

Self Examination – An Exhortation

In 1 Kings 20 we see God working through and for an utterly wicked and ungodly man, one who did evil above all who were before him. God's use of a man to do His work is no indication of Divine acceptance. We may see in this an explanation of why some labor brilliantly in the Truth and then leave it. They are just scaffolding, unfit for the temple but temporarily useful in its construction. We can never put our faith in men.

Why did Ahab make a covenant with Benhadad and call him brother, after all he had done to God's people? Was it a misguided sense of mercy and kindness? Ahab's character would appear to preclude this, although he may have told himself it was. One thing is certain: his course was dictated by the natural thinking of the flesh, and it was very displeasing to God. It was God who was fighting Benhadad, and yet Ahab took it upon himself in the midst of God's war to make a covenant of peace with the enemy. God decreed utter destruction. Ahab felt that because the enemy was weak he was harmless, and after the manner of the world he made a covenant that he felt would bring himself glory and profit.

God has decreed utter destruction to the flesh. The powers of this world are the flesh in political and social manifestation. The friends of God are the enemies of the world. There can be no private covenants of peace and calling them brethren while God is waging war.

When, through a faithful prophet, the God who had saved Ahab rebuked him, he went to his house heavy and displeased. The manner in which Ahab is led to condemn himself is very instructive. It was identical with Nathan's approach to David.

It is very difficult—almost impossible—to judge ourselves objectively, even when we are honestly making the effort, but if we mentally reverse the position, or look at our circumstances in the impersonal way it was presented to these kings, we often find our view of the matter is greatly altered and clarified. Few things are more instructive than to see others doing the same things that we ourselves have done, and to consciously compare our reactions. Viewed from that angle, determination is often revealed as stubbornness, kindness as weakness, self-reliance as pride, industry as ambition, thrift as greed.

Ahab felt a gratifying sense of magnanimity and benevolence. He had gloriously defeated this great king, and now he was demonstrating the nobility of his nature by treating his fallen enemy with kindness and restraint. From every point of view, he would be well satisfied with his day's work, greatly and comfortably impressed with himself, in a receptive mood for well-earned congratulations and respect. How annoying, then, to have all this so rudely shattered, and in an unguarded moment to be led to publicly denounce himself in an obvious allegory. Little wonder that he went to his house heavy and displeased, disgusted with life and terribly hurt that he should be so misunderstood and unappreciated. How differently things can appear from different viewpoints! How easy to pity and excuse ourselves!

There is a little lesson in passing in verses 35-36. The prophet said, *"Smite me,"* and the man refused. And the prophet said, *"Because thou hast not obeyed the voice of the Lord, a lion shall slay thee,"* and so it happened.

God can be very terrible in His swift and relentless visitations of justice. It is imperative that we are fully and constantly aware of both aspects of His nature—severity and goodness. The flesh will inevitably presume upon its position if God's awful majesty is not kept clearly in view. It is those who have least cause for fear in this respect that are most acutely aware of the necessity for fear in its proper sense and place. Isaiah said, *"Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips."* Daniel, the greatly beloved, in a vision that enacted the resurrection, stood trembling until the angel twice assured him, *"Fear not, peace be unto thee, be strong."* When Paul says, *"Be not high-minded, but fear,"* he gives us an idea of what he means by fear. It is the opposite of high-mindedness. It is not terror or cravenness, but the humble and intelligent recognition of the exalted majesty of God and the unworthiness and insecurity of man at his best estate. If one sin could plunge the race into six thousand years of misery and death—if an entire lifetime under the tremendous strain of flawless perfection, followed by the most terrible of deaths, was necessary to establish a basis on which man could approach God—if we see around us and behind us the carcasses of millions wasting in the wilderness—then what other enlightened viewpoint is there for us than, as Paul says, *"Fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest, we should come short of it?"*

The accepted in the day of judgment say, *"When did we those things for which we are being commended?"* The rejected say, *"When did we have an opportunity to do more than we did?"* The only safe and acceptable frame of mind is that which strains every effort to render the best possible account of time and talents, but with a clear recognition of the deceptiveness of the flesh and the ever-present danger of failure if the efforts are relaxed. Any other course is gambling with eternity. Any other counsel is the mind of the serpent. If we could be doing more, and we are not doing it, how can we hope to be among the few chosen when myriads are swept away like a drop in the bucket? What distinguishes us from those myriads, that we should live forever, and they should die? Is God a respecter of persons or have we that one thing they lack—an entire, consuming devotion for the things of God? It won't come overnight. It won't just happen to us while we sleep. It can only come as the result of purposeful and sustained application and effort.

Do we, in moments of leisure or relaxation, turn to natural pleasures or to the Word of God? Here is the test of what is the deep undercurrent of our natures, and whether it will carry us to life or death. Do we do God's service as burdensome, necessary work, longing for a vacation from it; or is it a constant pleasure because of our great love for the One we are serving and our desire to be near Him and approved of Him?

There is the message to Ephesus. Let us look at it—Revelation 2. If we just read verses 2 and 3, what verdict would we give of Ephesus? Works, labor, patience, canst not bear evil, hast tried and exposed false professors of the truth; hast borne and hast not fainted. What more could be asked? What more could be done? They had fought the fight and kept the faith. Surely they could say with assurance, *"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown."*

But what do we find? Thou hast left thy first love—thou art fallen. Repent or I will come quickly and remove thy candlestick. The outer shell of works and labor and patience continued, but the original inner love was gone. They worked and endured

and had patience faithfully, but just as a matter of duty, and were doubtless glad to get away from it all occasionally when they felt they had legitimate excuse to do so. They were conscious of their own patience and self-sacrifice. They performed the service of God as a necessary burden, faithfully done, but without the spontaneous pleasure and enthusiasm of love.

This does not please God. If, after all God has done and revealed and promised for the future, men are not sufficiently enlightened and spiritually motivated to discern that the only real pleasure and satisfaction and relaxation is in Him and in His service, then He does not want their labors as a matter of burdensome duty, no matter how faithfully or patiently they are performed. We cannot give God anything. Even the service He requires is but the provision that His love has made for us to discover and enjoy the highest form of pleasure He has conceived and made possible.

He offers us an opportunity to work and live and commune with Him throughout eternity. All He wants is our full appreciation and wholehearted acceptance of the offer. He simply asks us to choose between Him and the world upon every occasion when the choice is before us, not as a matter of self-denial but of enlightened love and true preference. The fundamental requirement is that we must *want* to serve Him, whenever and however we can. We must desire Him above all things through a fully developed recognition of His infinite desirability. We all desire many things. Why? In many cases we could not give the reasons. We say they are natural desires. We desire things because we think, or feel that they are desirable; that they will satisfy certain longings within us. God has assured us that in Him all desires find their ultimate and permanent fulfillment. The purpose of life and the Scriptures is to bring a full realization and conviction of that fact to the minds of those whom God has loved and chosen.

There were many serious offenses among the Corinthians, things difficult to conceive of among brethren; but these very searching letters were written while the ecclesias were in the earliest formative stages. It had not been long since they had first heard the glorious news Paul brought and had come in out of the dark Gentile night. They had so many things to learn to make them spiritually-minded and acceptable children of God.

We marvel at the tremendous labor Paul undertook to form holy ecclesias of God out of the shapeless clay of Gentile ignorance and corruption. We get occasional glimpses of the material from which he drew. *"Such were some of you,"* he says, after cataloguing the deepest vices, *"but ye are washed, sanctified and justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus."* Firmly and patiently he corrects them and molds them together into the body of Christ, always holding before them the highest ideals of holiness and perfection.

He speaks here only of going to law against brethren, but Christ had already gone much deeper when he taught us not even to contest any legal action but rather to give more than is asked. We can afford to give. We have the limitless resources of the universe behind us. We have no need to worry about the consequences. We cannot lose. *"He that spared not His own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall He not with him, also freely give us all things?"* (Rom. 8:32). *"Take no thought—freely have ye received: freely give"* (Matt. 10:8). If only we can summon the courage and the vision

to throw ourselves upon this promise—if only we can rise to the free and unrestricted heights to which we are invited—far above the petty, grovelling levels of anxious earthly care. Cannot we see here another major aspect of John's assurance, "*Perfect love casteth out fear?*" (1 Jn. 4:18). How perfect is our love and faith in this respect?

"If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). Our only concern is to make sure that God is for us. Everything else will take care of itself.

Paul continues, "*Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters?*" (1 Cor. 6:2). The flesh is so small. So wrapped up in little things. So concerned about passing trivialities!

The future rulers of the world! Those who lay claim to the exalted destiny of priests of God and kings of the earth. Those to whom will fall the administration of the lives of millions. What a sorry spectacle they all too often present! How out of keeping with their lofty aspirations! Custodians of priceless treasure bickering over pennies, each jealous of his fancied rights—each tenderly nursing his ruffled feelings.

Would Paul sometimes wonder if all his work were a sad mistake? Wonder if he were vainly wearing himself out trying to draw common clay to impossible heights of refinement and nobility? "*I fear for you,*" he said, "*lest I have bestowed labour on you in vain*" (Gal. 4:11). And the word "*labour*," when Paul uses it, involved a measure of peril, hardship and bodily suffering that we can hardly even visualize. Paul, in his life, gave "*labour*" a real meaning. His was not composed of pleasant and convenient interludes, adjusted to the pampered desires of the flesh, but a steady, pushing, uphill course in the face of every conceivable disappointment and trial.

How he longed to draw them on to a point where he could enjoy deep spiritual communion with them, but they would not follow. Their attention was taken up with other things that Paul knew were so unimportant. They would not put forth the sustained effort and application that was necessary. He must be constantly laying again the elementary first principles when, he told them, they should by now be teachers of the deep things themselves.

"All things are lawful unto me," someone answers Paul. How familiar that sounds! "Show me where it is specifically said to be wrong." Some never rise above this level. It is not God's intention to bind us hand and foot with multitudinous commands on every conceivable matter. He gives us general principles and expects us to apply them intelligently. He indicates the direction in which His preferences lie and expects us to be eager to press in that direction without being forced reluctantly by specific command. The frame of mind that hedges against giving any more than the absolute minimum commanded or hides behind the absence of a word-for-word injunction is useless to God. He wants the heart, and that freely given.

All things are lawful—but all things are not expedient. That is, profitable or conducive to the greatest good. There is a much freer and nobler purpose in life than just hugging the bottom limit of what is lawful. "*All things are lawful,*" Paul repeats, "*but I will not be brought under the power of any.*" Much is made today of freedom, but how few are free! Freedom from the arbitrary domination of other men is a very small part of real freedom. Freedom from our own inherent bondage is much more

important. Paul said, *"Who shall deliver me from the bondage of this death?"* (Rom. 7:24). The clutch of this inner law of sin that makes a godly life a constant struggle?

"I will not be brought under the power of any." *"His servants ye are to whom ye yield yourselves to obey,"* Paul tells the Romans. And Jesus said, *"Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin . . . The truth shall make you free"* (Jn. 8:32, 34).

Then Paul applies this basic principle like this: Do these "lawful" things in question, whatever they may be, hinder a complete fulfillment of the perfect ideal that God has set and Christ has exemplified and you profess to be your aim? Do they offend others, or cause them to stumble, or distract their attention from more important things, or reduce your weight and influence with them?

If any of this be true, then this verse applies — *"I will not be brought under the power of any."* I will not be a helpless slave to anything, however small, that in any way interferes with my main objective. I will not enslave myself to a petty conception of my own dignity and "rights" when God calls me to the largeness of heart and breadth of perception comprehended in the Truth.

Paul says, as an example, *"If meat make my brother to offend, I will not eat meat while the world standeth"* (1 Cor. 8:13). The purpose of God is too great, and passing things are too small. The argument Paul uses is unanswerable. It should put to shame any contrary disposition. Christ gladly *died* for such a one—how far will *your* love go to avoid offending him or causing him to stumble? All things are lawful, but it is our glorious and exalted privilege to forgo our "rights" for Christ's sake, and with Him to suffer patiently when the wisdom of God requires it as a necessary ingredient in the bringing of many sons to glory. *"Let no man seek his own, but every man another's welfare"* (1 Cor. 10:24).

Paul concludes with his customary exhortation to holiness, *"Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?" "Ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's"* (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

To glorify God is to visibly show forth God's characteristics, to openly champion all the things that God stands for, to publicly demonstrate the superiority of God's holy way of life over the narrow and mean and ugly way of the flesh.

The temple of God was very holy. The greatest care and reverence had to be manifested in all things connected with it, not a reverence that was fearful and depressed, but one that was joyous and free. *"The temple of God is holy, which temple ye are . . . If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy"* (1 Cor. 3:17). Great privileges—great responsibilities. They cannot be taken up half-heartedly or fearfully.

Outside are the fearful and unbelieving, the hesitant and faint-hearted, greatly desiring the reward but not prepared to forsake everything for it—hoping to find some way of gaining the future without placing any jeopardy upon the present—drawn by the light but afraid of the flame.

"But ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them and walk in them." *"Having therefore this promise,"* Paul observes, *"let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement . . . perfecting holiness in the fear of the Lord"* (2 Cor. 6:16; 7:1).

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