

SIDETRACKED AND SLAIN

"And he cried unto the man of God that came from Judah, saying, Thus saith the Lord, Forasmuch as thou hast disobeyed the mouth of the Lord, and hast not kept the commandment which the Lord thy God commanded thee, But camest back, and hast eaten bread and drunk water in the place, of the which the Lord did say to thee, Eat no bread, and drink no water; thy carcase shall not come unto the sepulchre of thy fathers." I Kings 13:21-22.

One of the wonderful things about the Bible is that it reveals every phase of human life. The controlling motives, deepest desires, pathetic tragedies, hidden conflicts, creative joys and sorrows are all revealed with amazing likeness to our own experience. In the Divine Word every man sees himself, as it were, in a glass and realizes that some of its most revealing stories might have been written about himself and been the description of his own conduct. While the Bible is a mirror in which we may see ourselves, most of us spend more time examining the mirror than we do in examining ourselves as we are revealed in the mirror. Moreover, every man is strangely depressed or uplifted according to the response he makes to the conviction that is thus forced upon him, that here in the Word of God he is actually in touch with the God Who knows and Who cares about him.

Among the dire tragedies, recorded with a wealth of detail which makes it impossible for us to overlook their personal significance to ourselves, none are more arresting than the records of men who have been turned aside from the high pathway of faithful obedience.

For those who are open-eyed, the Holy Scriptures are rich in stories that show us ourselves. In the thirteenth chapter of First Kings is a narrative that is little known and somewhat terrifying; yet, it reflects the case history of many a life in any community.

Here was an unnamed prophet who lived in the days of Jeroboam, the king of Israel, when calf-worship was being substituted for the worship of Jehovah. You will recall that it was part of the king's strategy to build two altars, one at Bethel and the other at Dan, in order that the people should not return to Jerusalem for the periodical observances of the Feasts. He feared the religious influence of the Temple and its services upon a political situation of very delicate and uncertain equilibrium. His action in building these altars for the worship of the people was, of course, dictated entirely by considerations of political expediency. This is not the only time in history that religion has been made a pawn in the political game, and always for the benefit of the politician.

While this young, nameless prophet was in some secret trysting place with God, the Spirit of God commanded him to go to Bethel, where Jeroboam had erected one of his heathen altars, to stand before the king, to denounce him to his face for his obstinacy and his sin, to declare his doom and that of the altar he had erected and then to return to his home without eating or drinking or accepting anyone's hospitality on the way.

On the very morning of the inauguration of this altar when Jeroboam stood with the incense ready, this unknown prophet strode forward from the crowd, and what a thrill ran through the people. It seemed that he did not see anybody, not even the king. His eyes were riveted upon the altar. He cried to it, "O altar, altar!" and foretold that a child should be born of the house of David who would offer on it the bones of its ministering priests.

Naturally the king was full of anger against him. Politicians always hate prophets. They can do pretty well what they like with priests, buying their silence with promises of promotion, preferment and patronage, but they cannot buy the true prophet. The true prophet is a man whose price has never yet been discovered. His conscience is never for sale. This young man was of that order. The furious Jeroboam pointed to the intruder and cried to his retinue to seize him. In that very instant his outstretched and pointing hand was smitten with paralysis and withered. Shocked and alarmed and fearful because of what had come upon him, the king begged the prophet to pray for the healing of his withered hand. He did so, and in answer to his prayer it was restored.

Jereboam's attitude changed completely. Unable to cow this young prophet by fury he tried flattery. Like most men of his order, he thought that a bribe would probably succeed where a blast would be absolutely powerless. So, he invited this young man to dinner, asking him to go home to the palace and eat with him at his table. But, this young prophet was altogether uninfluenced by the flattery as he had been unmoved by the threat of the king; for both were equally insulting to the God Whom he represented.

When the invitation had been refused and the messenger of the Lord was on his way out of Bethel, he was overtaken by an older man who insisted that he was a prophet with a special message for the young man. He claimed that an angel had told him that the young prophet should come to his home and partake of refreshments. He was an unblushing liar, who dared to take the name of the Lord upon his lips and say to this young prophet, "The Lord hath sent me to thee," with just the same invitation as the king had offered him in vain, "Come home with me, and eat bread."

That claim was false, but the young man fell for this piece of trickery. He went home with the older man, in spite of God's clear command to him. While they were sitting at the table, the old man began to gloat over him. He reminded him that he may have thought it was the Word of the Lord he was following, but he also told him that he would not live because he had disobeyed God. He remarked, "Since you have scouted the order of the Eternal and disobeyed what the Eternal your God commanded you, your corpse shall never reach the tomb of your fathers" (Moffatt).

The next verse lifts the curtain on the tragic outcome of this strange drama: "Off he went, but a lion met him on the road, and killed him." In the morning a gallant courier of God's message; at night a ghastly corpse under God's displeasure! In the morning a man of steadfast purpose; at night a victim of vacillation and disloyalty—a man who permitted himself to be turned from his purpose! Sidetracked and slain!

From this story there come to us some simple, searching and intensely practical lessons, which I want to impress upon your minds and lay upon your hearts. It may be that some of you are standing at a crossroad in life, where decisions have to be made, and are face to face with just the same temptation, in another form, as challenged this young man when he met the old prophet.

I. A Brave Beginning Is No Guarantee Of A Bright Ending.

There was something magnificent about the way this young man started out for God and for righteousness in a particularly evil hour in Israel's life. He began his mission with high aim and went through the first stages of it with uncompromising fidelity. He refused to be cowed by the pomp and circumstance of King Jeroboam when that political schemer was corrupting the religion and morals of the people. Failing to blast the prophet with anger, the king tried to buy him off with a bribe. The prophet met both tests with victorious courage. "A young man who begins life like that will go places," we say. Yes, he will if, but that "if" is a big word. He will earn a large usefulness provided he does not turn away from his obedient loyalty to Almighty God.

Life in many of its phases—athletics, marriage, business, etc.,—seems to say to us: The set of qualities that guarantee a fine beginning is not the same as those which assure a good ending. "Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof; and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit" (Ecclesiastes 7:8). Begin as splendidly as you may, but make sure that you do not frustrate the grace of God by getting sidetracked.

Sidetracked! Isn't that what happened to Aaron? While his brother, Moses, was away from the camp of Israel and on the mount with God, Aaron permitted himself to turn aside to the worship of the golden calf. Isn't that what befell Samson, a mighty man

who became as weak as water? Under loyalty to his vows he was strong, and through him God wrought great deliverances, but he was sidetracked by a cunning and conscienceless woman and fell the pathetic victim of his pitiless foes, the Philistines. We think of Solomon, a man to whom was given great wisdom, affluence and influence for the service of God and his country, and we realize that is what happened to him. Of him we read that "his wives turned away his heart" after other gods. Solomon, whose palace was as elegant as his power was fabulous, sidetracked before the end, and the clouds of idolatry and sensuality blotted out the morning light of his glory. Isn't that what happened to Judas, who companied with the Lord for three years, and then sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver at the end? We think of the tragedy of Demas, the man who deserted his Lord and his comrade in a time of stress, trying to laugh gaily over the fortune he made when he gave up the poverty of being a Christian evangelist.

Sidetracked and slain! History looks us squarely in the face and tells us that a fair beginning, important as it is, is no guarantee of a fine ending.

II. Temptation Although Overcome Once Frequently Returns.

The picture of the young man in verse fourteen is full of the elements of human life and experience. He knew God and had been taught by Him. He had received a message from God as to what he was to do, the message he was to deliver, and as to his own conduct during the course of its delivery. He performed a noble service in Bethel. He rebuked the King for his evil influence upon Israel. He denounced the altar of the heathen. He lifted the banner of pure worship. Now he is on his way home. On the way he stops to rest. He is "sitting under an oak."

His first temptation must have been to fear Jeroboam's hatred. That temptation was overcome. The second must have been to fall for Jeroboam's hospitality. That too was overcome. Ah, it has been a wonderful day--so far! Big things were accomplished. A glow of satisfaction cheered his heart. So, he takes it easy. He sits down to rest. And there, while he was weary, relaxed and possibly over-confident, the deceiving prophet found him and seduced him. Under his influence he did what he refused to do under wicked Jeroboam's influence. He broke his vow to abstain from food until his mission had been completed.

There is no time in life when it is safe to take it easy, to relax watchfulness, resoluteness and obedience. Make up your mind to this, Satan will never take your first "No" for a final answer. He is too smart and too persistent for that. Temptation to which we have said "No" has a way of returning. While it may appear from another quarter, it is the same temptation, proposed with the same intent.

Satan is a master in the use of different techniques, but always he has just one aim in view--to break your loyalty to God. His approaches are endlessly varied, but his aim is forever the same. It is temptation from an unlikely source that so often overcomes men. They do not know the cunning of Satan. They do not understand that he sets a trap for a man's strength as well as for his weakness. It was Moses, the man of meekness, whose life was marred by arrogance and anger. It was David, a man who was singularly spiritually-minded, who was overtaken and overwhelmed by sin. It was Peter, ordinarily a courageous man, who fell, white-faced and whimpering, before the pointed finger of a serving maid who in sly railery accused him of being a companion of the Lord Jesus. Temptation smashed back by the grace of God has a stubborn, subtle way of returning.

III. The Soul's Greatest Battles Are Often Fought Over Very Small Things.

After all, it was not a very big thing, this going to the old prophet's house for a meal. There really was not much to it. There is no suggestion that the meal was not

such as a man of God might consistently take. But, fidelity in small things is that which alone attests the value of any professed loyalty to God. It is in small things that our loyalty to Christ is commonly tested and ordinarily proved. How could God depend on that young prophet in any future mission if he had failed Him in such a small thing? It is usually in small things that God tests our trustworthiness. If he could not be relied upon in a small detail, how could God trust him on some larger errand? About some little thing there may be raging the greatest conflict of your life, and your entire usefulness in the future may depend upon your unquestioning obedience to the Lord Jesus in regard to it.

IV. Our Safety Lies In Strict Obedience To God's Revealed Will.

God had honored this young prophet by giving him this work. Still more, God granted him the power of working miracles--the altar was rent and the king's hand restored. In spite of all this, what a terrible end he came to--and all because of his disobedience to God. Learn, then, that our gifts may be our danger; our talents may be our peril, if we ever think that in the strength of these we can dare to be disobedient to God. God teaches us that gifts are no safeguard. The brightest must obey just like the dullest. The only road to happiness is to obey God unswervingly. It is to follow Christ all the way.

Here was a young servant of God who had his "marching orders" for the day. The main service that God asked of him was to save Israel from further folly in idolatry. But, incidental to the performing of that service was a conviction the Lord had given him that he should not stop for eating or drinking until his mission had been accomplished. For him that was the clearly revealed will of God.

It was trifling with that revelation that landed him before nightfall in the middle of a first-rate tragedy. He became the prey of a wild beast when he played with the will of God.

Are you listening, fellow Christian? The one sphere in which you can be most sure of God's will is that of your own life and work. You may have an opinion as to what God's will is for your neighbor or friend, but you know what it is for you. Whatever you do, don't trifle with that knowledge. Don't lose that light.

You can remember when God spoke to you and said, "I want you to stand for Me and speak for Me, and be My witnessing disciple wherever you go from this day forward." Have you done it as He wanted you to do? Or, you were up against a difficult decision. The road of your life forked right there in front of you. Two ways were beckoning. Which one to take? Then the way of duty was made plain to you, so plain that you could not question it. That was God's will for you. Have you been governed by it?

Once a man knows God's will he must do it. Here is a good motto: "The will of God, nothing less, nothing more, nothing else." It expresses vital truth. Once a man knows what God's will for his life is he must do it. He must do it even though all the old prophets in the world unite in trying to divert him. He must do it even if it costs him his life. He must do nothing else, for his safety, happiness and usefulness depend on his strict obedience to God's revealed will. There is a tragic consequence awaiting him if he does otherwise.

Let me close these remarks with a word of hope. You may have begun well, and then fallen. You may have had your fellowship with Christ broken. You may have had your spiritual vitality and influence devoured by some hungry lion of sin. If so, I hold before you now the cross of the blessed Saviour. I hold before you the shining fact that He can make the dead to live, the failing to succeed and the shattered to be whole again.

Jacob got sidetracked, but God brought him back and made a spiritual prince out of him. David got sidetracked, but he came back and walked thereafter the white way of holiness. Peter got sidetracked, but he found the highway again. John Mark got sidetracked, but he got ashamed of the white feather of his miserable surrender and seized again the blood-stained banner of the lowly Nazarene.

You can do the same. This very moment is the time to do it. How will God treat you? He does not leave you in any doubt. Listen to His Word: "Let the wicked forsake his way." There's outer failure. "And the unrighteous man his thoughts." There's inner failure. "And let him return unto the Lord; and He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7). It is His word to you. Take it and make it your own.