. Then, whatsoever service our hand finds to do, we shall be enabled to do it in God's strength. If a saint be greatly blessed of the Lord in public, we may be sure God has been dealing with him in secret, in a way we had not supposed. But how often, after a Christian has been signally used in service, do we see him failing in some comparatively little matter. Such failure too often comes from forgetfulness of that injunction: "PRAY to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly."

O LORD, Thy love's unbounded—
So sweet, so full, so free—
My soul is all transported,
Whene'er I think on Thee.

Yet, Lord, alas! what weakness
Within myself I find,
No infant's changing pleasure
Is like my wandering mind.

And yet Thy love's unchanging,
And doth recall my heart
To joy in all its brightness,
The peace its beams impart.

Yet sure, if in Thy presence
My soul still constant were,
Mine eye would, more familiar,
Its brighter glories bear.

And thus Thy deep perfections
Much better should I know,
And with adoring fervour
In this Thy nature grow.

Still sweet 'tis to discover,
If clouds have dimmed my sight,
When passed, Eternal Lover,
Towards me, as e'er, Thou 'rt bright.

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