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CONTENTS

The Search After Truth.....Howard Agnew Johnston
 The Perils of A Prophet.....J. Ross Stevenson
 Church Finance.....Theron H. Rice
 Efficiency.....A. L. Phillips
 The Union of Christ with the Believer and the Influences There-
 from.....D. H. Rolston
 John Berry Clark.....Thos. Cary Johnson

MISSIONARY

Progress in India.....J. Lovell Murray

EDITORIAL

REVIEWS

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THE SEARCH AFTER TRUTH.

BY HOWARD AGNEW JOHNSTON, D. D.

There is a widespread impression that our age is one of unusual intellectual unrest. Within recent years a prominent writer issued a book whose title included the words "An Age of Doubt." Another prominent author within a year issued a book entitled "An Age of Faith". Of course we have both faith and doubt; but this age is characterized above all others as being distinctively *an age of facts*. It is also rightly called a "scientific age" as compared to former times, because the scientific method obtains in the thinking world. There is more stability in the thinking world today than ever before, for there is a growing sense of actual knowledge and certainty, resulting from the scientific research and the critical spirit which have canvassed the whole realm of investigation, and have practically decided many things which are henceforth settled for all scholarly men.

In all this research it will be fair to say that men have been asking one question, and asking it earnestly. It is the old question which we have recorded as being asked by Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea: "What is Truth?" There might be various answers to this question offered by different students of the world's life; but the largest consensus of judgment will agree that the deepest purpose of the question goes to the point of bringing men light upon the problems involving the moral and spiritual welfare of the human race. It is not enough to know all the facts about the physical universe. It is not even enough to know all the facts involved in right thinking in the intellectual realm. The supreme asset for humanity is character. The supreme need for humanity is righteousness. The supreme problem for humanity is the moral and spiritual prob-

THE PERILS OF A PROPHET.

J. ROSS STEVENSON, D. D.

In the First Book of Kings, Chapter 13, Verse 26, there is an obituary notice which is quite startling. It reads thus: "It is the man of God who was disobedient unto the word of the Lord". These words sum up the story of an unnamed prophet, who was sent by the Lord to rebuke Jereboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin. He must have been a man of excellent training, of true consecration, of noble courage, and of marked fidelity. He stood ready to do the will of his Lord, and he was sent as a trusted messenger on a perilous mission. He could not be intimidated, and he could not be bribed. Against the greatest of temptations, he stood firm, and the hardest part of his errand he fearlessly performed. Yet he miserably failed, met a tragic death, and was buried in the land he was sent to curse. There were peculiar, unsuspected perils under which he was doomed to succumb, and he furnishes a lasting illustration of the fact, that even the best of men may fail, and even true ministers of the Lord may yield to subtle temptation and manifest wrong doing, and he also reveals some of those special perils to which the man of God is exposed. We may call them the peril of fancied security, the peril of abated zeal, the peril of unconscious inconsistency, and the peril of indirect obedience.

I. This unfortunate prophet is an object lesson as to the peril of imagined safety. He had received a clear commission. He was a man of approved character. His work in our time would be called successful. He was endued with a power that enabled him to perform miracles. When King Jereboam endeavored to placate him and come to terms with him, he rejected the royal overtures with emphatic scorn. "If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not come in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place." Truly, a noble man of God, with clear moral vision, with strong convictions of duty, able to resist the most powerful enemy, yet it was this man of God who yielded to a subtle temptation, turned aside from the path of righteousness, and was condemned along with

the people he was sent to denounce. This does not surprise us when we think of Judas' apostasy, of Peter's denial, and Ananias' and Sapphira's perjury, and Demas' desertion, and the Scriptural warnings as to the danger of thinking one's standing is secure. Every now and then the whole Christian community is shocked by the downfall of some conspicuous Church official, and instance after instance could be given to show that high ecclesiastical position, special religious privileges, marked ability in Christian endeavor, are not sufficient safeguard against wrong doing. One might suppose that in a School of the Prophets a student for the ministry is absolutely safe, yet such gardens of Eden have been invaded by the tempter, and expulsions and excommunications have not yet become a thing of the past. There are gross forms of evil concerning which every man of God would say with Peter, although all men may fall, "yet not I", but there are subtle forms of impurity, dishonesty, selfishness, which may betray the minister of Christ, rob him of his power, and blight his usefulness. In a recent series of studies on "The Will of God", I noted these forms of dishonesty: Bluffing in recitation; not keeping engagements and promises; debt, exaggeration, or play of fancy on facts. Are there not ministers today who would scorn to do anything that might shock conventional ideas as to moral propriety, but whose vanity, covetousness, ambition and worldliness is plainly evident? Not long ago, I was introduced to a saintly minister of Christ with such comments upon his goodness as to create the impression that it is unusual for a preacher to be a conspicuously good man, and that a man of God is not always expected to be a man of God.

II. We can also see in this story of a prophet's undoing the peril of abated zeal. It required the greatest fortitude to go to Bethel, approach the altar in the midst of heathen festivities, pronounce the curse of God upon such wicked worship, and declare the apostate priests would be burned on the altars they had erected, and then when interrupted by the King's displeasure, and tempted by his blandishments, say, "Get thee behind me, Satan. I am here on business for my Lord, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished". It is no wonder that after all this strain of toil and fret of care, as the prophet went back

home, a reaction set in. He was lonely, weary. He craved sympathy, rest, refreshment, and then Satan renewed his assault, as he always does, and the man of God was led astray. Several years ago, a minister who had been conducting a series of successful meetings was accused of wrong doing, and the only explanation he could give for it was a nervous breakdown following a hard physical strain. We might comment here on the necessity under which the man of God is placed to avoid overstrain, to keep himself in the best physical condition, and yet it must needs be that such strains should come, and we have the proverbial blue Monday, which usually comes when the day is given up to idleness and morbid brooding. In his little book, "The Personal Life of the Clergy", Dr. Robinson mentions three common dangers to the minister. They are secularization, overoccupation and depression, and this last, all too common in our high calling, carries with it a number of attending perils today, bitterness, censoriousness and indolence. Mr. Moody used to tell the story of a dream which Dr. Bonar once had. The angels weighed his zeal and found it to be one hundred, and he was much pleased. Then they began to analyze, and found fourteen parts were selfishness, fifteen parts sectarianism, twenty-two parts ambition, and three parts pure love to man, and four parts love to God. Only seven parts in the one hundred were purely good. Someone has defined depression as self-confidence that has failed. No one would claim that the minister should toil on uninterruptedly, and the old criticism upon well-earned rest, that the devil never takes a vacation, presents a wrong model for Christian imitation. Seasons of recreation and refreshment should not prevent men from being fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, being clad in zeal as with a garment. It is no doubt true that many prophets should rest more, should not undertake so much, and should do thoroughly what they have in mind, but is there not a large multitude, which no man can number, who get more rest than is good for them? A great deal of ministerial mediocrity and inefficiency is due to a loss of zeal. The peril in this direction is a peculiar one in our profession, when a man is not always under compulsion to work, and may map out his own program for the week, and has in his

parish pious souls who patiently and cheerfully endure his extemporaneous platitudes. "Be thou faithful unto death" and "Suffer hardship" are admonitions we need to lay at heart, if we are not to be thwarted by ease, and coddling, and softness.

III. This prophet of Judah also reveals to us the peril of unconscious inconsistency. Here was a man guilty of the very thing for which he denounced others. The whole country of Israel was under a blight because of apostasy from God. The sins of the king and priests had polluted the whole land. The old prophet could calmly contemplate the royal abominations without lifting a finger against them, and his own sons were present at impious sacrifices. The whole realm was in fellowship with unrighteousness, and to show that no believer can ever commune with an infidel, the prophet was instructed to come back out of the forbidden land with haste, and to use a different route for his return, so as not to be intercepted by those who might recognize him. He clearly understood these explicit instructions, but he tarried in the territory of the tempter. He sat down under an oak, and invited the very temptation by which he was to be destroyed. There the old prophet found him, enticed him to take part in the fellowship with unrighteousness, and induced him to do, although it might seem to be in an excusable way, just what Jereboam and the priests and the old prophets themselves had been doing. He was indeed inconsistent, but he did not know it. Very frequently the minister of today will be found denouncing his people for the faults of which he was once guilty in his student days, and of which he may be guilty in a mitigated form now. He grows impatient with the rank and file of the Church for not attending the mid-week Prayer Meeting, and then when he is a delegate to an ecclesiastical convention, Presbytery, General Assembly, the devotional hour is the one part of the program he may be willing to miss. He cannot understand why the men of his Church should be so absorbed in worldly pursuits, and should be otherwise so busy that they cannot give themselves more earnestly to religious services, when he himself lets the morning paper keep him from his studies, and excuses himself for unprepared sermons and unpaid visits on the plea that he has been too busy.

He has no patience with grafters and rebaters, though he may always insist on having a clerical discount for himself. He is strong in his denunciation of intemperance, although he himself may lose his temper and be guilty of intemperate speech. He warns against the allurements of the world, and against formality, even when he has acquired a pulpit dialect, a professional air, and a habit of worry regarding the things of this life. No wonder that Paul urged Timothy to take heed to himself in order that he might faithfully shepherd the flock. The tribute which Christ's enemies paid to him should be applicable to every man of God in our own time. Teacher, we know that Thou art true, sincere, genuine, real, and that Thou teachest the way of God in truth, and carest not for any man, canst not be intimidated, nor diverted, for Thou regardest not, art not afraid of the person of man.

IV. We may also find in the life of this unfaithful and unfortunate prophet a warning against the peril of indirect obedience. When confronted by a clear and unmistakable issue, this man of God could not be diverted and would not be bribed. He might have interpreted the king's social offer as evidence that his message had gone home, and as an opportunity to exert further influence for good upon the royal court, but no, he would not compromise, he would not do anything that could be interpreted as being in conflict with his explicit orders. He would not go against the instructions of his Lord, and when the old prophet invited him to go back and sup with him, he positively refused. Then this miserable old sinner, who still carried the name of the prophet, lied to the stranger from Judah, told him that he had received a special revelation from God, giving the divine messenger permission to return with him and break bread in his house, and the man of God yielded and did what he had been told not to do. It may seem at first thought that this stranger was more sinned against than sinning, but we must remember that his instructions were most explicit and had a great moral purpose, and that this old prophet had by his life in Israel proved himself to be apostate. At any rate, the man from Judah could have inquired again from the Lord whether he should accept an invitation from such a questionable quarter. He yielded possibly

because he wanted to do so. He was weary, lonely, hungry and thirsty. He craved sympathy and fellowship, and it was easy for him to find a divine sanction for the gratification of his wish. Men can always find justification for what they are bent on doing. They argue to themselves: This might have been wrong before, it might be wrong under ordinary circumstances, but this once because of peculiar conditions, it can only be right. When men wish to do a questionable thing, they can always find some prophet to commend it. We are reminded of the Jesuitical doctrine of probableism, that teaches: In case conscience is undecided as to what should be done, or borne, one is not necessarily bound to the more certain and probable meaning, but may even take the less certain and less probable view, if this could be supported by worthy reasons, and could be sustained by the authority of some distinguished theologian (*doctor gravis*). Now, in the ministry, it is not impossible to get an authority of the distinguished theologian on your side, when your representation in the matter is colored by personal wishes. I once knew a "*doctor gravis*", who would have justified any man for declining to go to the Foreign Field, and an old prophet here and there may still be found who would not hesitate to intercept a volunteer from foreign service and seek to induce him to stay at home, especially if he is engaged to his daughter. There are many hindered volunteers who have been turned aside, as was the prophet from Judah, by some pressing invitation to a more inviting field and a more engaging fellowship. One of our Synodical Missionaries told me of a Seminary graduate who accepted a call to the Home Mission Field at a salary of Eight Hundred Dollars. Afterwards he declined to go, and he wrote this explanation: "I have been called to a Church in another State, which offers me One Hundred Dollars more, which is a plain indication of Providence that I should accept". No wonder there is an impression abroad that a large number of ministers measure Providential indications solely by the size of the salary, or by the social opportunities for their wives, or the educational advantages for their children, with the result—a secularized spirit, an enfeebled sense of a divine vocation, and an unfulfilled commission. Too often we seek to justify our-

selves for not doing what we might have done, or meant to do, by the plea of peculiar distractions and unprecedented conditions, forgetting the obligation under which a man of God is placed to rise above conditions and be obedient to his heavenly vision under all circumstances. To the minister of Christ, as to no one else, comes the admonition:

"Then keep thy conscience sensitive,
No inward token miss,
And go where grace entices thee,
Perfection lies in this."

This picture of the prophet gives us the darker side of the ministerial life. There is a brighter side, far more pleasing to contemplate. "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. No evil shall befall him". Had this man of God only kept in communion with his Lord, he would not have gone astray. He emphasizes the necessity under which every minister is placed to be constantly deepening his spiritual life by devotional Bible study, by prayer, by unselfish service, so that divine grace shall ever be operative in his heart, and put new meaning into the petition which Christ delivered to all who would represent Him in the world; "Lead us", who claim to be men of God, "not into temptation". "Deliver us", though our calling may be high, "from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.—Amen".