



Fire and Ice Sermon Series

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A Pastor's Secret Heart

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Fellowship with a ministerial friend, under whose ministry we have counted it a privilege to sit, prompted us to ask him for this article. His words will give those who are not pastors a deeper understanding of what the ministry means. Others, in the ministry, may see that God in some respects has led them differently (for church and spiritual conditions are not identical across the world). But many pastors today are having to endure spiritual hardship and much inward conflict and the testimony of this article is a soul-strengthening reminder that God's ways are not our ways.—Ed.

Our experience of the pastoral ministry stretches back to an ordination in the late fifties, and during the ensuing years we have fed and shepherded three congregations. While, in the complexities of individuality, our experiences have been our own exclusively, we believe that others may share with us in some measure; we may express what other pastors feel. This we believe to be the case. We trust that our candour will not be misunderstood.

In the sweep of these years since ordination, that is, from youth to our middle years, we can see two categories of experience, the bad and the good. Perhaps most of us, in our more public thoughts, are accustomed to concentrate upon the good and we give much emphasis to the privilege of our calling (of which none should be in doubt). But it is possible that, by taking stock of the bad, by facing it honestly, we may arrive at a deeper appreciation of the good. Certainly, for candid expression of what is bad, hurtful, searing, even desolating, we may take prophets and apostles for our example. We believe that the hold which these men had upon the sovereignty of God was the stronger because of their dark experiences, and by their plain revelations to us of their secret hearts, they afford us an opportunity of comprehending less imperfectly such a truth as Paul writes of, 'the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings...' [Phil 3.10]. We will

adopt the pattern, therefore, of stating some of our bad experiences before the good, hoping thereby to magnify the name of the Lord who called us in our immaturity, and who has been our refuge, our strong tower.

Jeremiah's speech is alarming: 'O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived..' [Jer 20.7]. The prophet here expresses a cry from the furnace of his afflictions, daring to suggest that the Lord had not forewarned him of all the details of those sufferings which his ministry entailed. Ordained in his youth, the prophet sank under the hostility and venom of his contemporaries, not to mention the burden of apparent ineffectiveness, which seemed to characterize his ministry. It is true that God graciously decreed that Jeremiah should know the broad outline of the work which he was to fulfil from the commencement of his ministry [Jer 1.7-10], but of the daily details which would ensue — woven as they must be around and through his experience with people, and wrought within the tensions of his particular age, of these the Lord had said nothing.

Just so, we recall our ordination in youth. Perhaps our little flock had their expectations and we had great expectations within our heart. We thought that we knew ourself and others. In both respects we have had much to learn. We came to that day of days crying, 'Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage for ever: for they are the rejoicing of my heart' [Ps 119. 111]. From the first, we set about the holy task of unfolding the meanings of the Scriptures. Moreover, in our three charges we have seen that the Scriptures, preached Christ-centredly, and in the conviction that they are God's authoritative Word, do feed and nourish the believers. Yet such a ministry stirs wrath in the worldly and the unregenerate. As Jehoiakim tore and burned each page of God's word through the prophet, after it was read to him in his room [Jer 36.21-23], so have we also seen the commandments of God demolished insolently in the fire. And this response is more obvious now than when we began our work. For us, at least, these are more difficult days than were those of the late fifties. Partly this derives from our youth being gone, because many will make allowances for a young man where none is made for the pastor with grey at his temples, and with heavy eyes. The most obdurate listener will entertain some hope that the youthful preacher will 'change', whereas no such hope will shield the same preacher in his later years from the barbs of those hard hearers. (We would here thank God for the love and understanding of those many Christian people, who, with courtesy and encouragement, have warmed even to our most immature utterances!)

But these are also more difficult days than former ones because of developments in society itself. Respect for authority generally, and respect for the ministerial office in particular, is much reduced. Individualism and self-

assertiveness now rage without control. The very concept of the declarative communication of truth is demeaned: participation in the quest for ‘consensus’ has much diminished the preaching office. Together with this, we have seen a growing passion for excitement among professing believers. This poor, crude generation appears to know nothing, and to care nothing, for the testimony of the church’s experience through the ages. The strange, sad fact of the Montanists of the second century; the poignant waywardness of Andreas Carlstadt in the sixteenth century; the extraordinary novelties of Edward Irving’s ministry in the nineteenth century; and the diversions of those mystics of every age who set experience above God’s written testimonies, are all as if they had never been. In 1832 Daniel Dana wrote: ‘A special cause of doctrinal error and corruption is found in that excitement which frequently attends revivals of religion; and particularly, lengthened religious meetings. In these cases, the imaginations and feelings of men, being powerfully roused, the plain truths of the gospel pall upon their ears, and they demand something more novel, more startling, more overwhelming’. We fear that the present passion derives not so much from any revival of true religion, but rather from a religion which has already departed from allegiance to the Word. We fear that this passion is essentially man-centred, and that it will crash, within the coming decades, in a most dreadful disillusionment wherein the preacher’s work may have many more difficulties added to it.

The cult of youth enters upon our present experience with desolating power. We recall from our childhood an awe of those who were old in the faith. ‘The glory of young men is their strength, grey hair the splendour of the old’ [Prov 20.29]. Today, however, our western world has gone far to rob old men of their splendour. Even the middle-aged must often give way to youth as we have witnessed when serving as moderator in vacancy committees. We have sat in despair as believers have stipulated that they shall look only for a man under thirty years of age, or certainly no where beyond his early thirties. Indeed, we must frankly confess to a spirit of outrage at the assumption that men in their forties, with both vigour of mind and body enriched by years of pastoral care, are now dismissed as vessels no longer fit for noble use. It has seemed to us, in our most dolorous frame of mind, that this is a human sacrifice not totally dissimilar from those which desecrated the kingdom of Judah — to feed upon a man’s youthful strength and vision, and thereafter to forget him. We recall those many overtures made to us in former years, by churches which sought to procure for themselves a pastor. Now we turn into our manse with the narrowing years at times oppressing our heart. The world seems to have passed us by: ‘I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind: I am like a broken vessel’ [Ps 31.12].

We believe that these three ingredients of the present times, namely, diminished respect for authority, increased passion for excitement, and the cult of youth, have given rise to the existence and employment of wrong criteria among the churches in their search for pastoral care. The danger may be described, in general terms, as looking for ‘instant’ personality — ‘cooked and tinned’ and needing but to be opened and served — for glamour, for youth. The whole emphasis is upon immediate things: ‘with-it’ is an imperious prerequisite. With... what? we ask. We have not departed from our first conviction, that to be much with God, and much with his Word, and much with the flock, is to have one’s life joined where it matters most, irrespective of one’s age.

We may speak from sore experience, and say that a confrontation with moral problems will prove to be rocks upon which many ministries break. We know what it is to weep with and for the fallen, while seeking to counsel them in the way of life, and with nothing but compassion and love for them in one’s heart. But we also know how wrathful a flock can be, if their pastor should dare to enter upon such matters. We know what it is to be seemingly alone, in seeking to safeguard the church’s purity before a lax, indulgent and promiscuous world. We believe that moral problems call for the utmost love and wisdom: both graces are taught by the Spirit through the actual experience of bearing one’s responsibility in such times. But we would counsel the utmost caution. We would urge upon our brethren a forethought of the cost which the duty before them may incur.

The pilgrim went from his Valley of Humiliation into the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Our path has gone in much the same way. We believe that, as greed rends the world, so vanity too often rends the church. Congregation upon congregation is dominated by a few powerful personalities who love their prominence, and who brook no interference. We do not depreciate powerful personalities, per se. Nor do we forget that the church has been greatly blessed, in every age, by those whom God gifted with leadership qualities. Such men are needed today in every congregation. It seems to us, however, that the church is blighted by the influence of those who love their power more than they love the Lord. To such people there is an impossibility about the apostolic command, ‘Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ’ [Eph 5.21]. In such situations, collision with pastoral authority is inevitable. We have been hated for this very cause. We know what it is to be slandered, to have some affront set before us every week for years on end, to bear the company of those, in the services of worship, who will not shake our hand, nor allow us over their door-step. We know what it is to be quiet when others revile us, misrepresenting and distorting and fabricating all that animosity can invent. Moreover, we know what it is to believe

that we have deserved no such treatment — that those who treat us worst of all are just those who have received kindness from our hand.

We cannot deny the weight of this suffering. Our resolve at times grows weary. We break-down and cry in our study where no one sees. We learn a certain slowness in our trusting of others: some prove false, and their evangelical statements are exceedingly hollow. But of others we may suggest that their hold upon the truth is so slight, their sympathy with the Biblical emphasis is so superficial, their openness to the poor values of this crazed world is so wide, that, while they declare themselves to be profited under our ministry today, we dread lest some turn of events shall quickly disrupt their loyalty. The night-watches do tend to close our mind upon these sorry things; sleeplessness is our frequent portion during the darkness, and weariness is our frequent portion through the day. Loneliness is the salient feature of our path. We do not refer to isolationism, for we have always sought the company of our colleagues, and have contributed fully to the wider work of the church. But we and our colleagues are so busy, so engrossed, that when the heart is desolate at the ‘Fraternal’, none has sufficient quietness of spirit to discern it. We plough our lonely furrow. With none in our congregation could we share these matters. Leadership where the church is weak has this loneliness to it, as has leadership in many walks of life. We must confess, however, that we feel a certain impatience with much triumphalist talk about the ‘fellowship’ which believers have with one another. For the most part, the structures by which the church’s fellowship is expressed are not adequate to meet our need.

On one matter we see a constancy from our ordination to this present hour. We refer to the response which people make to the saving truth of the Gospel. As then, so now, we see that a saving faith is the imparted work of the Holy Spirit. We have known what it is, times beyond number, to press the claims of Christ upon our flocks. Our best efforts, our most judicious exposition of the Word, our most fervent and impassioned appeals and applications, all fail until it pleases the Lord to bestow his blessing upon our labours. We confess that, at times, we feel that the dullness and beast-like passivity in the people, as if they were so many cows placidly gazing at one from the other side of the hedge, derives from too much television-viewing. In fact, we suspect that our people do sometimes ‘switch’ to another ‘channel’ as they sit before us. Certainly at the heart of our human need is the inability to stir anyone until Christ’s loud voice says, ‘Lazarus, come forth’ [John 11.43]. We have seen this throughout our work. It has dominated our thinking, until, night and day, we cry to the Lord that he will graciously bless our hearers.

Now that we have written of the bad, we shall turn to the good portions of our work. They are the better, and are appraised as being so, because of our bad experiences. Supremely, we have learned that we did not choose Christ, but that he has chosen us [John 15.16]. A little imagination set in motion upon some of the facts here seated, will soon persuade any reader that we have often wished that we were in any other work but this. The Lord alone has kept us pressing-on at our duty. The conviction which brought us to our ordination, namely, belief of the divine call, is now finer for having come through the furnace. We believe that our present ministry is in direct response to that providence which see us here. We are, therefore, convinced about God's will. Our peace is deepened, however much our will may have been crossed.

Our awareness is sharpened upon the face that God has a purpose for us. Our consciousness of obedience is much increased, so that we tend to fear, most of all, any act of disobedience which we may foolishly perform. We are encouraged to expect that, as God has been pleased to take such personal dealings with us, it will please him at any time to break forth in the normal routine of our life, with his extraordinary and reviving power. We now believe that our communion with the Lord is deeper than it was, so that we feel the assurance of his presence with us, even in the valley of the shadow. And we confess that we entertain some hope of our offering to God obedience, not only in the general matter of our continuing in a work which has brought us so much anguish, as he dictates that we should, but also in every detail, so that our whole life shall be couched by his glorious power.

Again, we have increased in our understanding of the Scriptures as the years have passed over our head. We have had this Book with us in times when our spirit was daunted and devastated. It has been our constant study. By it the Lord has spoken to us. It has moulded and chastened our thoughts. With all our heart we love this glorious document. Moreover, we cannot but testify to the face that our study of its pages is now, almost invariably, rich and wonderful to our own spiritual life. We feel a continual pleasure in the edifying of the Word. We rarely go before our people without a sense of the gravity, and the graciousness, and the wisdom of his Word. Our complaint is not that our message is poor: rather, we feel the paucity of our own words to express truths unutterable.

Again, we have increased in our compassion for our fellow men. Our eyes are sometimes filled with sorrow. Formerly they might have flashed with indignation — and this emotion we still feel. But now our hearts go out in pity to those who are so small, so petty, so distorted in their vain ways. We see more clearly than we did 'the judgment seat of Christ' [2 Cor 5.10]. We look upon our

flock with all that experience of their weaknesses and our own. We are poor muddled creatures. God is infinite in his condescension to make use of us. We go among our people now in a less opinionated way than may have been before. Nor do we go among our people only. It has pleased God to grant us the chaplaincy of a local hospital. Here we spend one afternoon every week, at the least. Gradually we feel that this extension to our ministry — which our own flock fully supports — is bearing fruit. It is our undying sense of privilege to have these opportunities set before us. ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’ [Mat 4.4].

Again we have increased in our admiration for the work of the Spirit in the lives of his people. The faith which our office-bearers display, the perceptive understanding of the Word which some of the least in our flock are given, the loveliness of Christ which lights up the faces of young and old believers until neither is old nor young, but conjoined in one excellence in him — these and many other works excite our ardent praise. We admire the catholicity of the faith. We have seen the same admirable work in many people, and in many flocks. We hail all believers, all who are regenerate by the Spirit and who love God’s Word, as one holy people. And if, among our friends, we have such as do not share our points of emphasis in subordinate matters, or who are unknowing in matters of great importance, we make it our task to dwell upon the uniting truths, both for their good and our own. We also remember our callowness, our immaturity, remembering also that it pleased God to use us even then; we do heartily admire the Spirit’s work.

Again, we have increased in our appreciation of the richness and the diversity of life. Perhaps we are deeper within ourself than we were before. Perhaps we are more cautious than we were; less credulous in our relationships. Perhaps we live in a larger patience with men even because of a certain scepticism, or slowness of judgment. We do not rush with exaggerated applause. These years have brought us so many heartaches, disappointments, and frustrations, that the boyish enthusiasm of the beginning is now quite gone. Yet the pathos of life and its glory are before us. We live now in a much greater awareness of God’s thoughts to us-ward, whether or not the world heeds our work. We live in keener anticipation of the Lord’s presence than we did. We move steadily into the second half of our expected ministry with some foreboding, some regret that our ambitions have been so signally unfulfilled, some sigh in our heart that these will never be our portion.

Yet there is deeper tranquillity. We confess to a delight in such musical works as those of Franz Joseph Haydn: works which come to us across the

centuries from an age of violence and quite awful disruption, with serenity and the soaring aspiration of the human spirit. But such we interpret with the 'tools' of our knowledge of the Word, and chiefly in its disclosure of the glory of the Lord. We realize how brief is life, and how speedily we have come from our ordination to this point in our pilgrimage. The beauties of the world are all about us now; now we have eyes to see them. But increasingly our heart cries, 'Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus' [Rev 22.20]. We now have less expectation from men, or from the world. But there is a greater ingenuousness in our evangelistic yearning, for that very reason. For the Lord's sake we desire their eternal good. Meanwhile our heart is nourished in hope: 'God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away' [Rev 21.4].

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