

"BUSY HERE AND THERE"

"And as thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone." I Kings 20:40.

Three times Ben-hadad, the king of Syria, went to war against Ahab, the king of Israel, and the first two times he was defeated. Upon his second crushing defeat, he was completely under the power of Ahab. Because he was such a dangerous enemy of Israel, it was the expressed will of God that Ahab should slay him. Fearful of being slain, Ben-hadad sent courtiers, robed in sackcloth, covered in ashes and crawling in humility before Ahab, to plead for the preservation of their master's life. Gloating in the pride of victory and somewhat beside himself, Ahab said: "Is he yet alive? He is my brother." Thus, contrary to the will of God and the welfare of the Israelites, Ahab spared the life of this wicked and idolatrous king. Failure to do his duty in this regard caused judgment to descend upon Ahab, which resulted in his eventual defeat.

Riding along in his chariot, Ahab saw a miserable, dust-covered and wounded man by the roadside. This man was a prophet who had disguised himself as a wretch. When the King stopped his chariot, the nameless prophet spoke a parable about a soldier who was charged by his superior officer to guard an important prisoner of war. His commission was to this effect: "Keep this man: if by any means he be missing, then shall thy life be for his life, or else thou shalt pay a talent of silver." From the very moment that the superior officer committed the prisoner into his custody and said, "Keep this man," this soldier was under an obligation from which nothing could free him. His one business was to look after that captive and see that he was kept securely. That constituted his whole duty.

This man was set free from all other tasks in order that he might give himself completely to the doing of this one thing. That task was his very own. As certainly as this man of the long ago had a particular task to perform, so do you and I. God has a purpose for each of our lives, and that is why He gives to every one his work. God rightfully expects us to work constructively. It is our task to build and not to tear down. When Mary made her priceless contribution by anointing Christ Jesus at the feast in the house of Simon the leper, what part did Judas Iscariot play? He played the part of the destructive critic. It takes far less intelligence and ability to tear down and destroy than it does to do almost anything else. Your work and mine is to be constructive and not destructive.

With the prisoner in his custody, the soldier looked around and saw various other things which he thought should be done before the army returned from the battle. Instead of guarding his prisoner carefull, he went hither and thither busy about other things. He left undone the one thing which he should have done. He had received special orders to give his entire time to the particular task of guarding the prisoner. The importance of that task was such as to justify his neglect of regular work. It was a question of relative importance or priority.

This man understood perfectly what he was to do, as well as the great importance of doing it. He knew that it was a life or death business with him. While he was busy doing other things, the prisoner, who was in his charge, quite naturally fled and escaped. That night the officer returned and as the trembling soldier stood before his superior the only thing he could say was: "And as thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone."

This guard did not fail because of ignorance, inability or idleness. He failed because he was "busy here and there," instead of attending to his duty.

It is certainly right to be busy. Of all times in history, people are the busiest now. America is like a beehive, but much of our activity is not worth the trouble or effort. We cannot go fast enough. Many of us are not getting anywhere, but we are going just the same. We are like squirrels in a cage; there is plenty of action, but no progress. While we are so busily engaged in secondary and unimportant details, we are neglecting our main duties and the most important things.

Many people are busy from Monday morning through Sunday night, but not in doing what God wants them to do. As we say, "They have their fingers in every pie," but no pie is better because they have fingered it. There are degrees of importance in duties which we owe to ourselves and to others. When we are surrounded by many and conflicting activities, we must select the one that is most important and give our time and energy to it. Unless we pursue this course we shall be "busy here and there" and accomplish little or nothing in the end. Always remember that duties never conflict. Never let those things about which you are so busy every day come between you and your supreme duty. Avoid anything that will interfere with your duty to God. Be busy about that which God will approve and bless. Many unfortunate souls today have so many things to do, so many engagements to keep, so many functions to attend and so many burdens to carry that they cannot perform their duties. Too many of us are engaged in a stressful and straining life of trivialities that we do not have any time left for the highest things.

Margaret Slattery tells about a poor family. The father worked hard, regularly, but could not support the family. The mother would get up at four o'clock in the morning, trudge to a hotel where she scrubbed floors until just time to go home and cook breakfast for the family. She worked all day at home, prepared supper early and left it on the table for her husband and the children, because the husband got home late, as he walked to save carfare. She went back and worked other hours. In the same city lived a woman who had her breakfast served to her in bed about ten or eleven o'clock. She worked on her fingernails and eyebrows until one or two o'clock, ate lunch, played cards in the afternoon, went to the country club and danced and dined until 2:00 A.M. Then she told her husband that she had to go away for a rest; she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Multitudes are trifling with trivialities instead of careering among sublimities.

Ease and evasion do not develop strong character, rugged spirits and stalwart souls. They do not win the espousal of brave men and women.

It is related that King Henry IV asked the Duke of Alva if he had observed the great eclipse of the sun which had lately happened. "No," he replied, "I have so much to do on earth, that I have no leisure to look up to heaven." Does that statement not photograph the condition and attitude of multitudes of people? Is this not the reason why we do not experience high tides of enthusiasm, the sweep of power, the irresistible wakes of holy influence, that once purged the churches and fired them with holy zeal? We must regain the pristine power if the calls of our generation are to be met.

Multitudes of church people are "at ease in Zion," when foundations are being shaken, when heavens are being rent, when civilization is crumbling, when the darkness of apostasy is deepening, when humanity is crying for the "Bread of Life." Christian people are the only group on earth who have a cure for earth's ills, fears, insanity and needs. Will we falter, fail and betray a lost world?

We have too much moderation in our churches and too little affirmation. Sin is smiled upon with fawning indulgence. We have fallen from lofty heights to boggy depths; from highlands of compassion to the lowlands of complacency; from the pinnacles of main things to the bowery of almost anything. Once we flamed with fires of compassion, now a warrant of death is hounding our trail. When churches were separate from the world, they were powerful in winning the lost from the world. They have compromised with the world and have lost the respect of the world.

All of us are called to action. This is a day of gravity. The hour is an imperial one, loaded with importance and freighted with destiny. We should not, we dare not fail our Lord nor our people. We are not to do the trivial when immensities call us. The only crime is not in doing something wicked. It is criminal to busy ourselves "here and there," to give priority to nonentities in the midst of immensities, as Milton says, "Without dimension, where length, breadth, and height, and time, and place are lost."

"He was gone." This statement has pathos in it. A death rattle permeates it. It describes one who flirts with life and dallies with destiny. It is odious with unfaithfulness to a trust, and unsightly with the scandal of betrayal. If we are thus guilty, opportunities will flee and priceless possessions will be lost. We may be paralyzed by inordinate wickedness; put to sleep by the narcotic of pleasure; and hypnotized by the lure of wealth. France is a lamentable example.

General Giraud analyzed the causes of the collapse of France. The decline of the family, primacy of pleasure, lure of ease, prostitution of the schools, disregard for discipline from home, to army, unwillingness to work, luxury, spread of venereal diseases, use of alcohol, lack of moral earnestness, and the desecration of the Lord's Day. Apply these tests to America and see how we are following the suicidal course of France. Add to this analysis the declaration of Marshal Petain after the fall of France: "Our soldiers were drunk and would not fight. Since the victory of World War I, the spirit of pleasure, of riotous living and drinking has prevailed over the spirit of sacrifice." These are not the statements of preachers. They are hardened warriors, who do not blink at facts.

No wonder Theodore Roosevelt said, "Free peoples can escape being mastered themselves by others only by being able to master themselves." In our effort to free people from slavery and shame, woe betide us if in doing so we fail to free ourselves from the enslavement of ourselves.

"He was gone," describes graphically the danger of the loss of opportunity to be saved. "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Eternal life transcends everything in importance, yet we trifle with our souls and with the responsibility of winning souls. Nothing can atone for neglected salvation. "He

"There is a time, we know not when,
A point, we know not where,
That marks the destiny of men
To glory or despair."