

F.B. Meyer:

It is a very solemn thought that one sin may forever, so far as this world is concerned, wreck our usefulness. It is not always so. Sometimes -- as in the case of the apostle Peter -- the Lord graciously restores and recommissions for His work the one who might have been counted unfit ever again to engage in it. "Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs." But against this one case we may put three others, in each of which it would seem as if the sentry angel, who forbade the return of our first parents to Eden, were stationed with strict injunctions to forbid any return to the former position of noble service.

The first case is that of Moses. No other man has ever been honored as was he, "with whom God spake face to face" -- the meekest of men, the servant of the Lord, the foster-nurse of the Jewish nation, whose intercessions saved them again and again from destruction. Yet, because he spake unadvised with his lips and smote the rock twice in unbelief and passion, he was compelled to bear the awful sentence, "Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them! (Numbers 20:12). Most earnestly did he plead for a revocation of that terrible prohibition. {126} But he was silenced by the solemn reply, against which there was no appeal, "Let it suffice thee; speak no more unto me of this matter" (Deuteronomy 3:26).

The second case is that of Saul, the first, ill-fated king of Israel whose reign opened so auspiciously, as a morning without clouds; but who soon brought upon himself the sentence of deposition. Yet it was only for a single act. Alarmed at Samuel's long delay and at the scattering of the people, he intruded rashly into a province from which he was expressly excluded and offered the sacrifice with which the Israelites were wont to prepare for battle. "And it came to pass, that as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt-offering, behold, Samuel came... And Samuel said, What hast thou done?... Thou hast done foolishly; thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel forever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue;... because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee" (1 Samuel 13:10-14). Early in his reign and before his further disobedience in the case of the Amalekites -- for that one act of disobedience, revealing, as it did, a sad state of moral decrepitude -- Saul was rejected.

The third case is that of Elijah. He was never reinstated in quite the position which he had occupied before his fatal flight. True, he was bidden to return on his way, and work was indicated for him to do. But that work was the anointing of three men who were to share among them the ministry which he might have fulfilled if only he had been true to his opportunities and faithful to his God. God's work must go on; if not by us, then, through our failures, by others brought in to supply our place. "Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: {127} and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room." Those words rang out the death knell of Elijah's fondest dreams. Evidently, it was not for him to be the deliverer of his people from the thralldom of Baal. Others were to do his work; another was to be prophet in his room.

All those who hold prominent positions as teachers and leaders may well take warning by these solemn examples standing on the plains of time, as Lot's wife on those of Sodom. We may not all be tempted, as Elijah was, to unbelief and discouragement. But there are many other snares prepared for us by our great enemy and strewn over with fair appearances, as the hunter strews earth and grass on the top of the pitfall which he has dug in the pathway between the river and the lair of his prey. There is the adulation given to the successful man in which so much of the human is mingled with thankfulness for the help or comfort given. There is the desire to be always prominent -- foremost on every platform and first in every enterprise -- to the utter neglect of private prayer. There are the insidious attacks of jealousy, depreciation of others, comparison of their standing with our own. And in addition to these are other modes of failure, more gross and evident than they, to which we are all prone, and by which, alas! too many have been mastered. Any one of these may compel God to cast us away from His glorious service and employs us in a humbler ministry, or to anoint our successors.

As children, He will never cast us away; but as His servants He may. Let us beware! One false step, one hurried desertion of our post, one act of disobedience, {128} one outburst of passion; any one of these may lead our heavenly Father to throw us aside, as Samson did the jawbone of the ass with which he had slain heaps upon heaps. We shall not forfeit heaven; that is guaranteed to us by the precious blood of Christ. We may even be favored by a glorious and triumphant entrance thither in an equipage of flame. But we shall never again ride on the crest of the flowing tide, carrying all before us. Others shall finish our uncompleted task.

But with the danger there are sufficient safeguards. Let God prune you with the golden pruning-knife of His holy Word. Look into the mirror of revealed truth, to see if there is any trace of blemish stealing over the face of the soul. Offer your spirit constantly to the Holy Spirit, that He may detect and reveal to you the beginnings of the sin of idolatry. Be very jealous of anything that divides your heart with your Lord. "Watch and pray, lest ye enter into temptation" (Mark 14:38). Have perpetual recourse for cleansing, to the blood shed for the remission of sin. Trust in Him who is able to guard you from stumbling, and to set you before the presence of His glory without blemish, in exceeding joy.

But now, turning to the further study of the words with which God dismissed His servant from Horeb, let us notice three distinct thoughts.

THE VARIETY OF GOD'S INSTRUMENTS

Hazael, king of Syria; Jehu, the rude captain; and Elisha, the young farmer. Each was as different as possible from the others, and yet each was needed for some special work in connection with that idolatrous people. Hazael was destined to be the rod of divine vengeance to Israel at large, by whom God began to cut them short, {129} and to make them like the dust by threshing. Ah! cruel indeed was his treatment of them! (2 Kings 5:12; 10:32 12:3,17). Jehu was to be the scourge of the house of Ahab, extirpating it root and branch. Elisha's ministry was to be genial and gentle as summer rain and evening dew, like the ministry of our Lord Himself whom Elisha prefigured and of whom his name significantly spoke.

It is remarkable how God accomplishes His purposes through men who only think of working their own wild way. Their sin is not diminished or condoned because they are executing the designs of heaven, it still stands out in all its malignant deformity. And yet, though they are held accountable for the evil, it is nonetheless evident that they do whatsoever God's hand and God's counsel determined before to be done. This fact is often referred to in Scripture. Joseph comforted his brethren after his father's death, by telling them that though they thought evil against him, God meant it for good, to save people. David forbade his men to slay Shimei because, though Shimei cursed David, and cursing the king was a foul act of treason, yet "the LORD hath said unto him, Curse David" (2 Samuel 16:10). And our blessed Lord, when about to be delivered into the hands of wicked men, said that His Father was putting the cup into His hands (see Acts 2:23).

Men may do evil things against us for which they will be condemned, and yet those very things, being permitted by the wisdom and love of God, are His messages to us. Before they can reach us, they must pass through His environing, encompassing presence. If they do, then they are God's will for us, and we must meekly accept our Father's plan, saying, "Not my will, but Thine be done." {130}

NO ONE CAN ENTIRELY ESCAPE FROM GOD'S PERSONAL DEALINGS

God's nets are not all constructed with the same meshes. Men may escape through some of them; but they cannot escape through all. If they elude the Gospel ministry, they will be caught by some earnest worker, apt at personal dealing. If they manage to evade all contact with the living voice, they may yet be reached by the printed page. If they evade all religious literature, they may still be the sudden subjects of the strivings of the Spirit. "Him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay" (1 Kings 19:17).

We do not read that Elisha ever wielded the sword, and yet the ministry of gentle love is sometimes more potent in slaying souls than the more vigorous ministry of an Hazael or Jehu; and out of such slaying comes life.

Let us not compare man with man. Let us not despise any sect or denomination or body of Christian workers. What is inoperative with one is God's voice to another. We are totally unable to estimate the essential use of men. And let us not envy one another, because each of us has some special gift which qualifies us for the use of the dear Master and enables us to touch some who would be unreached if it were not for us. "But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21).

And as we look around on the entire range of ministry by which the world is filled, we may be sure that everyone has at least one chance, and that God so orders {131} the lives of men that once at least during their course they are encountered by the kind of argument which is most appropriate to their character and temperament, if only they will give ear and yield.

GOD NEVER OVERLOOKS ONE OF HIS OWN

Elijah thought that he alone was left as a lover and worshiper of God. It was a great mistake. God had Many hidden ones: "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him" (1 Kings 19:18). We know nothing of their names or history. They were probably unknown in camp or court; obscure, simple-hearted, and humble. Their only testimony was one long refusal to the solicitations of the foul rites of idolatry. They groaned and wept in secret and spake often one to another, while the Lord hearkened and heard. But they were all known to God and enrolled among His jewels and counted as a shepherd tells his sheep. He cared for them with an infinite solicitude, and it was for their sake that He raised up the good and gentle Elisha to carry on the nurture and discipline of their souls.

It has often been a subject of wonder to me how these seven thousand secret disciples could keep so close as to be unknown by their great leader. Attar of a rose will always betray its presence, hide it as we may. When salt has not lost its savor, it cannot be hid. And the work of God in human hearts must, sooner or later, discover itself. It is to be feared, therefore, that the godliness of these hidden ones was very vague and colorless, needing the eye of omniscience to detect it. But for all that, God did detect it, and He prized it. He did not quench {132} the smoking flax, but fanned it. He did not despise the grain of mustard seed, He watched its growth with tender love and care.

You may be very weak and insignificant -- not counted in the numberings of God's captains, nor deemed worthy of a name or place among His avowed servants. Yet if you have but a spark of faith and love, if you strive to keep yourself untainted by the world, you will be owned by Him whose scepter is stretched out to the most timid suppliant. But remember, if your inner life be genuine, it will not remain forever secret. It will break out as a long hidden fire; it will force its way into the light as the buried seed in which there is the spark of life.

It may be that God, by these lines, will speak to some backslider, saying: Go, return! Return to Me, from whom you have wandered. Return to My work, which you have deserted. Return to the posture of faith, from which you have fallen. Return to the happy, holy childlikeness of former years. "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings" (Jeremiah 3:22). Oh that the response may be, "Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God" (Jeremiah 3:22).