

BACK TO BETHEL

Separation from Sin, and Fellowship with GOD

by

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"Old Testament Heroes," "Meet for the Master's Use," etc.

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CHAPTER SIX

THE STRONG MAN ARMED

Luke 11:21, 22: "When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace. But when a stronger than he shall come upon him and overcome him, he taketh from him all his armor wherein he trusted, and divideth his spoils."

I want to tell you the story of a house of which I know something, for I have lived in one of the same pattern for many years. It consists of three stories. It is of magnificent appearance. Some say it was built as the palace of a king, there is so much splendor and embellishment, though some of the rooms are tawdry now.

The lower story is most occupied. There is at the far end the kitchen, in which the inmate spends a considerable amount of time. Next to that is the drinking saloon. Next to that the narcotic room, which is filled with drugs of one kind and another. Next to that the recreation or amusement room. Behind that is the sleeping room, and behind that again a room which is generally closed and blinded, because things are done there in secret of which, the apostle says, it is a shame even to speak.

Above this is another tier of rooms. The first on the right is called the room of archives, for there sits a scribe, always at work recording the past. Next to that is the library, or thought room, but the books that line the shelves of that library are mostly dummies. There is the outward appearance of a book, but within there is little or nothing but empty pages, or foolish or impure stories. Next comes the imagination room, in which a painter is always embellishing the walls with magnificent creations of his fancy, but as quickly as they are finished they are erased, and he begins his work again. Next to that is the room of friendship and love, which is surrounded by the portraits of men and women and little children. Beyond that the bullion room, where a machine is kept for turning out money day and night.

I want for a moment to speak about the rooms on the third floor, which are not often used.

The center one is magnificently appareled in satin and gold. It contains a throne, which I am afraid in many houses is covered with dust and stains. Indeed the whole room shows signs of neglect, and is filled with dust and cobwebs. On one side is the hall of judgment, in which great decisions are made. On the other side is the hall of conscience, surrounded by mirrors and glasses, and in these a man may see himself reflected at any angle and on every side. At the far end there is a room called the room of hope, which looks over a river to a city far away, apparently in cloudland a sort of observatory. On the other side is a chapel, a place prepared for worship, for high and holy service.

It is said that this house was built by a great king for his own residence, and indeed his monogram is still to be seen, though in many cases it has been sadly spoiled and worn. But his prime minister or one of his chief servants, having a controversy with his master, threw off his authority, broke into this palace, and has appropriated it for himself.

I need not tell you that I have been holding up a looking glass to yourself. You are the house, with the three stories of your nature, the lower one, the body; the one above that, the mind; and the one above that, the spirit. The body which touches the world, the mind or soul in which you think and resolve, and the spirit, which in too many is utterly neglected and given over to vacancy.

There is the throne room which is meant for GOD; judgment, where you should come to decisions in consonance with His will; conscience, where you should see and know yourself; and the chapel, where you should worship. But in how many cases that house, of your nature, which was built for the home of your eternal GOD, that He might abide in your heart, has been wrested away from Him and handed over to His enemy, the powerful Satan, whom our Lord describes in this passage as "**the strong man armed.**"

Yes, Satan is stronger than Adam in his innocence, than Moses in his meekness, than Job in his patience, than Peter in his courage and fervor. The strongest and fairest of the children of men have fallen before the masterfulness of Satan.

I want to show you this palace in three aspects. First, when it is in peace under its wrong owner. Then for a time he goes out and leaves it, but the true owner does not return. And third, the triumph of the true owner when he comes back and keeps it from all comers.

IN PEACE

First, I have to speak to you of the stage when the strong man armed keeps his palace, and his goods are at peace. The palace is at peace. It seems as though the rose had climbed up and hidden the walls beneath its rich and luxuriant foliage, and all over the palace, as over that in Tennyson's poem, there is lethargy and sleep. The palace seems lulled in perfect repose.

There are people here tonight who have been drawn here by their friends, and as they hear me preach about these things which touch GOD and eternity, as they hear my cry to repent and trust in CHRIST, they say:

Why bring these things under our notice? We are happy as a bird. We have no fear, though we have none of your religion. Why do you force it upon us? Why don't you leave us still amid the charm of this enjoyment of life which steepens our hearts and souls?"

Why? Because that spirit of calm is the worst trait in your history.

There are two kinds of peace. There is the peace of JESUS sleeping in the boat, resting upon His Father's care, and there is the peace of Jonah, sleeping in the hold of the ship while the storm is raging around him. There is the peace of Peter, who sleeps between two soldiers on the eve of his execution, and the sleep of Saul, when Abishai stands over him with drawn spear. Your peace is the peace of despair; the peace of death, the peace of ruin, the peace of the garrison sleeping at their posts while the enemy is creeping up. It is the peace of a mother and child sleeping in their home while a stream of oil fire is rolling down the street, which will presently involve them in ruin.

"He keepeth his goods in peace." His goods. He says of you, "That man is mine. I have him. I'll drag him down to the place prepared for the devil and his angels." He watches and keeps the palace day and night with untiring watchfulness. He holds you fast, and you are at peace.

But he is armed with a lie! Your soul is happy because things are so bad. It is the worst sign.

My child is ill; I call the doctor. He goes up stairs with the mother. When he comes down I say:

"Well, doctor?"

"She's very bad."

"Is there any hope?"

"Yes; one hope is that she suffers so. If the pain stops, telephone for me, and I'll come at once. It will show the worst symptom has set in."

An hour later my wife comes down stairs and says:

"The worst is over."

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Well, ten minutes ago the child ceased to suffer, and is now easy."

"Good GOD!" I say, "that is the worst symptom! Not to feel at all is the worst sign."

My friend, the worst thing about you is that you have ceased to suffer. If only conscience pricked you; if only sometimes you felt uneasy; if only you started up at night and thought you would be lost; if only there came a dread of sin and the judgment seat of GOD! Then there would be some

hope for you. But because you are past feeling, because GOD has given you up, you are of all men the most to be pitied.

The strong man armed keeps his palace. When the babe stirs a bit because of the baying of those hounds, the strong man armed sits with his feet upon the cradle and keeps it rocking. When the soul stirs up and says, "Perhaps I will be lost," he says, "Hush; that man is an alarmist! There is no truth in that Bible. There is no heaven to seek, no hell to dread. Think of your money and the things which come under the observation of your senses, but don't worry about those things."

That's the lullaby with which the strong man hushes the soul back. Yet in spite of it, sometimes the soul wakes up and says:

"I am not satisfied. I am not at rest. Is there not a GOD, a future? and I am not prepared for it.

"Hush, hush," says the strong man, and again administers an opiate. "Go to the theater, spend your life in pleasure, but get away from that thought."

I am talking to men and women who are at peace, not because they are justified, not because they are washed in the blood of CHRIST, but because their conscience has been crushed under the devil's foot until sensibility has gone out of it, mortification has set in.

THE STRONG MAN GOES OUT

The second picture is a striking one. The Lord says that sometimes the strong man goes out.

Mind you, he is not turned out, but he goes out. He goes out but CHRIST does not come in.

You have seen men like that. They have reformed, but are not regenerated. The devil has driven a man so far that he is afraid he will wake up. The prodigal in a far country is beginning to get restive. The devil says:

"If I don't take care I will lose this man, so I will drop off for a time, and then I shall get him more safe than ever."

Perhaps some men to whom I am speaking have fished for salmon, and they know what I mean by playing with the fish. Sometimes you get a heavy fish. If you begin to pull it in, you will lose it, and besides break your line. What do you do? You begin to play with it. If it swims off, you let the line run out as fast as it will. When it gets tired, you again draw in the line. After three or four hours that salmon will be so tired you can do pretty nearly what you want with it, and land it with your net.

That is how the evil one is dealing with some men. You don't feel his pull just now, but he has not let go. He is giving you a breathing space, but he will draw you presently to his net.

The man says he is going to turn over a new leaf.

- He "quits his meanness."
- He gives up for a time his tyrannical behavior in his dealing with his family, and the wife blesses GOD that the unkind treatment has ceased.
- He no longer frequents the saloon.
- For a time he goes to church with his wife.
- When a revivalist comes along he is moved by what he hears, and at the end of the meeting he steps up, shakes hands, says he likes the sermon, and gives every sign that he has become a religious man.
- He goes regularly to church, and gives away a portion of his income.

As our Lord says, his house is empty, swept and garnished. All the worst evils are swept out of his life. He has a pledge-card nicely framed and hung on the wall. He buys a large Bible too large to use, but good to look at. He invites the minister to tea. There is everything about that man to show that he has turned over a new leaf; but mind you, the only goodness which is going to stand in eternity is the goodness which he receives ready-made from the Son of GOD!

Plenty of men sit stitching a robe of goodness which they hope will stand when they pass the judgment seat of GOD. But I want to tell you the only robe which will stand the scrutiny of the judgment throne is the one which JESUS CHRIST wove on the cross, and the one which He only gives when you are born again. If you have not got from CHRIST the robe of His righteousness, there is nothing that you can do for yourself which will be other than filthy rags when He comes in judgment.

So here is the house. I think I see it before me now. Outwardly at least that man looks a clean man, and people say:

"I warrant that man has made a change for the better. He looks a happier, better man."

Yes, he is, outwardly,- but there is no indwelling CHRIST, hence the devil comes back. He looks in at the windows of the house. "Is CHRIST here?" He cannot see any trace of Him. He shouts through the keyhole, "Is CHRIST here?" and there is no answer, but the echo of his own voice. He goes around to the back door (for the devil is mortally afraid of CHRIST), and asks, "Is CHRIST here?" No. The house is empty.

The only power in that man's life is his own resolutions. The devil knows he can easily break them down; and he walks in, it may be after one month, or seven months, or seven years. Then he goes off and calls seven other devils worse than himself, and they enter in, and at the end that man's state is worse than at the beginning.

I stand here weighted with the burden of souls.

In our churches we let people in too lightly. I lament to say that often too many have been admitted to membership because they have turned over a new leaf, because they are respectable.

We do not go into the matter to be quite certain and accurate that they are saved. So men become members, and even officers of our churches, who have never known what it was to be born again, and who have no CHRIST tenanted their souls.

I would like to single out each person in this place and say:

"Hast thou been born again? Hast thou received JESUS to dwell in thy heart? Art thou believing for salvation in the finished work of CHRIST? Hast thou learned thine own righteousness is nothing but filthy rags, and the only thing which can make the soul safe here and hereafter is JESUS? JESUS on the throne, JESUS in the heart, JESUS in the life JESUS, the Saviour, the King, the Friend."

If you do not know it, I beseech you, do not sleep tonight until you have built your house upon the rock which will stand forever.

You say, "How may I get right? How may I be born again?" I deeply sympathize with you in your desire to be certain.

My mother was a lovely Christian, and I remember to have said my prayers at her knee from the very earliest dawn of my boyhood. I suppose that for me the new birth was like the dawn of the morning; I never had any marked experience that I could look back upon. When I was about 14 years of age a new minister came to our church and insisted very much on the necessity of the new birth. I was in trouble, because I could not point to any time or place or cause.

Then it was that I went to hear Mr. Spurgeon, and I heard him say that a man might not know his birthday, but be quite sure that he was living. That helped me, for I did not know my spiritual birthday, but I knew I was alive.

It is not necessary that you should have any startling experience, but it is necessary that you should believe in JESUS CHRIST.

Look at my hand. It has two sides to it, the back towards the light above us, and the palm towards the floor. You cannot take that hand without taking both sides of it. So the act by which you became the child of GOD and are saved, has two names to it. Angels call it "being born again"; men call it "trusting JESUS."

If you trust JESUS you are born again, and if you are born again you will trust JESUS. You cannot tell which comes first any more than you can tell which spoke in a wheel moves first, for they move together.

If right now you will look to JESUS CHRIST who died for you; or if you cannot see Him, you will look in the direction in which He stands and from which His voice comes; if you choose to believe; if you hand over your soul's salvation for Him to see to for you, that's saving faith. If you have that faith, whether you have any marked experience or not does not matter, but you are as much saved as those presently walking the golden streets of Heaven.

THE STRONG MAN CAST OUT

Once more I want you to see this palace for the third time under new auspices. I hear marching music! I hear the voice of the angel escort!

A stronger than the strong man is on His way.

- Stronger because He met Satan in the wilderness and overcame him;
- Stronger, because all through His life He met the demons and cast them out;
- Stronger, because in the hour of His weakness on the cross, He took a man from the very jaws of hell and carried him to Paradise;
- Stronger, because He went up to heaven triumphant over the powers of hell.

JESUS comes! He comes to you tonight and, mark, He comes to that door and summons you to surrender. "**Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man will open the door, I will come in.**" The strong man is there and CHRIST is there. Tonight is going to decide your life. Satan is holding you; never before was he holding you so nervously and tenaciously as he is doing now.

But he shall not permanently hold you against our Lord.

I tell you, man, you are going to get free. Those oaths are coming out of your lips. Those dirty thoughts are going to cease out of your heart. You will never again want to go to that house of ill fame. You are going to be delivered absolutely, utterly from the passions which have held unholy riot in your soul. GOD knows the banqueting room and worship hall have sometimes been filled with carousing scenes which made all heaven shudder. All that is to be ended now. I speak with prophetic voice. I hear CHRIST's footfall as He comes to set you free, to cleanse and purify your soul, so you will hate the things which now you think you cannot live without, and will love the things which now you care nothing for. Tonight you shall be translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of GOD's love.

So JESUS CHRIST waits. But listen, He says, "**He that is not with Me is against Me.**" Satan is in occupation, and JESUS waits without. JESUS must have a sign from you that you want Him. That is all. He will do the fighting, the saving, but you must indicate that you desire Him.

I was told the other day a very interesting thing about one of the ancestors of the family with whom I was stopping. She was only in a swoon, but they thought she was dead, and were preparing to carry her forth for interment. But one that was standing by saw the quivering of an eyelid. Immediately they removed her from the coffin, laid her upon the bed, and went to work to revive her, and presently she came back to consciousness, and lived for some ten years longer, a hearty, robust life. Saved by the quivering of an eye-lid, that showed she was not entirely gone!

Oh, man, JESUS waits and Satan waits. This is the hour of your choice. JESUS only asks thee not to resist and refuse, but to choose; and though thy choice tonight be as slight as the quivering of an eye-lid, let CHRIST see it. Look to Him! It is all He wants, and He will come into your heart.

When CHRIST comes, and He comes now, He will drive before Him passion, and lust, and unclean desire. He will take away the love of drink, the love of sin. He will cleanse and keep your heart. Do not try to make the heart clean for Him. He was born in a stable, and He can make even a stable a palace.

I close with a favorite story of mine.

Augustine was swept as by a mighty current between two women, his mother, Monica, a saintly woman, and another woman, who had fascinated him almost to damnation. His life hovered between these two just as your life hovers between CHRIST and Satan. Sometimes Monica attracted him heavenward, and then the evil influence of this woman dragged him to the very pit of the abyss. The conflict was long and terrible and Augustine was like a chip upon the tide, swept backward and forward.

One afternoon, he states in his memorable confessions, he and his friend were in the garden together, and he thought he heard voices as of children calling over the garden wall, saying:

"Take and read!"

He thought it meant he was to take up the New Testament, which Monica had left on the garden seat. He picked it up and read in Romans, thirteenth chapter, about casting off the works of darkness and putting on the works of light.

Instantly he arose. He had made his decision. He had counted the cost. He told his friend, and they went and told Monica, and Monica was glad.

The next day he went down the main street of Carthage. As he did so, he met the woman who had been the fascination of his soul for evil. As he met her she said:

"Augustine, it is I!"

He said, "It is not I," and passed her and was saved. He became as you know, Augustine, the author of *The Golden City*.

I know in my soul that I am talking to Augustines here; men who know better, but are doing worse; men who have sweet wives and the memory of holy mothers, and when they go home and take their little children upon their knees, it is impossible to describe the rush of holy love that comes. I tell you, your heart is between Satan and CHRIST - Satan, who will ruin it, and CHRIST, who wants to inhabit it.

This is the moment of your choice. If you will quit sin and give yourself to GOD you shall yet be "Augustine," the father of a multitude of children of GOD. There is a wonderful destiny awaiting you. You must call in JESUS CHRIST, and if you will, He will come in and keep you.

When I was a pastor at Leicester, there was a strike. The work people smashed property and ruined homes in their riot. One day they threatened to come into a house which I knew, where there was a big brother riveting shoes in the attic upstairs, and a little fellow downstairs. The little fellow feared they were going to break the house open. He went to the stairs and called his big brother:

"Tom, Tom, they are going to smash this door open! Make haste and come down."

He was a strong, well-built man, and he came down, put his big body against the door, and said:

"Now, youngster, you go on with your game. All the rioters in Leicester can't break this door open when brother Tom stands by it."

The devil often wants to come back to this house of mine, and I am afraid of him, but when he comes along and swears he will take me by force, I go to the foot of the ascension ladder, and I cry:

"CHRIST! CHRIST! Stronger than the strong man, make haste and come down. The devil is going to get me!"

And He seems to come like the lightning flash, and puts Himself against the door of my heart, and all hell can't break the door open!

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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