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The Battleground of the Soul

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Matt. 16:13-25; Luke 22:31-34.

"Blessed art thou, Simon... My Father (hath revealed it unto thee)" (Matt. 16:17).

"He... said unto Peter, Get thee behind Me, Satan" (Matt. 16:23).

"Simon... Satan asked to have you... but I made supplication for thee" (Luke 22:31-32).

We have before us the spiritual history in the making of a servant of God, and this can be seen in the representative and very human case of Simon Peter.

The thing which comes out of the passages above is the fact that, in the life of one who stands related vitally to the Lord's interests, heaven and hell have a very great concern, and such a one becomes the battleground of both realms; God and Satan, heaven and hell. You could hardly have anything which more vividly illustrates that than the tremendous contrasts here. At one moment - "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father Who is in heaven"; and, it would seem, within a few minutes - "Get thee behind Me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block (an offence) unto Me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt. 16:23). Then in connection with this we have the other passage in Luke. Literally the words are, "Satan obtained you by asking, that he might sift you as wheat: but I made supplication for thee." You hardly know what to make of such a swing of the pendulum in one man, but it has its lessons, and the very seriousness of the case accentuates the lessons which it teaches.

The Ground Of Satan's Power

(a) The World

You see it is a matter, in the first place, of the ground which is taken and occupied by the one concerned. When Peter took heavenly ground - "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" - he was in a very strong position. The keys of the kingdom of heaven, binding on earth and binding in heaven, were his. He was weak, and in a very weak position, when he took earthly ground, the ground of men, the ground of his own judgment and of his own selfhood. The ground taken decided whether he was spiritually strong or weak, and whether Satan had power over him or not. It would seem that, when the Lord was speaking to them about what was going to take place in Jerusalem as to His death, Simon just took Him apart quietly, and in a very kindly and consolatory way, and yet with a certain amount of patronage, one would feel, told the Lord that He must not be so depressed and gloomy, that He must take a brighter view of things, and that this sort of thing would certainly not happen to Him. But in Peter's attitude, on Peter's ground, the Lord saw quite distinctly a recurrence of what He had met so terribly in the wilderness in His temptation, when Satan had offered Him the kingdoms of this world without the Cross - had sought, that is to say, to divert Him from the way to which He had committed Himself. Peter became but the voice and instrument of that same arch-enemy to turn the Lord away from the Cross. Hence the word following about saving the life. But taking this ground of having the Kingdom and the Throne on any other line but God's ordained line, which is the way of the Cross, is alliance with Satan, and will put anyone in that alliance into the power of Satan and destroy them spiritually.

Firstly, then, it is very evident that any ground of the world, which in its nature is a kingdom without suffering, without the Cross, without the setting aside of natural life, is the realm of Satan's power and authority. It is perfectly clear that, in the case of the Church, speaking fairly generally, and in the case of countless individual Christians, the weakness, defeat and dishonour which characterize them, and which became so manifest in Peter's case, are due to occupying the ground of Satan's strength. That ground may be said to be compromise with the world in its principle.

(b) Uncrucified Self

In the second place, there was Peter's own self-strength, self-confidence. "Lord, with Thee I am ready to go both to prison and to death." He later found out how unready, how unprepared, he was for that, but at the time it was a case of self-confidence, and that ground brought his undoing and Satan's power. The self still alive and dominant instead of dead, put to the Cross, is the ground of Satan's power. Not until the soul has been denied and laid down is the power of Satan destroyed and spiritual power established in the life of the child and the servant of God. It is a question of the ground - whether it is the world or whether it is the self (another word for the flesh) - that determines how far Satan has power and how far we have spiritual power.

The Need For Persistent Determination

Now, what the Lord says here to Peter is very indicative and, I think, very helpful. "Thou art a stumbling-block (an offence) unto Me." The Lord had fought out this battle, had taken His ground, put both His feet down upon this way of the will of God for Him, namely, by the Cross to the Kingdom; and it was for Him no easy way. It was not just the being crucified and being killed, but being made sin and all that is involved of ultimately suffering the forsaking of God. It was no easy way, and He had to keep Himself rigidly in that direction, and anything that came along to influence Him otherwise only brought up the new demand for resolution and persistence. Thus it offended Him in the sense that it made it difficult for Him, it made it hard for Him, it was not helping Him. It may have been intended to help, so far as Peter was concerned, not knowing what he was saying,

but behind it the Lord saw that it only raised the old issue again, the old battle, and therefore it offended His sense of the will of His Father and stood across His path to make the way more difficult.

I think that does say to us that a position has to be taken inclusively and over many things where the will of God is concerned. We have to come very definitely and positively to such a position, and then realize that from time to time there will be, by one means or another, an effort of the enemy to change our minds, to weaken us in that course, to make other suggestions, to get us to reconsider it in the light of various issues and interests. We shall meet this offending, this stumbling, this hindering thing and have to be very ruthless with it. The way the Lord dealt with Peter was, in a sense, ruthless. Really there was no weakness in His attitude over that. Discerning its true nature, He saw clearly that, if He yielded to this suggestion, then He would go neither to Jerusalem nor to the Cross. It is a question of whether we have settled that such and such is the way of the will of God, and then, will this or that arising mean in the long run that we never get there, never do that will? If so, it has to be handled very ruthlessly and put out of the way and put behind us. The Cross comes to us in many connections and different terms.

Then, if we are really going to come through to the place of spiritual power as did Peter, that ground of the enemy must continually be forsaken and refused. The enemy has to be robbed of that which will destroy us and give him power to destroy us, and we have to be very ruthless with anything that arises to give him that position and defeat God's intention where we are concerned. This battle of heaven and hell, God and Satan, goes on in our souls, but there is for us this consolation, that we have a High Priest ever living to make intercession. We have a great asset in the continual intercession of the Lord Jesus for us. Let us close on that note of encouragement and assurance.