

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 8 -

THE FEAR OF THE CASTAWAY

In 'CARDIPHONIA' the difference is discussed between our acquired and our experimental knowledge, or, in other words, between our judgment and our practice. To hear a believer speak his apprehensions of the evil of sin, the vanity of the world, the love of CHRIST, the beauty of holiness, or the importance of eternity, who would not suppose him proof against TEMPTATION? To hear with what strong arguments he can recommend watchfulness, prayer, forbearance, and submission, when he is teaching or advising others, who would not suppose but he could also teach himself, and influence his own conduct? Yet, alas! The person who rose from his knees, before he left his chamber, a poor indigent, fallible, dependent creature, who saw and acknowledged that he was unworthy to breathe the air or to see the light, may meet with many occasions, before the day is closed, to discover the corruptions of his heart, and to show how weak and faint his best principles and clearest convictions are in their actual exercise. And in this view, how vain is man! What a contradiction is a believer to himself!

- John Newton, *The Utterance of the Heart*.

THROUGHOUT THE LIFE and ministry of the best of men this pernicious and harrowing insinuation or threat hangs over like a dark and ominous cloud. Why this should be must remain a mystery in the bundle of life, except that a man confesses in his secret thoughts that he is unworthy at the best and an unprofitable servant. And this is felt to be so in view of the final reckoning. For **"it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."** What if we have too readily accepted the well-known passage from Paul as "a text out of its context" - **"lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway"** (I Corinthians 9:27)?

The context indicates that there is no thought of the loss of or the rejection from the salvation wrought for us in CHRIST. It is the theme of service which is under review. As in a race one receives the prize-outstripping others - so there are those who are rejected or disproved. The Apostle thinks of that dread possibility at the last, when our service is weighed in the balances and perchance found wanting. Rewards are in view, and quality of service - **"of what sort it is"** - is decisive. No wonder that sensitive souls have smarted under the introspective imaginings of their own possible rejection at the last! It was this which challenged Paul in the presence of sacrificial service. What, if at the last, he had laboured in the wrong spirit, misused God-given opportunities, and had become **"as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal"**? In this connection he points to the need of self-mastery and discipline and finds illustration in the life of his own day.

The Christian life is not unlike the life of an athlete, with its contest and striving, its race and persevering activity, its demand of training rules, so that we do not live "**uncertainly**" or minister "**[beating] the air**," rather finding that by strict dealing with all our appetites of body and mind we find fulness and maturity and fitness for the task. That is the only way to offset the fear of becoming a rejected man later. Utilizing the vocabulary and metaphor of his day, the Apostle cites from the background of the stadium and the Olympian Games, examples of the disciplined life which must be tested if it would triumph. Thus, "**And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway**" (I Corinthians 9:25-27). That is the genius of escaping the final cataclysm, a life overcoming those things which lead the soul into the shadow-land of uncertainty and doubt concerning the outcome of the final audit. It is well to look at some of those things.

Many good and true men are subject to seasons of depression. After the exhilaration and uplift of days of divine blessing and unction, there may come a day of physical and mental weariness to react upon the spirit of a man. Or the unresponsiveness of some of our hearers to the truth may cause us to imagine that we are always in the worst period of history for faith. We too readily become an Elijah - under the juniper tree - forgetting that we are not alone and that the ministry of the Word is safe when GOD has His faithful ones everywhere. If "virtue" - soul strength - goes out of us, if our ministry has caused us to bleed somewhat, then we need not be surprised at reactions. Should we expect anything else? To engage in spiritual work, with all its exhaustion of spirit, is to be exposed to the antagonism of evil. To carry the burdens of lives and the secrets of the soul in its struggle with sin, to enter into the harrowing experiences of the mentally and morally perplexed, and sometimes to be falsely accused of others, is to be open to days of melancholy, unless there is a lifting up by the Divine SPIRIT. In such a mood of the soul a man might really be afraid that he is not sufficient for the task and so fear lest his labour is in vain.

Or again, the possibility of drifting in the ministerial vocation is a reality. Day by day, we traffic in those ideals of life touching the basic and eternal. Standing in the holy place we are imperilled by familiarity and lose our sense of awe and reverence. A ship experiencing a breakdown in the engine room when the shaft snaps is one that drifts thereafter. It is not infrequently true of life. Often the fear of the castaway is caused by interior breakdown known only to the individual and not necessarily apparent from without. A moral slump is not unknown, as though a minister is unlike other men and is immune. Nothing is more pitiable than one who has drifted from high and holy ethical ideals of conduct to become as the flotsam and jetsam of life. The failure to dedicate and concentrate ourselves as a living sacrifice to CHRIST is the beginning of a life of drift. Prayerlessness and carelessness and casualness contribute to those quicksands and the reef whereon at last a ship is wrecked.

Sometimes a young life launching out in the service royal finds a rising tide and a gale upset a boat from her moorings, and a promising life is disillusioned and defeated. That has taken place in the would-be preacher or missionary when he has left a home of piety to face new temptations and tests in college or university associations permeated by a new world of philosophical thought and practice. The new social sphere is turbulent in its storm: test and demands upon well-

established standards of right, or the old paths of faith are rudely shocked by the blatant and defiant or the subtle uprising of that which challenges. Let a man of GOD be yielding and compromising in his ethical and intellectual honesty and he may well end as a drifter, without conviction. This life of drift is a peril and danger to others: a drifting iceberg lowers the temperature all around and is a warning to other ships. That life may be one of lesser loyalties, and soon one is far away from living in the power of saving faith. Thus, in 1 Kings 13: the younger man is led astray by the elder who comes with flattery and bribe. How damning is the description of the unnamed prophet: "**The man of God, who was disobedient!**" (1 Kings 13:26).

No wonder the drifter fears the end of the castaway. The damning word in this sort of life is may, but the decisive word in the life of our Lord is must. Only infinite grace can redeem a man in the ministry from the perfunctory and the unspirituality of such a way of living, which ought to be motivated by the spirit of the One who "**stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.**"

Another feature is that which confronted Nehemiah during the rebuilding of the wall of the Holy City. The story is familiar, but its setting is revived continually for those who are in GOD's service. We face the spirit of defeatism and criticism, the sneer, ridicule, and the innuendo against the preacher as though a minister were a strange species apart from human kind. The best intentions, the sincerest motives, and a sense of dedication are oftentimes imputed to base and unworthy ends. True, "**not many mighty, not many noble, are called**" (1 Corinthians 1:26-28), and a sensitive spirit is easily the prey to this kind of attack. Possibly it is not good that any work for GOD should be exempted from the sneer of a Sanballat. The contrast between the magnitude of the task and the littleness of the instrument for its accomplishment (in his view) is so striking that to the natural mind there is ground for derision.

It is no light thing to possess a conscience void of offence towards GOD and man. Misrepresentation may imperil a man's usefulness. Prejudice against holy living and action is still alive. Earnest zeal is called fanaticism, spiritual decision is labeled obstinacy, and nonconformity is put down as pride. Gossip, if hearkened to, is a pernicious channel to be used against the Gospel minister to muzzle his message. Intimidation may come with sedulous regularity to impinge upon spiritual resources. There is a place where a man must stand in his lot and refuse to flee from the high calling of GOD. Better to die in duty than to live in dishonour. To say 'no!' in the hour of solicitation is the way of moral victory. We need not flee from the task committed to us: to do so is to allow the brood of evil thoughts full sway which tempt and lure in whispering that we may become as the castaway.

Another danger leading to this catastrophe is spiritual fatigue. Our Lord said, "**Men ought always to pray and not to faint**" (Luke 18:1). These are the alternatives, "Fainting," i.e., "caving in through exhaustion" or "perseverance through spiritual renewal." To lose our grip on GOD and to lose the spontaneity and joy in His service is to become weary in well-doing. Is it that we are too busy and our activities keep us from concentrating upon the main business of the vocation? Oswald Chambers, that keen diagnostician of moral need, wrote:

"The natures that make the finest saints make also the most exhausted ones unless they keep true to the life 'hid with Christ in God.' Our peril is the exhaustion which results from the thousand and one interests and demands - often legitimate, but which side-track us from 'prayer, and to the ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4)"

We need to reduce these interests to the minimum, for if we are exhausted we may lapse into the mood that fears the end of the disqualified. We need not be worn out if we learn the secret of refreshment. The HOLY SPIRIT of GOD can endue us with a sense of what is vital.

We have all heard tales of the "stickit minister." There is a heart-felt story of one which has been laid bare by the *Early Letters of Marcus Dods*. This great soul spent a few years in the wilderness of a "no man's land" when he was unwanted by any church in Scotland. Enough to fill the soul with despair that after years of painstaking preparation for the ministry he should find himself rejected. Yet Dods refused to succumb to the temptation that he must be disqualified finally. He, therefore, continued his reading and studies privately, waiting for the opportunity which he believed would come in due time. And it did in a most unusual way, in that the Divine Architect was preparing the young man for a wide ministry beyond his dreams. GOD led him not by the shorter way of a settled charge, but by the wilderness of unsettlement and change, through discipline, to perfect the instrument to be a teacher and preacher to preachers. Have we anything in ministerial biography like those burning sentences from one who wrestled long within himself and who was likely to imagine he might become a castaway?

"I may preach this again, but these people will not hear it again - they are hearing these words but once - let them be so said as to fix and not need to be heard again." "They may possibly never hear any preaching again - I may possibly never preach again." . . . "Why am I preaching, what am I hoping to effect, am I listless or flippant in the utterance of what I hope will save men from eternal death?"

These words of Marcus Dods are a revelation of a tortured soul. But this is no unveiling of weakness. Very far from that. Here we have the disclosure of a mind far more sensitive than one imagined it to be, confronting a succession of mortifications and disappointments which, surely, never came before or since to a man so gifted. To the discouraged these letters of Dods must be read. How often are men disheartened by the lack of the popular recognition of their worth, or by the temptation to think that they have wandered from the path assigned to them, and are trying to fulfill duties for which they were never meant.

Paul's incessant fear was that he might run or labour in vain. Suppose his work should be burned up, and he should suffer loss in the final Day? Perhaps he feared that some mistake on his part would disqualify him from the "prize" and his work be in vain. Dr. F. B. Meyer speaks of *The Sacrificial Side of The Christian Life* in these terms:

"A very solemn enquiry is suggested to us all. Are we running in vain? Are we labouring in vain? Life is full of running to and fro, and incessant labour, but we may gravely ask whether at the end there will be aught to show commensurate with the energy we have expended. So many days are lived in vain! So many sermons preached in vain! So many books are written in vain! So many philanthropic activities expended in vain!"

It is, however, certain that before any service that we do for GOD or man is likely to be of lasting and permanent benefit, it must be saturated with our heart's blood. That which costs us nothing will not benefit others. If there is no expenditure of tears and prayer, if that love, of which the Apostle speaks in another place, which costs, is wanting, we may speak with the tongues of men and of angels, may know all mysteries and all knowledge, may bestow all our

goods to feed the poor, but it will profit nothing. Let us rather seek to be poured forth as a libation than to do much without feeling the least travail of soul. As the fertility of Egypt in any year is in direct proportion to the height that the waters of the Nile measure on the nilometer, so the amount of our real fruitfulness in the world is gauged by the expenditure of our spiritual force.

It was because Moses was prepared to be blotted from the Book of GOD for his people that he carried them for forty years through the desert and deposited them on the very borders of the Promised Land. It was because Paul was prepared to be accursed for his brethren according to the flesh that he was able to turn so many from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto GOD. It is when Zion travails that she brings forth her children. No heart pangs, no spiritual seed. The Christian life should be a sacrifice.

John Mark is a New Testament example of a would-be assistant minister who seemed to fall after a splendid beginning. Was it fear or ill-health or the threat of bodily danger? Was it cowardice and a haunting fear that he might fall and be rejected? How glad we are that he "made good" in the ministry and wrote for us that graphic, moving, and concise sketch of the supreme life and ministry. To be rejected after a testing experience is to uncover weaknesses and defects hitherto unnoticed. The first flush of enthusiastic enlistment is followed by the searching test. Every student is tested by the examination, the soldier by the fight, and CHRIST's servants by temptation. The temptation to surrender to worldly forces is very real, but should such a man as the preacher flee?

Plato said, "An unexamined life is not worth living." Such scrutiny of character is a testimony to the essential worth of life. If an athlete neglected the training and the dietary rules of the games, he would find out his lack and he would be found out, too. Ten months training seemed a long time of preparation to run a race lasting a few minutes or even an hour, but the goal was that which mattered most. So in the ministry of divine unfoldings we dare not allow the erosion of constant fear of man to break down that which is vital to godliness and spiritual affluence. That is the way of decay, and a day comes when there is an awakening to the shadow of the end of the one who is excluded from divine approbation.

Others have found life intolerable and a burden by reason of what Paul describes as "**a thorn in the flesh.**" Many explanations have been proffered, and each is salutary until we discover our own peculiar trial and affliction. It speaks of a handicap or obstacle impeding progress, and if this is the way of stumbling for some it is possible to find grace to rise above and proceed in the calling of GOD. There are variations and limitations in knowledge, wisdom, abilities, gifts, physical endowments, and spiritual insights, but these should not lure a man to think he is to be measured by other men and thus lose heart. To GOD we stand or fall.

Paul, indeed, catalogued many things of pricking and goading, experienced in his full life as missionary and pastor. Hear him in II Corinthians 11:23-33, as he relates his labours, imprisonments, persecutions, physical sufferings and privations, dangers at sea and on land, the perils and hazards through sleepless nights, hunger and thirst, coldness and infirmity, and all the rest of it. And then there is the pressing business of each day, the care of all the churches. That was the greatest burden of all - his anxious, sympathetic care of the people of GOD, who needed the generous and sacrificial service of this Greatheart. If any man felt weak at times it was Paul.

He passed through the crucible of smarting and squirming under the lash of those situations wherein the leader is the centre of humiliation and buffeting. In such a state, when he felt insufficient for the task, he might have dreamed of an hour when all his service would appear as nothing under the great Taskmaster's eye. But the grace of GOD was abundant, and so he endured.

Everyone who is ever tempted to picture that last accounting, with its dire threat of disqualification in service, does well to ponder that master of the heart, Paul. The correction for a castaway possibility is the overwhelming conviction that "**we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ**" (II Corinthians 5:10). In that light we work and serve now, so that the honest, sincere, and dedicated spirit need not fear that snare of the castaway. We should gird up the loins of our mind and endure as seeing Him who is invisible, with whom we have to do.

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