

The Servant's Continual Need of Grace

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: Luke 9:28-36; Matt. 17:1-9; Mark 14:66-72; 2 Pet. 1:18.

One would not put these Scriptures together in this way - for it would seem rather unfair to Peter - but for the fact that this account given in "Mark" of Peter's denial was virtually Peter's own record of what took place. The great influence in Mark's life eventually was Peter, and it is quite generally accepted that the Gospel by Mark, as it is called, is really Peter's record of things, and bears all the marks of his nature and character. It is therefore impressive that Peter recorded so definitely and clearly the account of what took place, and drew attention so plainly to the vehemence of his denial of the Lord. That is some justification for placing the denial alongside of the great event of the transfiguration.

We have seen on an earlier occasion how heaven and hell, God and Satan, were contending for the ground in the soul of this man, and that everything for Peter's future usefulness to the Lord depended upon the Lord's having the ground by Peter's own yielding of it to Him.

Now here we might speak of the height and the depth possible in the soul of one person. Here is the mountain - probably Hermon, over nine thousand feet high - a symbol of the great spiritual height represented by the transfiguration. We are not speaking about the transfiguration at the moment, but it does represent a very great height of spiritual vision and experience. One would think that it would be impossible to rise to anything higher than to see the glorified Son of man. How high a spiritual thing that was for these men! And then, right at the other extreme, it is difficult to think of anything much deeper and lower than Peter's vehement and repeated denial of his Lord. How high! How low! How wide is the range of possibility in the life of any child of God! I expect we know just a little of this. There are times when we feel we are on the very mountain top with the Lord, and we wonder if ever again we shall be found guilty of the doubts and fears that have characterised us before. We feel that now we shall go on, and there will be no more ups and downs; and it is not always very long before we seem to be just at the other extreme, and wonder if ever we shall be up again. This is not an uncommon experience. We may be amazed at Peter and say, 'If ever I had such an experience and saw the Lord transfigured, I should never get anywhere near denying Him after that.' But I think we know enough to know that such things are not impossible. There are great heights and great depths which remain possible to the soul of any man or woman. And that is the point, I think, of the whole thing.

You see, the Lord was making it perfectly clear to Peter and to others during their time with Him that they, in themselves, were not to be relied upon, and He was saying through them to us that the stability is not in us, in what we are at all. We can never come to a place where we are settled and sure that there will be no more variations; we are not of that stuff, especially when we come into the spiritual realm where we have to meet the extra factors which Peter was undoubtedly meeting in the desire of Satan to have him to sift him as wheat. So stability is not in us, and the Lord takes great pains and goes a very long way to settle us as to that matter, to undercut all the ground of self-strength and self-sufficiency. It is something that has got to be established and maintained all the way along in order that one thing may be made manifest - one thing which came out in Peter's life and is perhaps the great thing which characterised him. That one thing is the grace of God.

The Lord knew whom He had chosen (John 13:18). "He needed not that any one should bear witness concerning man; for he himself knew what was in man" (John 2:25). And yet, knowing exactly these heights and these depths, these terrible reactions and rebounds, knowing how far Peter could and would go - and we too in the same way - He chose him. Surely it is sovereign grace! When you come to read Peter's letters, you find that the key to his letters is grace. It is a simple, but tremendously helpful, message to our hearts. On the one hand, the Lord leaves us in no doubt whatever as to what kind of stuff we are made of, and it would be very easy for us to despair of ourselves when we find the tremendous extremes of elation, and then of depression, which are possible in us; but the grace of God is greater than all that, and it is through making us aware of that utter worthlessness which belongs to us that He displays His grace most gloriously.

Peter, as an example, is taken on the way which lays down a very sure foundation for the grace of God. We can understand Peter speaking much about grace. But then, you see, there was the ministry aspect of it. "Simon, behold, Satan asked to have you, that he might sift you as wheat; but I made supplication for thee, that thy faith fail not; and do thou, when once thou hast turned again, establish thy brethren" (Luke 22:31,32). The real ministry of Peter was going to be strengthening, confirming, encouraging his brethren, and undoubtedly that ministry was along these lines. Many of his brethren would come to the place where they were prepared to give up and disappear from the work because of the consciousness of their own insufficiency and weakness. There would be a great need for a confirming, establishing, and strengthening ministry, for this very reason, that the

The Servant's Continual Need of Grace

Lord was never going to allow His blessings, however great, to obscure the fact that all was of grace, and that on the human side all was weakness and worthlessness. In that realm we well know how much a ministry is called for to strengthen and confirm the Lord's people. And so the ground for that had to be laid very truly and deeply in Peter's own life. If we are allowed or caused to see, perhaps in some deeper and fuller way, our own worthlessness, it is that we may discover more fully the grace of God in order that we may be able to help others who are on the point of despairing and giving up. There is a ministry factor in it, and we find that, in the case of Peter and Paul and others, the Lord was making the ground safe for service.

It is very impressive to notice that, however great were the blessings of the Lord, however much the power of God came to rest upon these men - and I need not remind you how greatly Peter and Paul were blessed and used by God - yet all that was never for one moment allowed to cover over the fact of the utter helplessness and worthlessness of the men in themselves. It seems as though the Lord kept that balance all the way along. There is a very great peril in being used and blessed - the peril that we should forget that this is the Lord and not ourselves at all: that we do not figure in it. If the Lord for one moment lifted His hand from us we should go utterly to pieces and could commit the most awful sin and make shipwreck of our lives - as the outflow of what is in us. That could be, and the Lord would take great pains to see that that does not happen as the result of His own blessing. He will not bless to our undoing. So, if He blesses, if He uses, He will always balance it in some way with that which will keep us aware that this is not coming from us but from the Lord. He makes usefulness safe by always keeping us conscious of the underlying fact of what we actually and truly are in ourselves.

I think these are some further characteristics of the life of one who may be led into a knowledge of the Lord and into usefulness to Him. Service has its principles, and Peter undoubtedly represents the man of service to the Lord. But what a background there is for that service! And it will never be otherwise with any of us. Even though we may never rise to the measure of Peter's value, nevertheless we are going, either here or hereafter, to be of very great service to the Lord - that is what He is after, but our theme will ever have to be, Grace, wonderful grace, unspeakable grace.