

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 14 -

THE MERIDIAN TEST

"SIMON, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." - Luke 22:31,32.

"He whose name is Legion is at our doors deceiving our intellects with subtlety, and flattering our hearts with beauty; and we have no trust but in Thee." - Mark Rutherford.

"I humbly bless His gracious Providence, who gave me His Treasure in an Earthen Vessel, and trained me up in the School of affliction, and taught me the Cross of CHRIST so soon; that I might be rather Theologus Crucis, as Luther speaketh than Theologus Glorise; and a Cross-bearer than a Cross-maker or Imposer." - Richard Baxter.

He who would accomplish anything must limit himself. The man who would lead others must himself be capable of renouncing . . . the only life that for us human beings can be perfect is the life that is 'dedicated.' I mean by the expression 'dedicated life' one that is with all its strength concentrated on a high purpose . . ." - Viscount Haldane.

AT NO TIME of life are we tempted more than in middle age. What that period is each man finds out for himself, for the time is not that of the clock or calendar but the state of the soul. Midlife overtakes some earlier than others, and no one can chart the period with exact chronology for every man. **"The destruction that wasteth at noonday"** (Psalm 91:6) is the meridian test of the ministry. The time comes when there is a slackening of effort in the momentum of service. A lassitude comes on apace and the struggle has begun. Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University, says, "If a man's curve of efficiency is ascending at 45, and keeps on ascending just after that period, it may well move upward for his whole life; but if there is a turn downward at 45, he will never recover." What is true in the observation of the mental powers of life is wholly true of the moral and spiritual state of the preacher.

Physically, like all men, there is a subtle change taking place and not every man can maintain the strenuous habits of youth. His mead of exercise is generally less violent and the appeal of the easy chair more insistent. Mentally, this finds approbation without difficulty and a sluggishness of mind is experienced. There is nothing to stop it except discipline! This temptation strikes at the peripatetic preacher whose round of engagements makes him an easy prey as well as the man in his third or fourth pastorate. Without disciplined habits of study and constant reading, a man

repeats what is no longer fresh and vital. The old sermons need to be recast and relived, but that may not always be apparent in the pulpit. The mind finds enjoyment in reading lighter works, but is no longer zestful in the approach to the more serious textbooks which appear year after year. The library ceases to grow by non-selection, and so the mind reclines in the comfortable ambit of the ephemeral and passing output of the second rate.

Spiritually, it is a time when there is the tendency to live on past experience. The period of enthusiasm for the ideal and the untraversed way is past, and now the steady gait of constant reiteration of truth sometimes has a benumbing effect. The conscience is no longer wide-awake and the spiritual appetite for truth is often satiated. All the perils of the holy place are familiarized, until we do not feel keenly the wonder of the eternal things. We are no longer startled by suffering; no more shocked by sorrow; and not easily shamed by sin. There is no more deadly and insidious condition of soul than the dread ease in which we proceed to our tasks, unmoved.

Think of the young, untried, theological student proceeding to his first funeral service. No more trying ordeal awaits anyone. To most good men the contact with suffering and sorrow means the unloosing of a tenderness of speech and a compassionate heart. The snare of the noonday is that we are not now moved with compassion because we have recited the same words a hundred times or have become calloused in soul through the loss of spiritual identity with those who are in need. Without divine love our speech is empty and void. Sensitiveness may give way to satiety and compassion to coldness. Then our prayers lose their spirit because of our occupational disease and our preaching loses urgency and vehemence as we lose sight of the horror of sin.

Another soul-destroying blight of this period is the lack of resiliency to anything opposing our convictions. There are those whose lips are sealed in private and in public through linking themselves to the associations of men who do not belong to the church. One of our modern dangers is the substitution of social religions and humanitarian clubs for New Testament Christianity. The minister who belongs to outside societies pays a price. Loyalty to the tenets and practices of the society may run counter to that of the church and conscience. Boldness in speaking without the fear of any face and without circumlocution is a New Testament quality, and happy is the man who is not tempted to tactful silence when principles are involved. Who has not known the words that were half-alive and cold because fear had settled upon the spirit? He who is free in spirit is bold with the courage of the Spirit of GOD. A lowered morale is a danger of mid-life.

The false prophets of Old Testament days serve us as warning when we know our own peril in our contacts with the world. There will always be a demand for smooth things and an appropriate reward for him who is willing to supply them in the name of religion. The snare of popularity is fraught with traps for the unwary. If the truth is having effect upon mind and conscience there will be a corresponding return of devotion to and trust in us who are the under-shepherds of the flock, but there are those who will endanger our spiritual influence through a lowered standard which does not disturb the conscience.

It is inevitable that we shall mingle with those who are influential, wealthy, well-educated, and powerful in the community. Here we need much grace and holy boldness to stand firm for all that we count dear in our vocation. No one discounts the aid and devotion and stewardship of

those who are of the "mighty and noble of the world" in their friendship and service in the church. But it is not unknown that an individual may love power and wield an influence through these worldly aids. The temptation to simony in Acts 8 (in the story of Simon) is one that Peter resisted. A man seeking office in the church in return for money is a temptation to the preacher and also to the layman. The church's history is marked by such a peril. The invasion of the spiritual by the carnal, of mammon worship and the seeking of power for personal ends, is observed in middle life. Flattery and fawning on the part of the so-called "big" man may produce an uneasy conscience and a devitalized holy life.

It is a necessity for the man of GOD to fear no face but the face of GOD, for there is a dark line in GOD's face towards any besetting sin, whether of vanity or compromise. There are few things more touching or instructive than the entries in Thomas Chalmers' *Journal*, which show with what earnestness he was praying against this danger in the height of his popularity. A defective dedication of heart is sensed where there is the bleating of the sheep (I Samuel 15). In truckling to the spirit of the age, the moral sense may be drugged and a trifling spirit betray itself in view of pernicious disloyalty.

When a man's interests seem to be the pursuit of numbers, buildings, organizations and other utilitarian considerations, he may well question his state of heart if he ever wishes to promote spirituality these days. The spirit of the age will induce us to conform to the status quo of an unspirituality of mind. We should be utterly unafraid of public opinion, social disapproval, and personal loss; and to refuse to conform may be the way of an intrepid proclamation of truth. Expediency and evasion are not for us.

William Robertson Nicoll thus speaks plainly about such equivocation: "*The apostasy of churches always creeps on apace when priests and prophets, afraid of malediction, and afraid of imperilling their worldly interests become cowards, opportunists, and time-servers, and, not daring to speak out the truth that is in them, suffer the cause of spirituality and righteousness to go by default.*" The man of GOD must be courageous.

Internal breakdown of morale is an uncommon experience of men of GOD. No one goes lightly into the ministry, and moral standards are higher than any other vocation. The "school of the prophets" has always insisted upon an ethic which is above reproach. But a moral slump has been witnessed in a few casualties caused by playing with fire.

The theological student who reveals certain tendencies to this opening of temptation is the one who is not careful in his friendships. Because of the sheltered nature of his vocation, the young man is brought into touch with those of the other sex in home and in church. During student days a flirtatious spirit is no preparation for the ministry and marriage, and is fraught with peril as a man moves towards the noon-day of life. How often has a student left saddened and disappointed lives of the fairer sex behind him because of the speciousness of his promises and the insincerity of his intentions. Here is the place for the Christian gentleman. Every theological student and all pastors, bachelor or married, should scrupulously watch his behaviour in any friendships or contacts with the women of our congregations. The speech must be noble and clean, the relationship friendly without being too free, and the service together a partnership devoid of the sordid.

A man set apart for the high calling of GOD in the ministry can afford to wait GOD's time and

choice for that most sacred commitment of marriage. When GOD gives a call and sense of vocation, He is able also to give to man the right guidance in the selection of the partner worthy and fit to share the home of a man of GOD. There are those who have been spoiled through marriages of convenience or worldly wisdom. Let the young man see that there are those who went ahead of GOD and now reap the harvest of conduct not in keeping with the divine vocation. A man's wife may make or break him in the ministry. There is no more important choice to be made in life than the choice of a God-given partner sharing the same spiritual convictions and ideals. And, generally, the theological curriculum does not include a seminar on this subject!

Pastoral visitation and pastoral counseling afford opportunities when temptations can arise for the unsuspecting pastor. There is one valid and safe procedure in such an extremity. When asked to share the burdens and problems of another life, especially that of a woman, it is wise not to linger upon details or begin to relate our own experience of life. Rather turn quickly to the Bible for a reading to be sanctified in prayer. In this way the other mind will be turned away from any desire to intrude upon the pastor's inner life and the pastor will be fortified against temptation. Spiritual Wisdom is necessary, and we must avoid any injudicious conduct in our desire to be helpful and kind.

Mid-life brings into focus the most difficult and acute subject of temptation. This is a hard subject and there are those who have never been so tempted while in the pastorate. But a few have made shipwreck through carelessness and the destruction that wasteth at noon-day. King David's tragedy of ease and slackness opened the door to solicit the forbidden, until the lure and seduction of a Bathsheba was irresistible. If David is to be condemned, and justly, let us remember that once in a while a Bathsheba may be temptress. Not that the insurgence of sex should be excused or overlooked as non-important, but that no man should be behind in discipline and self-denial and self-control through the HOLY SPIRIT. Not every one can speak of these matters with sanity and rightness, yet with restraint. Dr. F. B. Meyer had earned that right through discipline, and a doctor who came to him in the grip and passion of sex temptation relates that in helping him to victory, Meyer drew aside the curtain of his own life in self-revelation. His face was transfigured, and looking upward, he said with intense fervour, "I have had a cross to bear in my life, and it has made me the man I am."

There may be a night-time in the secret recesses of the heart. It requires the night to reveal the stars. The darkness of confused temptation may be the inevitable condition of revelation and understanding of purity's strength. The noblest of men who are unsullied by the scorching flame of impurity are those whose integrity of life speaks of an antiseptic spirituality, who carried no odorous fragrance of habit or indulgence with them. "**Be ye clean, that bear the vessels of the Lord,**" said Isaiah. This is not to be confused with an unbalanced view of the holy life. Holiness of life is experimental and sane through obedience to the will and commandments of GOD. But this is not claiming to be free from all sin.

The story of Robert Pearsall Smith, as told by his son in *Unforgotten Years*, is a warning to those who ignore the plain teaching of Scripture and the treachery of the heart. Dr. B. B. Warfield, of Princeton, wrote that "there is nothing more dramatic in the history of modern Christianity than the record of this 'Higher Life Movement'" of which Pearsall Smith was the leader near the end of the last century. We learn "that nature, in one of her grossest economies, has placed the seats of spiritual and amorous rapture so close to each other that one of them is very likely to arouse

the other." Pearsall Smith had said to select gatherings of spinsters of a certain age that the "Higher Life" could be imparted by the salutation of "a holy kiss." When those who indulged with him in this intimacy became jealous, there was scandal. Honest souls seeking after a richer spiritual life were stunned and shocked, and the world without pointed the finger of condemnation at Smith and those who were associated with him. Whatever the intentions of this good man, his indiscretions of conduct with the other sex sealed forever his public ministry.

In the presence of these temptations we are not unmindful that even the grosser, fleshly appeal may assail us. The coarse may stab us as well as the spiritual and refined, and sin is sin. There is one thing difficult to say concerning our relationship with the women of the congregation and yet it must be said. We see and talk with them about spiritual problems as doctors deal with physical complaints. It is known that a delinquent clergyman is an exception. But we face the same moral difficulties as other men. Because of the reserved nature of our task and our seemingly sheltered life, such temptations occasionally are thrice-heated. In comparison with other walks of life, the record is high in its moral integrity and purity.

"I would be true, for there are those who trust me;
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare."

That is the secret of moral strength when this peril comes.

The man in the ministry must be told early, and be reminded occasionally, of the potentially tragic dangers emanating from his fellowship with women in the church. The Marys and Marthas and Lydias are in the church, but once in a while a Jezebel finds coverage. Our peril is in the unthinking, good-intentioned service we might proffer in the pastoral relation. It is a delicate subject, but enough has been suggested to show that it is decisive for a man to keep his moral standards high and never have a breath of suspicion exhaled anywhere concerning his conduct in this regard. Happy the man who is married and has his own understanding wife and children calling out his affection and love as a safeguard. We need not fall to the level of becoming the "women's parson" or allow presents from those who are attracted to our ministry to imply a closer relationship. The complementary relation of the sexes can be expressed in mental and spiritual appreciation of each other.

Consider the life of the Apostle Paul, who reveals an ethical nature trained in a strict school. After his conversion and entrance upon the sacred calling he laid bare unreservedly the sins of the past; but there was no confession of those dalliances with the flesh into which soft and self-indulgent natures easily fall. He could never have allowed himself that which would have robbed him of his self-respect. His sense of honour was keen. The darker sins of life found him with a conscience void of offence before GOD and man. If Paul is an example, the names of Lot, Saul, David and Solomon are beacons of warning. And Macbeth and Iago are the middle-aged wrecks of Shakespeare's fertile mind, each warning us against this destruction that wasteth at noon-day. When youth is past, we may be overcomers of every trial and offset the erosion of character, and as Enoch "**walked with GOD**," so can we.

The waste at noon-day attacks all men, and wise is he who is vigilant and prayerful. Sin is sin

and we who speak about it to others may be taken unawares if we minimize its power.

"A sin is a small and delicate thing
At first; it scarcely raises its head;
It creeps where the dust and shadows cling;
It fears the heel that may bruise and tread.

"And then the swift metamorphosis,
Out of sound, out of sight,
From larva to hard, cold chrysalis
And then the winged, silent thing bold in the light!

"The great soft moth that doth confound
- So fair and delicate to see!
And in corruption bring to ground
Strength, wisdom, and integrity."

The gossamer thread of this temptation appalls a Paul, whereas an Esau is not moved, except it be gross and vulgar. To recognize the possibility of such confusion which brings the corruption of our best powers is a sure way to fortify the mind and spirit against the temptation.

There is another discovery we shall make in the midstream of our life work. The apparent danger - to many is not that we will turn into criminals or blackguards, that we will wreck our life and shame our family or church. There are not many black sheep in the flock. The danger is that we become respectable, decent, commonplace, uninteresting mediocrities. If our minds are becoming sterile and anaemic and our hearts cold and dead, it is because we have lost our passion for the Lord and the things pertaining to His Kingdom. In the meridian of life the mind and spirit may die long before the body. We are dead when we cease to grow in grace and in knowledge. The demand for youthful preachers to-day is not unfair when it is the wish for the minister to be a student of divinity all his days and not a wish to examine his birth certificate. The growing preacher will never lack for opportunities to minister, and happy is he who in mid-life is still drinking from the fountain of the New Testament.

To save a life from failure is to save a soul from death. Let a man find the perennial secret of when this temptation overtakes him and he will move forward to the last span of life and ministry with powers unabated in strength. When the winter time comes, there should be richness and mellowness of character, producing power and influence in the community. No man's work need end in a long drift of gloom, but the light that never was on sea or land should fall upon life and service to the end. If there has been apparent lack of success throughout life, let the closing period be rededicated to the happy acceptance of the will of GOD, so that all bitterness is cast out. It may be that comparatively few find their dreams fulfilled. The vast majority have to content themselves with humble aims, slow advancement, a seemingly uninteresting career, and a nameless memory. Little worldly success is given the preacher, and we could bear but little, anyway. Wise is the man who does not repine or become bitter in spirit, but exultantly goes forward expecting the autumn and latter rain to come in a new splendour unknown in youth.

"Teach us, Good Lord, to serve Thee as Thou deservest: to give and not to count the cost: to

fight and not to heed the wounds: to toil and not to seek for rest: to labour and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do Thy will."

In the period when disillusionment may overtake us we should be prepared to search our hearts in the presence of the Lord. "**Thou hast set . . . our secret sins in the light of thy countenance . . . So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom**" (Psalm 90:8, 12). The extraordinary capacity of the mind for self-deception must be remembered. A true self-knowledge is necessary. We should discover tendencies and know our sentiments. Endless opportunities for that deadliest form of hypocrisy, self-deception, abound. There is vanity posing as dignity; priggishness, as self-respect; self-pity, as the result of overwork and the temptation to hurry about; meanness or slovenliness, as asceticism; moral cowardice, or worldliness, as being all things to all men; in sincerity, as humility. Who among us can say that these and similar rationalizations find no place in his own life?

No one should object to criticism. Using a sword himself, the pastor should not be surprised if men wield a rapier blade to his own discomfort and hurt. Isn't it true that many have abused the privilege of entering the ministry? Qualifications for the sacred office are in question when our fellows look at those who presume to speak in the name of the Eternal. And rightly so, for there are those who give the impression that GOD discredits reason and discipline, whereas we know full well that GOD never called a fool to preach. The ministry of the Word does not provide a couch for lazy bones and limp minds; it offers, instead, a yoke, thorns, and a cross. Thus Henry Ward Beecher testified to one great truth in riper years, that much as he owed to himself, he owed still more to his enemies. His friends never saw his faults, and if his enemies exaggerated them, nevertheless, they compelled him to see them.

Because of the insidious peril of temptation in middle life we may find help in noting how Paul dwells again and again on personal character as one of the deepest essentials of the minister of CHRIST. "**Let no man despise thy youth.**" How? By asserting claims? That would be a poor way. There is a great difference between demanding and commanding respect. Not for ourselves, but for our Lord and Master we are to earn an honest attention by commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of GOD. We are sure to be watched; so we are required to take care in loyalty to the law of CHRIST. By setting this before us for CHRIST's sake we shall become examples to the flock. And we should never forget that we are being watched by those who are contemptuous of, and antagonistic to, the Christian faith. 1 Timothy 4:12 speaks of the example "**in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.**"

To come to terms with ourselves is the real issue in times of temptation, for there is no greater need than the stainless life. We need the Almighty Keeper. The devil is always lying in wait. But the Lord is near and ready to be our Master and reveal His mastery through us over sin. This is the way to full self-control and the achievement of Christlikeness of character. If we spare ourselves we shall falter and fall. It is impossible to be our best at the supreme moment if character is corroded and eaten into by daily inconsistency, unfaithfulness, and besetting sin.

There is nothing more certain than the ability of our Lord and Master to assist us in moments of temptation. When we see ourselves in His light we understand. During the last war a soldier picked up on the battlefield a battered frame which had once contained a picture of JESUS. The picture had gone but the frame still bore the words Ecce Homo. He sent it home as a souvenir,

and someone put a mirror in it, and hung it on the wall. One day a man went into that house and read the startling words, Behold the Man, and saw himself. Is not this parabolic? The servant of GOD sees only himself when he sees himself in CHRIST JESUS. Then - the blots and stains, the weaknesses and petty things which trip us up, and the bias toward certain sins. It is then we are startled at the heinousness of these temptations and posit unceasing vigilance lest we stumble and fall.

"When evil thoughts molest,
With this I shield my breast
May JESUS CHRIST be praised!"

In His steps we follow, to find that "**though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered.**" We shall realise the need of a perpetually renewed act of self-giving and dedication with all the courage and generosity of which the self is capable in CHRIST.

"Look out to GOD,
Love His glory,
Hate yourself,
And be simple,
And you will shine,
Fortunately without knowing it
Or thinking of it,
With a Christlike splendour,
Wherever you go
And whatever you do."

- F. W. Faber.

In discussing the temptation to deterioration in character we are not unmindful of the manifold avenues by which men are prone to fall. Life is like the sea; there are depths and shallows, fair and foul weather, calm and storm, ebb and flow. There are also mists and fog, tradewinds and warm breezes blowing, shipwrecks and derelicts, lurking icebergs and coral reefs out of sight. But there is also the charted course of those who have suffered and overcome, and the wisdom of CHRIST's Gospel, and the flaming ardour of His love. As wise navigators we shall take soundings of those deeps of the moral life and chart our course by the sun. We must keep in touch with the Interpreter's House to have the truth authenticated to us by the Spirit of GOD. Then the moral quality of our lives will certify our communion with GOD and reveal in obedience the will of GOD for us. As we overcome in the fight, a holy life will gain the hearts of men, and holiness of living will pass into genius for reaching those for whose souls we wait. Also, the parasitism of unbelief and doubt will be crushed and a strong faith will overcome the deadening effect of the continuous round of duties wrapped up in our vocation.

"The Master said, 'Come, follow' -
That was all.
Earth's joys grew dim,
My soul went after Him;
I rose and followed

That was all.
Will you not follow if you hear His call?"

In this way we crucify the cowardly thing, the softness that would sink to things below, self-pity, dullness, selfishness, failure. Surely the fight is worth while to keep our ideals and vision where CHRIST has pointed.

"When the fight begins within himself
a man's worth something.
GOD stoops o'er his head, Satan looks
up between his feet - both tug
He's left, himself, i' the middle:
the soul wakes and grows."

- Browning

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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