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The Service of the Lord (1930)

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Hindrances in Service

The Lord's work makes progress not only in spite of difficulties but frequently by means of them. Service to God is rendered in a world where the Enemy has power and uses it in untiring and varied aggression against all that is done for God. This ceaseless opposition, directed against the glory of Christ, has beneficial effects. It reminds His servants of their inability to do anything in their own strength and of their dependence on the Lord, and casts them upon Him for His ever-ready help. It thereby proves the means of strengthening them to continue their arduous labour with joy of heart, and to face and go through every difficulty, strong in the Lord and the power of His might, and undeterred by any obstacle however formidable.

"But Satan Hindered" (?)

The way in which God turns to good account the Adversary's opposition to His servants is frequently illustrated in the Scriptures. One of the most striking cases is the result of the hindrance placed by Satan against the return of the Apostle Paul to the church at Thessalonica. He would fain have come to them, he says, once and again, but Satan hindered (1 Thess. 2:18). Whatever the actual hindrance was - not improbably it lay in the fact that pledges against the renewal of trouble had been extracted by the city authorities from Jason and the other converts (Acts 17: 9) - it nevertheless resulted in the

Apostle's writing to them instead. Accordingly the effect of the Devil's opposition is that we are in possession of the priceless treasures of the two Epistles to the Thessalonians.

In a similar manner we might trace the circumstances which produced the later Epistles written during Paul's confinement in Rome. Again, in recording the events connected with the penning of one of these very Epistles, he says that the things which had happened to him there had proved to be for the progress of the gospel; for his bonds had become manifest in Christ "throughout the whole Praetorian Guard, and to all the rest." This suggests that the soldiers of this famous regiment, as well as others, had heard the gospel from his lips. A further result of his difficulties he speaks of as follows: "Most of the brethren in the Lord, being confident through my bonds, are more abundantly bold to speak the Word of God without fear" (Phil. 1:12-14, R.V.).

Here, then, was a missionary, hampered in his work, restricted in his activity, and circumscribed in the sphere of his service, the object of Satan's ceaseless and varied hostility. To all appearances the efforts of the enemy had resulted in a serious set-back to the spread of the gospel. One is inclined perhaps to conceive that greater advances might have been made, had this servant of God been at liberty to continue his journeys, founding new churches, visiting those already established, and otherwise furthering the cause of Christ. Not so in the thoughts and purposes of the Lord. God is not thwarted by the work of His foes. "None can stay His hand."

How little we are able to calculate the far-reaching effects of the Apostle's testimony in Rome, or the full extent of the meaning of his inspired statement, "The things which have happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel"! And after all, was he not following in the steps of His Master whose faithful and devoted servant he was, and whose own claims and authority had seemed to the world absolutely invalidated by the overwhelming degradation and shameful humiliation of the Cross? The Death of Christ was but a seeming defeat. The Enemy who sought to accomplish it met his doom in his apparent success. The secret of the glorious victory over that effort of the Evil One was made known in Eden, at his first attempt to thwart, the Divine will. The bruising of the heel of the Seed of the woman, would mean the bruising of the head of the foe himself. The death of the Son of God was the destruction of His adversary.

Satan Buffeted

We similarly see God's wonder-working way in the matter of physical weakness. How many a worker who is tried in health feels that much more effective service could be rendered if only he were free from the malady! Here again the lesson of Paul's life had been recorded for our comfort. Doubtless he felt that his loved ministry was much impeded by his "thorn in the flesh." He besought the Lord thrice that it might depart from him. Though his request was not granted, the Lord saw to it, not only that he should be comforted, but that all that was needed by way of explanation should be made known to him. There was both the preventive side of the trouble and the empowering side. Not only did he learn that it was inflicted lest he should be exalted overmuch through the greatness of the revelations he had received, but he also learned gladly to glory in his weaknesses, that the power of Christ might rest upon him.

Let us note, too, the abiding effort which the gracious word of the Lord had upon him. He records it not as a mere historical incident, but as something the comfort of which he had felt ever since, and was still enjoying. "He *hath said* (not 'He said') unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). The consequence was that he could say, "When I

am weak, then am I strong." That was the outcome of Satan's buffeting. The hindrance became a help. Satan's messenger became the Lord's minister. Many and many a servant of God has been similarly tried. How blessed the comfort of this record of Paul's experience! And how wonderful will be the revelation, in the coming Day, of God's dealings with us in our service here below!

Satan Traduced

We learn from the Apostle of other ways in which his service was hampered. His heart must have been sorely tried by the constant activity of those who traduced him, imputing things to him of which he was not guilty, and seeking to undo his work by misrepresentation and insinuation. This he particularly mentions in the second Epistle to the Corinthians. The gospel had proved fruitful in Corinth, both among Jew and Gentile. During the initial difficulties the Lord had revealed to him that He had "much people in that city." We are therefore not surprised to find that the opposition of the Adversary was vigorous and varied. The character of his ministry was disparaged by influential opponents. He was accused of changing his opinion and of fickleness (2 Cor. 1:17,18); of walking according to the flesh (10:2); of inferior capacities in his ministry (10:10); of acting toward the saints by guile and taking advantage of them for his own ends (12:16,17). Unfavourable comparisons were made between him and other apostles (11:5,6), and the service he had rendered in such disinterestedness and genuine love was in other ways defamed. All this must have been exceedingly burdensome. Moreover these matters required firm handling, not in the spirit of mere self-defence, but for sake of the Lord's work and the profit of the church. We can understand something of the stress under which this Epistle was written.

There can be scarcely anything more trying for the servant of the Lord than misrepresentation of his motives and methods, and especially when he might have expected that those who act thus would seek an opportunity of an interview with him, and of becoming acquainted with facts. Sometimes it pleases God thus to test faith. Yet even these obstacles are under His control and become His instruments for the carrying out of His purposes. Difficulties are intended to draw us nearer to the Lord. Thus, learning that all our resources lie in Him, we derive from Him the power to enable us, if our private interests are at stake, to manifest the spirit of Christ towards our detractors. If, on the other hand, the honour of His Name and the blessing of His people require that the matter be taken up in any way, the Lord is ready to impart the wisdom and strength to do so, and from Him alone can we derive it. In each respect the Apostle, who so closely followed the Lord, has set us an example.

"God is His Own Interpreter"

Hindrances in service come from within as well as from without. Against these we ever need to be on the watch. There is always a tendency for our service to become merely mechanical, in other words, void of that spiritual power which must ever be present if we are to be used of God. Only the help of the Holy Spirit is sufficient for the maintenance of that power. It is His gracious ministry to lead us constantly into communion with God, that is to say, into the realisation of fellowship with the Father and with the Son, and this He does through the Word of God. Times of communion, alone with the Lord, undistracted by earthly circumstances, are essential for spiritual vitality in service. We must be first occupied with Christ if we are to be occupied for Him. Indeed, the presentation of our bodies "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto Him" is described as our reasonable (or intelligent) service (Rom. 12:1). The word in this passage denotes that form of service which is itself an act of worship.

Then, again, the influence of the world without is apt to find a ready entrance into our inner life. Contact with the world, inevitable in our work for the Lord, tends to deaden our sensitiveness to sin. For the isolated missionary, surrounded continually by the grossness of heathenism, the conditions are acknowledged to be unspeakably testing in this respect; but nowhere can we afford to be negligent in watching against the gradual encroachment of the power of the world upon our spiritual life, and the consequent diminution of spiritual vigour.

How perfect is the provision made for us, by which the hindrances arising from the flesh within may be counteracted and removed! The unremitting ministry of our Great High Priest, the efficacy of His precious blood, the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and the rectifying and guiding power of the Word of God, these are our unfailing resources.

Rewards of Service

To the devoted servant of Christ the service He appoints carries its own reward. The love that has liberated him from the bondage of sin has captivated his soul. For one who appreciates, even in a small measure, what his Redeemer has done for him, it suffices that he should be the bondservant of Jesus Christ. Grace it is that provides us with service to render. "I was made a minister (or servant)," the Apostle says, "according to the grace of God which was given me" (Eph. 3:7). The unutterable love of Christ is enough to preclude our looking upon any reward of our service as the motive of that service. Still less as the outcome of merit on the servant's part. He Himself taught His disciples to say, after they had fulfilled their service, "We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do."

There is, however, another side to this, and the Lord constantly directed the hearts of His followers for their encouragement to the reward which would eventually be theirs. Thus, concerning deeds of kindness He said, "He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward; and he that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward, and whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water only, in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you he shall in no wise lose his reward" (Matt. 10:41,42, R.V.).

Concerning rejection and reproach for His sake, He said, "Blessed are ye when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day and leap for joy: for behold your reward is great in heaven" (Luke 6:22,23).

Again, concerning self-sacrifice for His sake, "There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children, for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this present time, and in the world to come life everlasting" (Luke 18:29,30).

Faithful stewardship would result in the reward of authority hereafter (Luke 12:44), and similarly the Lord's explanation of the parable of the nobleman and his servants who were left to trade with his money, was "Unto every one that hath, to him shall be given; but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away from him" (Luke 19:20).

So elsewhere in the Word of God, the Holy Spirit constantly directs us to have regard to the reward, and warns us of the possibility of losing it. Moses is brought before us as a pattern for our faith in

this respect. The reason assigned to his decision to be "evil entreated with the people of God," instead of enjoying pleasures of sin for a season, was that, "accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, he had respect unto the recompense of the reward."

Reproach for Christ Was His Present Riches

The reward would come after. That is ever to be the order. Christ Himself, first; the reward He gives, second. Loyalty to Christ will never fail of present blessing and future recompense. Never did a saint suffer spiritually by accumulated wealth accruing from endurance of reproaches for Christ.

The manner in which the Apostle Paul had respect unto the recompense of reward is strikingly brought out in his first Epistle to the Corinthians. Speaking of his service in the gospel, he tells of his efforts to gain both Jew and Gentile; he says, "I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the gospel's sake, that I may be a joint partaker thereof" (1 Cor. 9:22,23, R.V.). How thoroughly the messenger was identified with his message! The blessing wrought by the gospel was his own blessing. There could be no half-heartedness about work carried on like that. He then applies to his service the metaphors of the race-course and the boxing-match, "I therefore so run," he says, "as not uncertainly; so fight I (the Greek word means 'box'; see R.V., margin) as not beating the air: but I buffet my body and bring it into bondage: lest by any means after that I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected." There was no false step in the running, no random blow in the buffeting.

We miss his meaning if we take him to indicate the actual beating of the body in outwardly imposed, ascetic discipline. On the contrary, he kept his natural inclinations and propensities in severe check, in order that his members might be in entire subjection to the will of God for His service. He mortified the deeds of the body. But while he does this for the Lord's sake, as His servant, his eye is on the Judgment Seat. It is possible to be eternally saved by grace as a believer and yet to be disapproved at the time of reward-giving there. In the Olympian games in Greece, a Competitor who had infringed the regulations was pronounced *adokimos* at the *bema*. But the matter did not end there. He was required to place at his own expense a bronze image of Jupiter at the entrance of the arena, as the lasting memorial of his disqualification. The intense solemnity of the possibility of disqualification at the Judgment Seat of Christ, led the Apostle to undergo the rigid discipline mentioned above. Stretching forward to the things that are before, he pressed on "toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

The Vital "How" and "What"

There is a solemn passage in the same Epistle regarding reward, and loss of reward, in connection with gospel work and subsequent service in building up assemblies. First, there is the metaphor drawn from agriculture. One labourer plants and another waters. Both are one, as God's fellow-workers. Their rewards are to differ according to the labour of each. Then there is the metaphor of the builder. "If any man buildeth on the foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, each man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself shall prove each man's work of what sort it is" (1 Cor. 3:8-13).

It is possible to engage in service in connection with the gospel according to methods which may appear attractive and successful, but which are not in conformity to the will of God. The Lord gauges our service, not by its success, but by our faithfulness to Him. Apparent success may after all be the

outcome of building wood, hay, and stubble on the foundation. "If any man's work shall abide which he hath built thereon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved, but so as by fire." The fire will consume, not purify. Not the man himself is to be burned but his work, work which, figuratively, consists of wood, hay, or stubble, work that has been done in the energy of the natural will, rather than by faithful adherence to the instruction of God's Word under the guidance of the Spirit.

How important it is to do all things "according to the pattern that has been shown us"! The theme is continued in the next chapter, where Paul speaks of himself and his fellow-workers as "servants of Christ." In this respect we are not to judge one another before the time. When the Lord comes He "will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall each man have his praise from God" (4:1-5). We must not act toward our fellow-servants as if we were on the judgment seat. The Judge Himself, by whom actions are weighed, will in that day bestow upon each one the praise that is due.

How faithfully the Apostle wrought in building up the saints! How true to the pattern was his work! Consequently he is able to say with confidence to the Thessalonian saints, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of glorying? Are not even ye before our Lord Jesus at His coming?" - lit., "in His Parousia" (1 Thess. 2:19). Similarly the saints at Philippi are his "joy and crown" (Phil. 4:1). Here are rewards open to all, rewards for winning and caring for souls. Then, a special reward is to be given for faithfulness in pastoral work. The under shepherds who have themselves been examples to the flock the while they have shepherded them, will receive from the Chief Shepherd a crown of glory at His appearing (1 Pet. 5:3,4).

Let all our service be characterised by two things especially. Firstly, let it be rendered "heartily as to the Lord." For "of the Lord we are to receive the reward of the inheritance." Secondly, let our heart's affections be set upon His return. The crown of righteousness is to be given to all them that have loved His appearing. Loving His appearing is something very practical. With the Apostle it meant fighting the good fight, finishing the course, and keeping the faith (2 Tim. 4:7,8). To the day of reward the Lord Himself looks forward, and almost His last word to His servants is, "Behold I come quickly; and My reward is with Me (suggesting His pleasure in bestowing it), to give every man according as his work shall be."