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## Some Perils of the Way

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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The Word of God is strewn with instances of how good people were either caught in traps and snares, or were just saved from such by a small margin.

There is no doubt that the Adversary is out to cripple, spoil, or make havoc of the work of God by any means in his power, and where he cannot do so by direct methods, he will attempt it by the indirect course of deception, and subterfuge.

The servants of the Lord have no small amount of warning in the Scriptures in the direction of watchfulness. Sometimes lessons of the most vital importance can only be learned by painful experience, but there is something to be gained from the experiences of those who have gone ahead, as well as from a spiritual grasp of the teaching of the Word.

If we did but see the spiritual factor in the things recorded, we should see how frequently history repeats itself, even if the outward form is not always the same.

We take three instances for the moment, and we are sure that all servants of God who have any measure of experience will recognise how true to life are the perils therein constituent.

## **1. The Peril of Mistaken Glorifying**

It was Hezekiah who fell into this snare. Hezekiah had been ill with an illness which, but for Divine intervention, would have been fatal. By such an intervention a lease had been added to his life. Just at that point, when God had done a great thing for him, and made possible a further period of valuable ministry, the Enemy seized the occasion and the overjoyed state of Hezekiah to lead him beyond the limits of discretion. It was a cleverly laid plot, and came along the line of human sympathy. A ruler from far off Babylon who had heard of his sickness sent messengers with tokens of friendly congratulation, if he had heard of the recovery, or of sympathy because of his sickness. This was, apparently, a kindly act, but it must be borne in mind (and this is where Hezekiah failed) that friendliness with the nations round about was always a matter of serious question with God as to Israel, and there could never be eliminated the element of treachery, though unrecognised, which would rise to take advantage of friendship (?) when the occasion made it an advantage to do so. There were other factors, but Hezekiah was caught in the trap of sentimentalism, and uncovered all the glories of the holy things to such as could only value them carnally, thus stimulating a desire to exploit them for the ends of the flesh. Read the story in 2 Kings 20, and you will see what place this injudicious act had in the tragedy of Israel's later history.

Those glories of gold, silver, precious oil, spices, armour, etc., were the secret glories of the inner life of a people in specific spiritual relationship with God. They were the wrought things of fire, and suffering, and the Holy Ghost. The flesh has no right to look upon them, and they may not be displayed to the carnal mind. Then, again, they may not be gloried in as things in themselves; like blessings, spiritual qualities, spiritual riches, and spiritual gifts! They must always be kept sacredly in closest relation to Him Whom they represent. They are His excellencies, and they are not for boasting or showing off. They are not for advertising or for making use of for an impression. There are many things which come out of deep exercise with God which cannot be explained to the unspiritual, neither can they be used to entice patronage or favour. There is a right kind of glorifying in the Lord, and a proper chastened magnifying of His works; but there is also a dangerous uncovering to the uncrucified, uncircumcised, desire of men. The Lord Himself, knowing what was in men, would not commit Himself to them, and there are often times when the enemy will use spiritual information given to the flesh as a means of destroying the true testimony. The only way to rightly possess the riches of Christ is that of the Cross, and if we give the knowledge of these things without pressing home the absolute necessity for the flesh, in its desire for power, glory, influence, position, reputation, and possession, to be utterly set aside by crucifixion with Christ, then we shall see what we have uncovered only used for the destroying of the true spiritual value of the testimony.

## **2. The Peril of Unspiritual Solicitude**

Our second instance takes us into the Book of Ezra, chapter 4. The building of the House of God as a place for the expression of His thought in fulness is not going to be carried through without every kind of opposition which the Enemy can bring against it. When that is finished he will have no more place. He will neither have anything more to do, nor will he have any more opportunity for trying it. Hence, by every means, he must interfere with this work.

Amongst the almost countless methods used by him, one of the most effectual has been, and still is, what we have called Unspiritual Solicitude. That is, the help (?) of those who are not walking in true fellowship with the Lord.

Argue as you may for getting people interested in good things, and thereby getting them "saved," the flesh and the natural man never can build a spiritual house. "That which is born of the flesh, is flesh," and it will never be anything else. "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven." A spiritual state by being born of the Spirit is indispensable to doing spiritual work.

We do not say this without a good deal of experience in the matter, and we know that, in the long run, what was done by the unspiritual has not stood the test. But worse, the mass of the trouble, disintegration, discord, division, weakness and dishonour to God in Christian work has been the fruit of the uncrucified flesh, and unspiritual people. Like those in the chapter above-mentioned, the evil is so often hidden in an outward solicitude and sympathetic interest, often with a confession of oneness in the interest and the object of the interest.

It is always a dangerous thing, and not at all in keeping with the principle of Scripture to allow some from without whose spiritual qualities and walk with God have been unproved to take up the sacred responsibilities of the work of the Lord. This is not meant to apply to the point of suspecting everyone who comes along. But service should grow out of fellowship and life together in the Lord.

From what the Holy Spirit shows us in Ezra 4, we are able to see that those who came in such a sympathetic (?) way were after all enemies; and while all who come in solicitude may not be consciously or deliberately set upon mischief, the principle holds good that, all who are not truly in fellowship with the Lord in life and walk will prove to be an adverse factor in His work sooner or later, and the cause of weakness.

### **3. The Peril of Untried Workers**

For this further illustration we turn to Acts 13. In this chapter we find ourselves at a point in the journey of Barnabas and Paul which brings out from obscurity a secret flaw in their method. It is in Perga in Pamphylia. One - John (Mark) whom they had taken with them for the work, broke down and returned to Jerusalem.

There are one or two things in the background of this young man going with them which ought to be investigated. Primarily this, that we do not read of the Holy Ghost saying, "Separate me Barnabas and Paul, AND John Mark unto the work whereto I have called them."

The inclusion was one of a purely personal and arbitrary character, and apparently of a very casual order.

John Mark was evidently a young man of some earnestness and apparent promise. He had a Christian home, for it was in the house of his mother that the prayer meeting was held when Peter was in prison. These things evidently led Barnabas to think of him as being promising and, perhaps, a useful addition to the party.

But when all is said, he was an unproved worker, and sooner or later it was inevitable that the weakness should make itself manifest.

Now, it is true that every worker has got to be tested somewhere, and many who were no more proved beforehand than was John Mark have gone forth and made good. But here is a case where so much depended upon the workers being men who had been tried, and where it was so very

necessary that the Holy Ghost should do the selecting. The issue of this matter was not just that John Mark returned from the battle, but that confusion and an abiding cause for sorrow and shame arose out of it in the very beginnings of this great epoch. It is useless to try and settle who was right, Barnabas or Paul, in the subsequent refusal of him for a second journey of these two men. Probably they were both right. Paul was right in not exposing the next journey to the possible further weakness and further breakdown. Barnabas was right in taking the position that because a young man had failed once, he should not be deprived of a second chance. But then the two positions cannot be made one, and so it must be, either that a measure of positive right on one side or the other is surrendered, or you must admit that there was a mistake and weakness in the first place.

The sequel to this episode which is given us by Paul in his letter to Timothy shows that Paul stuck to his original position. He had taken the attitude that in such work as that to which he was called, those who took a place should be proved and known. When, after years, John Mark had proved himself, Paul was quite ready to have him as a fellow-worker and companion, and instructed that he should be brought to him.

It is tremendously important that for the sake of the testimony, the necessity of unbroken fellowship in the case of those whom the Holy Ghost has brought together for a great work, there should not be the jeopardising element of the unproved and unestablished worker.

The Assembly ought to provide an ample testing-ground for all who are to go forth. If the Assembly is constituted and governed by the Holy Spirit, all the weakness of its members will come to light. The fact that it is so in many local "families" of the Lord's people, is intended to result in moral and spiritual training for the time when the members will have to stand against common foes without the spiritual home-life immediately around or behind.

There are terrible tragedies on the "mission field" in the way of broken relationships which were intended to be very fruitful for the Lord, because the training and proving in a home fellowship was not adequate. This whole thing is spiritual. It is not just getting on happily with other workers in the more or less comfortable conditions of organised work at home. It is being in a spiritual testimony, against which the devil is positively set. Here there are met factors which are not just ordinary social difficulties, however unpleasant. It is the devil out to ruin the testimony by setting the Lord's people at variance, and anyone who has not learned to triumph in the matter at the home end is not safe to be sent forth to the realms where the devil has so much more of his own kind to play with, and so much more in every way by which to cause pressure and strain.

Any "training" in a college ought to be but an adjunct to equipment, not THE equipment. The real training is spiritual, not academic; and this is only possible in a spiritual Assembly.

There will always be serious loss in any life if it has not had a true Assembly background.