

## A Minister's Obstacles

by Ralph G. Turnbull

1959

Fleming H. Revell Company New York

### Chapter 15 -

#### WHILE I WAS MUSING

"The regulation of every man's plan must greatly depend on the course of events, which come in an order not to be foreseen or prevented. But in accommodating the plans of conduct to the train of events, the difference between two men may be no less than that, in the one instance, the man is subservient to the events, and in the other the events are made subservient to the man. Some men seem to have been taken along by a succession of events . . . having no determined principle in their own characters . . . Others, advancing through life with an internal invincible determination, have seemed to make the train of circumstances . . . conduce as much to their chief design as if they had, by some directing interposition, been brought about on purpose." - *On Decision of Character* - John Foster.

*"Temptations, when we meet them at first, are as the lion that roared upon Samson; but if we overcome them, the next time we see them, we shall find a nest of honey within them."* - John Bunyan.

THE MINISTRY was never intended to provide a safe place or a comfortable living for preachers. If the Cross and not a cushion is our symbol we should not be shocked by the antagonisms of life. We shall be a target for animosity and misunderstanding by the very nature of our work and vocation. "**The fellowship of his sufferings**" is not a pious quotation, but a veritable highway of living dangerously and courageously with CHRIST. And the tribulation experiences, the heartaches, the wounds, the slights, the sense of disappointment and frustration may be caused by human channels within professing Christendom, even within the Church itself. Human nature, although redeemed, is queer and unyielding stuff: small wonder that we who are working with it in our own hearts and in other lives should not escape its contrariness.

The warning about our temptations and tests is reiterated throughout these chapters, for if there is one thing clear in the ministry, it is that "**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**" We need to stand fast in the age-abiding victory of our Lord against all that would be against us. Morale, as we have learned in the present world conflict, is everything. How much more in the spiritual warfare of CHRIST's man against the Accuser of our souls! A man may give way, here and there, in the years of a full and strenuous life, but what is most impressive in the struggle is not the ruin of a life but its recovery by grace and faith, which is courage.

Martin Luther confesses:

"Oh, how I trembled when I was ascending the pulpit for the first time. I would fain have excused myself; but they made me preach. It was the regulation, that the junior brethren should preach to the rest . . .

"Here, under this very pear tree, I have over and over again, argued with Dr. Staupitz as to whether it was my vocation to preach. He said it was. I had fifteen reasons against it, and fifteen more when they were done. 'Dr.,' I used to say, 'you want to kill me. I shall not live three months if you compel me to go on.' 'Our Lord,' the Dr. would reply, 'our Lord requires the aid of able men: He needs your services, and must have them.'

"If I had my time to go over again I would make my sermons much shorter, for I am conscious they have been too wordy.

"Sermons should be addressed to the . . . commonalty. If in my discourses I were to be thinking about Melancthon and the other doctors I should do no good at all: but I preach in plain language to the plain, unlearned people, and that pleases all parties. If I know the Greek, Hebrew, and Latin languages, I reserve them for our learned meetings, where they are of use, for at these we deal in such subtleties and such profundities, that GOD Himself, I wot, must sometimes marvel at us."

"Albert Durer, the famous painter of Nuremberg, used to say that he took no pleasure in works of art which were overladen with colouring, that he much preferred those which were plain and simple in their execution; and so I say about sermons."

"Oh, how happy should I have been, when in the monastery at Edurt, could I have heard once, only once, a sermon, however brief, upon the Gospel . . ." (From *Luther's Table Talk*)

Very early in the reign of George III, Sir William Blackstone, the eminent jurist and author of the celebrated Commentaries on the Laws of England, had the curiosity to go from church to church to hear every clergyman of note in London. His reaction to all these sermons was that he "did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero," and that "it would have been impossible for him to discover from what he heard whether its preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mohammed, or of CHRIST."

In a sort of apologia, written in 1753, an anonymous "church" convert to "Methodism" declared that "many of the church sermons of the day were in an unknown tongue to the common man." Most preachers, he protested, seemed to care very little what effect their preaching had on their audiences (J. Wesley Bready, *England: Before and After Wesley*).

John Wesley is a luminous example of redeeming every fragment of time. At the end of that moving Journal of his an attempt is made to account for this unique achievement:

***"To one great purpose, he dedicated all his powers of body and mind; for this he relinquished all honour and preferment. At all times and in all places, in season and out of season, by gentleness, by terror, by interest, by every motive and every inducement, he strove, with unwearied assiduity, to turn men from the error of their ways and awaken them to virtue and religion. To the bed of sickness or the couch of prosperity; to the prison or the hospital; to the***

*house of mourning or the house of feasting, wherever there was a friend to serve or a soul to save, he readily repaired. He thought no office too humiliating, no condescension too low, no undertaking too arduous, to reclaim the meanest of GOD's offspring. The souls of men were equally precious in his sight."*

Many years ago, a young pastor in his first church had an experience which was serious then, but which seems amusing now. He was invited to preach at the annual church service of a certain secret society. He was not a member of the society, so he was given certain information which would help him prepare his sermon. He was told that the organization was founded on the parable of the Good Samaritan, and that the members helped each other and thus manifested the Good Samaritan spirit.

The young preacher, being entirely honest and not even diplomatic, told the audience that, after studying the parable, he was inclined to think most readers had missed the point. This organization, for instance, existed to help those who were in its membership and who were in "good and regular standing," but the Good Samaritan helped a man who had no standing at all (Dr. Will H. Houghton, President of the Moody Bible Institute, Chicago).

When the wrong emphasis is given in preaching or where preachers dodge the actual truth of Scripture to suit the convenience of a group or ecclesiastical organization, such equivocation is the death knell of that evangelical note needed to-day. Dr. Houghton points the true way!

A worldly spirit is a danger to the preacher. What vanities and inanities are revealed by the casual speech and the off moments! And sometimes there is an unwarranted dogmatism with lack of humble conviction. There is room for more of that humility before the revealed Truth which was well expressed by the late Professor Robert Dick Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament*. "Let me reiterate my conviction that no one knows enough to criticize." He was referring, of course, to those who were unscientific in their approach to the study of the Bible, but it ill becomes the preacher to restate his prejudices as though they were convictions and standards of judgment for others who do not see eye to eye with them, even when accepting the Bible as GOD's last word to man in CHRIST.

The inwardness of our message as it affects our character and conduct is the primary reality. Do we know in our own hearts the power of the Gospel which recreates life and enables men to live on the higher plane of the Kingdom of GOD? From the reports of some of the shallow meanderings of time that passes for preaching, it would seem that some ministers have lost the realization that there is a Saviour.

Even C. J. Jung (*Psychology of the Unconscious*), moved by no apologetic motive, has deemed it his duty to remind us that modern men have lost a vivid and feeling awareness of the deep historic meaning of the word "redemption" through forgetting the moral and spiritual condition in which men were before JESUS came.

"The domestication of humanity [he writes] has cost the greatest sacrifices. We do not realize against what Christianity had to protect us . . . We should scarcely know how to appreciate the enormous feeling of redemption which animated the first disciples, for we can hardly realize in this day the whirlwinds of the unchained libido which roared through the ancient Rome of the Caesars. In the past two hundred years Christianity has erected barriers of regression which

protect it from the sight of its own sinfulness."

Salvation is an historic fact with a challenging and transforming ethical meaning, bearing upon every man as he really is in his inner life and in his active relationships. It is here that the preacher must ever proclaim the historic tenets of the faith and work for a verdict without delay.

The psychologist is not alone in reminding us of our lost sense of sin. This is one of the deficiencies of our generation, according to Dr. Charles W. Koller, President of the Northern Baptist Seminary, Chicago. Trenchantly, he writes:

"Our generation has become indifferent to the holiness and sovereignty of GOD! Here is reflected a serious deficiency in modern preaching. When the emphasis was shifted from the holiness of GOD, the sinfulness of men, and the need of redemption, the consciousness of sin went with it. And when the church lost its consciousness of sin, the world also lost it. As a result, the world is not much concerned about salvation. Since there is no consciousness of sin, and since it does not seem to make much difference anyway, the world is not crying to the church, **'What must [we] do to be saved?'**

"Let the people of GOD restore the lost emphasis! Let saints and sinners be instructed anew in the sovereignty and holiness of GOD! Let it be the concern of the Church to reveal the gravity of sin and the imperative need for repentance! In the sight of GOD there are no mild sinners, and sin does not come in pastel shades. Sin is disobedience, lawlessness, moral anarchy, such as would dethrone GOD if it could. Holiness is not relative, but absolute. The slightest taint of impurity is incompatible with it. Without cleansing there can be no fellowship with GOD, either here or in the world to come."

Hear also Dr. John A. Hutton, in a recent pronouncement in *The British Weekly*:

"In the light, or under the threatening, of these incidents (cf. War) we would suggest once again that the revival for which the Church and all the churches ought immediately to plan and proceed with, is the revival of the Ten Commandments! The revival of that method of presenting the Gospel of JESUS CHRIST which embodied the first preaching of the faith! For it was CHRIST who declared, concerning the Law which in its moral substance raises the Hebrew religion above all others, that not one jot or tittle of it should pass until all was fulfilled!

"Such a day still tarries, horribly. For is there one of those Ten Words of the Decalogue concerning which we may say that it need no longer be urged upon us?"

"And let not preachers suppose that insistence upon the Law will reduce the still greater urgency of the Gospel. Contrariwise! There is in our mind a shrewd and profound observation by Dean Church to this precise effect: Let any man confront himself with anyone of the Ten Commandments, and let him observe himself under the light of it - and he will find many reasons for a humble and desperate acceptance of the faith once delivered to the saints. It was the Law, said Paul, which confronted me with CHRIST. A faith, indeed, which is not a personal necessity, is not indispensable."

A few other quotations are given in this causerie for reflection:

"The vocabulary of disparagement was unknown to him as Tamil or Telugu; the muscles which are flexible in the lips of the sneerer were atrophied in his" (Dr. A. B. Macaulay, on "*Dr. Hugh R. Mackintosh as a Man*").

"Very few people can read; almost everybody can read history, travels, science (objective instruction), but very few can read books calculated to strengthen their own minds, to increase their subjective power - such books as Butler, Foster, and scores more. Many can understand them thoroughly and answer any questions on them, but they can do this without having themselves thought through what the author has thought; now you must do this if you would acquire some permanent good from the thoughts of another; they must not remain his, they must become yours, not ideas which you have got from him, but thoughts that you have thought for yourself (under his guidance of course).

"I could not go and hear Gladstone just for poverty - every penny that is not used up in living is devoted to books, and of pennies that go that way the number is easily reckoned, for I have just bought three books this year. But all things are good, and poverty teaches like the rest. It's an experience, however, not to be desired" (*Early Letters of Marcus Dods*).

Because a man is a preacher he is in danger. The nature of his calling and the demands upon character make it inevitable. Phillips Brooks (*Lectures on Preaching*) dwells upon the danger of self-conceit:

"In a certain sense every young minister is conceited. He begins his ministry in a conceited condition. At least every man begins with extravagant expectations of what his ministry is to result in. We come out from it by and by. A man's first wonder when he begins to preach is that people do not come to hear him. After a while, if he is good for anything, he begins to wonder that they do. He finds out that the old Adam is too strong for young Melancthon. It is not strange that it should be so. The student for the ministry has to a large extent comprehended the force by which he is to work, but he has not measured the resistance that he is to meet. He knows the power of the truth of which he is all full, but he has not estimated the sin of which the world is all full. The more earnest and intense and full of love for GOD and man he is, the more impossible does it seem that he should not do great things for his Master. And then the character of men's ministries, it seems to me, depends very largely upon the ways in which they pass out of that first self-confidence and upon what conditions come afterwards, when it is gone."

Dr. A. E. Garvie (*The Christian Preacher*) calls attention to the sins which so easily beset the preacher and are hindrances to saintship:

"(1) The calling itself brings with it a secret and subtle peril in the desire for the praise or the dread of the blame of men.

"(2) When a man falls before the temptation of seeking and prizing popularity, another fault often appears. He gives himself 'airs'; he looks down on men who may be really abler and worthier than himself, who are not as popular as he is; he is not among his brethren as the least of all, but makes it plain that he regards himself, and expects to be regarded, as the greatest of all.

"(3) But popularity as a preacher brings other worldly gains besides the praise of men . . . A preacher is a profane person like Esau (Hebrews 12:16), who cares for the fees, and not

altogether for the sacred task of preaching.

"(4) A fourth peril of the preacher is that out of the pulpit he may not in his conversation and manner adorn the doctrine he preaches."

Dr. Garvie's sage counsel is worth pondering, as is that of Dr. J. H. Jowett in a brief discussion of the perils of the preacher, religious as well as moral, in *The Preacher: His Life and Work*. Our aim and goal ought to be that freeness and fulness of life of sainthood found in the communion of our Lord and Master.

The inner life determines the quality of life and service. If we are to proclaim holiness, we must desire holiness for ourselves. When we preach about ethical standards we shall distill unconsciously our own moral life and level. In our service we should be on our guard lest a mass of energy in the running of many organizations takes the place of the HOLY SPIRIT. If we drift away from the centre of our faith to the circumference routine, then the fine gold becomes dim. Not in argument, but in witnessing lies our true strength in the pulpit and out of it. **"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you"** (1 John 1:3).

Dr. W. R. Maltby, Ilkley, England, has offered out of his ripe experience in the Methodist Church, *"Five And Twenty Precepts For Preachers,"* as reported in *The British Weekly*, February 19, 1942. They should be pondered by all, and especially No. 24 on *"A Preacher's Damnation"* - "He spoke of great things and made them small; of holy things and made them common; of GOD and made Him of no account."

We are called to self-watch. "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Peter told our Lord: **"Be it far from thee!"** We are open to the same solicitation. Do not spare your judgment of yourself. Do not spare yourself in confessing your sins and mistakes. These two maxims are necessary for us who really desire to be honest in the presence of our temptations. The supreme test of excellence in character is not in the greater but in the lesser incidents of our practice and conduct. The scrutiny of self when we are alone, not when we are before the public, is the only safeguard against corrosion and besetting sin. As our Lord taught, we are members of the True Vine and a sharer of divine life and nature by grace. The character or fruit-bearing expected by the Divine Husbandman is the result of pruning and that life of mystic communion with GOD through His Spirit.

We are not unlike those who came out of Egypt and who are impassioned to strip off the ornaments which they brought with them. At the outset of our ministry we may delight in many things which, later, we are determined to throwaway. We have seen what life is, and we have seen what death is. We have learned what common people have to suffer. It is then the man of GOD must strip himself of every adornment of the flesh: his pride of sermon construction, his gifts and abilities, his subconscious desire to please men. A man will continue to use every gift of GOD, but his sole aim will be to please GOD and to win men by the Cross of his Saviour. Delivered in the hours of these temptations, he will be passionate and eager to be of use while the lamp of truth burns.

Valuable as the call to our vocation was, it will not do to trade too long on such a memory. James Stalker has it in *The Preacher and His Models: "A ministry of growing power must be one of growing experience."* As we are not immune from temptation we should learn that we do grow

through temptations and testings. For the final approbation of our calling will not come by way of our qualifications, gifts, achievements, but whether we live as godly men. Everything around us tends to make us shallow and live the outer life. We have to watch and pray to conserve the inner life. The minister must be a regenerated man, or he has no place in the ministry of the Gospel. It is possible for a man to be regenerate and yet remain worldly, shallow, undeveloped, and unsanctified. Paul exhorts us to "**take heed to yourselves**" in order to be saved in the moments of temptation.

If we are obedient to the will of GOD and responsive to the HOLY SPIRIT we shall be overcomers when tempted. Utterly unworldly, indifferent to praise or blame, free from pride, almost unconscious of gifts, filled with a passionate devotion to our Lord and a zeal for the spread of the Gospel - these possessions set ablaze by the Spirit of GOD will issue in sacrificial devotion and fulness of ministry. Let JESUS CHRIST be Lord of life and the problem of temptation can be mastered by His supremacy. "**To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna . . . To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne**" (Revelation 2:17; 3:21). Who would not become such when "a great High Priest our nature wears . . . to help us in the evil hour"?

Brethren, we may lift up our hearts in the hour of testing, knowing that the grace of JESUS CHRIST is sufficient. If there are those who ask, What do we get out of the ministry? The truth can be expressed in Richard Baxter's language of the seventeenth century:

*"I'll tell you but the truth: constant study, preaching, and all other labours; yet though I am day and night full of pain, study I must, preach I must, instruct the ignorant, resolve the doubting, comfort the dejected and disquieted soul, admonish the scandalous and relapsed. As far as I am able, these must be done, and very much more, besides defending the truth against all wrangling seducers; and when all this is done, what is my profit? . . . In a word, . . . the life of a minister is so heavy a burden, and such a continual grief, that I confess from my heart, I have been many a time haunted by Jonah's temptation, to overrun GOD's work and to put it off, as Moses and Jeremiah would have done. We have flesh and blood as well as other men, for we are but men; and when in the time of temptation, I have hearkened to the flesh, this hath been the language of it - was not I born as free a man as others? Why must I then be tied up to this work? . . . Such thoughts as these the flesh has suggested . . . But do I approve of this, or grudge at my employment? No, I bless the Lord daily, that ever He called me to this blessed work! GOD hath paid me for all these sufferings a thousandfold . . . And my constant experience assureth me, that the dearer it costeth me to serve Him, the more abundant will be the incomes of my peace! I would not therefore change my life for any of the greatest dignities on earth. I had rather thus serve in the Gospel, so He will on go to bless my labours. I am contented to consume my body, to sacrifice to His service, and to spend all that I have, and to be spent myself, for the soules of men."*

"Who is sufficient for these things?" cries the preacher. The answer is close at hand in: "**Our sufficiency is of GOD: who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament.**" So, then, in the midst of common temptations we are made sufficient, made fit for this supreme task of life. Not filthy lucre, not prestige of position, not any humanitarian urge puts and keeps a true man in this ministry of all ministries. The temptations soon beset one to test the qualifications of character. Only a life surcharged by the Divine Spirit, imbued with a love for the revealed truth,

and characterised by a holy passion to persuade men is worthy of the high calling. "To expound and testify concerning the kingdom of GOD, and to persuade men concerning JESUS" (see Acts 28:23) is our one task.

Courage will be needed, and grace is available to those who keep on asking, seeking, and knocking. This ministry is not of the letter, but of the spirit. It divides men in life and death. No man can lightly become a minister when he hears of the horrific power of these insidious temptations. His life will need to be disciplined; he will need to apply a rigorism at once hard and firm and at the same time to avoid the bye-end of a formalism at once pedantic and lifeless. In the crucible of the mystic relation with his LORD and HEAD the minister will beat out a moral theology of the heart until he finds himself sharing the insight and the foresight of the Chief SHEPHERD of righteous souls.

"What I aspired to be,  
and was not comforts me:  
success is nought;  
endeavour is all."

It is written that JESUS "**knew what was in man**" (John 2:25), but the Christian man does not know what is in himself. We may be strangers to certain sins and not easily touched by some forms of temptation. Not that our nature is invulnerable, but because we have never been in the situation for this or that temptation to arise. Whatever our claims to advance in the life of holiness and sanctification, we do not deceive ourselves in imagining that we could not be so attacked.

The record of temptation in life is striking. Who would think that the sweet singer and psalmist of Israel who gave us the Twenty-Third Psalm could be the guilty paramour of another man's wife and then murder that man? Or that lovable, frank, open-minded, passionate Peter, who swore his loyalty and devotion to CHRIST, would deny his Lord? And in the records of the history of the Church at large, witness Bishop Andrewes weeping over the manuscript of his Private Prayers, beseeching GOD for holiness, yet guilty of paltry partisanship and infamy which stained his good name. Or Samuel Rutherford, apostle of love in Scotland, horrified at the fierce passion which swept him in time of dispute.

These are things which make any man in the ministry to say he doesn't know himself in those deeps of his being if he should be tempted. We may pray to be delivered from presumption - the presumption of claiming a state of life which is perfect - and the pride which leads to self-sufficiency. To be set free from spiritual blindness is to be aware of our constant need of grace, and it will lead us to flee to CHRIST, in whom alone we stand, complete in His righteousness, sanctification, redemption, and wisdom.

"**Quit you like men**" is our challenge and call who follow His steps. We are never off duty, and to fulfill our ministry will exact the highest reach of our powers; Jonathan Edwards framed seventy resolutions for his self-government, but one is sufficient for "**a good minister of Jesus Christ,**" even Bunyan's word: "I preached what I did feel - what I smartingly did feel." Even our failure is a schoolmaster of the soul, teaching because we have learned, "Fearless and unperplexed, When I wage battle next, what weapons to select, what armour to indue."

Temptations vary very much. As in the strategy of modern warfare there is a disposition of forces by land and sea and air, so the attack comes to us on various levels of our life, and there seems to be a graded system. To be tempted and tried is not an unmixed evil if we are to be strong to assist others in the fight. The spurs are won thereby; the Cross is our way of conquest; bleeding brings blessing; and our straitening is the way of our achieving. Best of all, this conflict with the unseen and spiritual antagonisms will draw us close to our Saviour, and we shall be able to give an account of our victories like that of Matthew Arnold's Bethnal Green preacher:

"'Ill and o'erworked how fare you in this scene?'  
'Bravely,' said he, 'for I of late have been  
Much cheered with thoughts of  
CHRIST the LIVING BREAD.'"

~ end of book ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>

\*\*\*