



Articles and Sermons :: The Deadly Devices of a Sleeping Prophet by George B. Duncan

The Deadly Devices of a Sleeping Prophet by George B. Duncan - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2005/7/2 23:34

This is an article from Charity Ministry's *The Remnant* magazine. It is a warning about a snare that many Christians fall into, especially those who have known the Lord for a while. It's a little long but well worth the read, I have broken it up into smaller chunks to ease reading.

The Deadly Devices of a Sleeping Prophet

Originally "The Peril of Spiritual Maturity";

by George B. Duncan

Printed in 1947

Will you turn with me to 1 Kings 13; a passage of Scripture that may not be very well-known; for I want to consider with you some aspects of failure in Christian living which are peculiarly the peril of those who have grown older in Christian experience, and to do so against the background of this story. And if we want a text to focus our thought at the beginning, we shall take it from

verse 11, "Now there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel";

May I begin by saying that I know perfectly well that age has its prerogatives. There are some things that age has that youth can never have. I think, for instance, of the wealth of experience that age alone can enjoy. I suppose that most of us know what it is to meet older Christians who are rich in experience, who have a wealth of memory that makes them seem rich indeed; veterans of many battlefields and conquests; men and women who have walked a long way with God. They have a maturity of judgment, a knowledge of life and of the Bible, a knowledge of God, that seem to make the problems that baffle and perplex us quite simple, and enable them to avoid the mistakes that those of us who are younger so easily make. In this wealth of experience they have a prerogative over youth: and also, I believe, in the work of encouragement. Many of us can recall meeting Christians the wealth of whose experience has humbled us, for those same men and women have accomplished a work of encouragement which has helped us along. And how humbly grateful we shall ever be for that ministry and that memory, that set our feet steadfastly on the way. But while age and experience have their prerogatives, they also have their perils: and it is to these that I want to turn your thought. Years ago I heard a Christian say, "Few Christians end well." You know, if that is true, then it is more than ever vital that the experienced Christian who so rightly thinks "he standeth"; should "take heed lest he fall."

May I add very humbly that I address these words as much to myself as to anyone who has been a servant of Jesus Christ for more than a few years, for it is more than twenty-one years since I led my first evangelistic mission, and I am beginning now to think of some of the perils that the passing of the years can bring. Let us turn, then, and look into the mirror of God's Word and see there ourselves: and as we read I want to remind you that age is a relative term, and God's Word may come to those who are not so very old, but older than others. So let us look at this old prophet who dwelt in Bethel. And first I want to note with you what I call

Re: The Deadly Devices of a Sleeping Prophet by George B. Duncan - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2005/7/2 23:36

The Lethargy That Marked His Service

Here was a man who had spiritually very nearly come to a standstill. Note the inaction into which he had settled down. Bethel, where he lived, was the scene of Jeroboam's sin; the setting up of false religion, served by false priests. The details are found in the closing verses of the previous chapter. The action of the king was to become proverbial and legendary in the history of Israel: for Jeroboam was the king who made Israel to sin. The motive of Jeroboam's sin was political expediency; the action, one of spiritual apostasy. And in the face of this challenge, the old prophet was silent. He had nothing to say, and said nothing. Why was this? Why had this lethargy settled down across his service for God? Was it because of weariness? He had fought through many battles in the past: he just could not rouse himself for yet another battle: this time he would leave it to others to fight. Or perhaps it was worldly wisdom for he had a family to look after, and it would not do to incur disfavour in high places. Would it matter if he compromised just this once, and let this thing pass unrebuked? Well, whatever the reasons, the silence remained unbroken, the message unspoken, and the servant of God remained at home.

I want to ask, is this, perchance, true of you? Is your pace slowing down? Spiritually, vitally, you have very nearly come to a halt and a standstill? There was a time when no one was keener than you in the ministry of prayer. In your own prayer-life you prayed with some purpose. In the prayer life of your church, you could always be relied upon: Your prayer meant so much to the church, to God, to the minister, to yourself. But in your praying you have slowed down; and for weeks, for months, it may be for years, the old prophet; has come almost to a halt in his prayer-life.

In your consecration you were once fastidiously careful: your standards were high, almost intolerably so, in your separation to Christ from the world; but it cost so much to maintain that standard, and you grew so weary, and so wise, that at slowly and almost imperceptibly the world has encroached, and as far as consecration is concerned, you have almost forgotten the meaning of the word.

What about your service? How desperately keen you were; how unashamedly you used to go out for the conversion of others; and you saw them converted. But that has all stopped now: you are not interested in that; you do not toil for that; you do not labour for that; you do not preach for that; you do not suffer for that as once you did. You are a Christian still; you are a prophet still; you still hold office; you are a deacon; you are an elder; you are a Sunday school teacher, you are a member of a committee, a chairman of a committee, you are a minister, you are a bishop, a missionary, a Christian parent: you are holding office. Listen, all the spiritual vitality has been drained out of it, and there is a lethargy upon your service, and you have come to a halt, and you are at a standstill. Your testimony? You have none. Your usefulness has practically gone. You are holding on to a position; you have a rank to which you have ceased to have the spiritual right.

Re: - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2005/7/2 23:38

The Inaction Into Which He Had Settled

And then I want you to notice the intrusion by which he was startled. The lethargy which was upon the life of this old prophet was suddenly, rudely startled; the silence which he had been careful to maintain was suddenly, sharply broken. His sons rushed in to tell him of the dramatic event; that the king himself had been officiating at the high place that very day, and the man of God, a young man of Judah, had dramatically interrupted the service. The curse of God had been pronounced against the altar; and the king, violently angry, had caused the instant arrest of the man of God and he had been struck immediately by the hand of God in judgment. Then a cowed and frightened king had pleaded for mercy, before a rent altar, amid the smoke of the scattered ashes. A cringing and conciliatory monarch had offered hospitality and rewards; to find his offer treated with contempt. What had been the words of the man of God from Judah, to the king? If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place: for so was it charged me by the word of the Lord. The long silence had been broken, and like a sudden peal of thunder out of a leaden and sullen sky, the voice of God had spoken; and with glowing faces the sons of the old prophet ended their breathless story, while the old man watched and listened.

What was it that turned their glowing faces into puzzled wonderment? Was it the sudden, stabbing realization that what had just happened should have happened long ago? And that the man who should have done it was not the man of God from Judah, but the old prophet, their father, to whom they now told their story; across whose face consternation and anger now chased each other, until finally a burning sullen anger settled there, and the man who had been inactive so long, stung into action, demanded, Where did that man of God go?

The Intrusion by Which He Was Startled

All I know is this, that again and again, where the lethargy of our service has slowed down to inaction, when an intrusion comes to startle us into amazement and into anger; when a minister comes to the church with a flaming heart; a son or a daughter is converted in their Christian home to God, and with passionate devotion they give their all to Christ; when a man or a girl joins the fellowship of the church with heart afire for God; a Christian comes into the office, a new nurse starts her training in the hospital, a new curate joins the staff; and the silence is broken. The lethargy is startled into alarm. God begins to speak directly; where there was a comfortable security and quietness. All is disturbed and confused. And the old prophet, amazed, alarmed, angry, is stirred to action at last. Is there an old prophet listening to me now? Spiritually you have come to a halt. Has somebody come into your life? Has the voice of God spoken? Worse followed, for the lethargy that marked the service of the old prophet was replaced by what I call

Re: - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2005/7/2 23:39

The Animosity That Seared His Spirit

Here we face the tragic fact that the man who took no action at all against the deeds of Jeroboam, became passionately and angrily active against the man of God. One of the things that appals me, that shames me, is just this very thing: the ceaseless animosity of Christian against Christian. You find it in churches, you find it in fellowships, you find it on mission stations, you find it in societies, you find it wherever you find Christians: and the tragedy is that those involved are very, very seldom youngsters in the faith. Children do not normally kill children. Men kill men. You do not find it in the Sunday school, you do not find it among the young people in the Youth Fellowship. You do not find it among the confirmation candidates. You find it at a higher level. You find it among the older Christians, in your deacons' court, among your elders, you find it among you clergy and ministers, in your committees, among your Sunday-schoolteachers, in Christian parents; you find it in the old prophet. This is where you find it: the animosity that sears the spirit.

Then you find that those who have ceased to be active in the vital things of God against the enemy of souls are tirelessly active against the men of God. Why? Why was this old prophet roused to action; not against the false worship of Jeroboam: he did not do a thing about that. Why was he roused to action against the faithful servant of Jehovah? I think, first of all, because of a pride that would not be humbled. The man's pride was hurt to the quick. The man who remained unmoved when God's name was dishonoured, was stung to the quick when his own actions were condemned. The security and comfort he had gained by compromising his loyalty had been treated with contempt by another. The standards that he had lowered by his slackness had been raised again to the mast by the zeal of the man of God. The silence he had so carefully maintained had been broken. The message he had ceased to declare had been declared by another. Everything he knew he should have been, and had failed to be, the man of God from Judah had been. And as his own sons told the story of it all, they told the story of his own condemnation; and his pride hated it. A man in his position, a man of his age, a man of his experience, being condemned, being judged! He had been weighed in the balances, and found wanting. Not explicitly, for the man of God from Judah had not said a word about him: but he had been condemned implicitly. He sensed it as he listened to the story told by his own sons. He saw it in the glow that had been kindled, and still shone, on their faces. His imagination ran riot as he followed the telling of the story in a thousand homes in Bethel that day; and with the telling he would have been called the old prophet, the man who had done nothing, the man who had lowered his standards, the man who had compromised himself; Condemned! Condemned; and he hated it.

Have you got a pride that will not be humbled? Oh, his wounded, resentful pride writhed and twisted with the pain of it all, until the focus of all the hate and all the hurt was found in a purpose that would not be halted; to find the man, and somehow to bring him down; to bring him down to his own level, and to make him swallow those words of contempt, 'Neither will I eat bread nor drink water in this place,' making himself out to be better than the old prophet; for he had been eating bread and drinking water there for these years and months past. So the purpose was formulated and pursued until he found the man of God.

Tell me, are you more active against the people of God than against the enemies of God? Are you? Is it possible? Do you write more, do you talk more, do you think more, do you plan more, against the servants of God, than His enemies? Do you? I'll tell you why. Because the life of somebody has condemned you. Not verbally, but implicitly. Am I speaking to some parents and your child's love for Jesus Christ condemns your lack of love? Am I speaking to some minister, and the zeal of someone in your church condemns your lack of it? Am I speaking to some Christian worker, and your compromising with the world is condemned by the consecration of your colleague; some clerk or typist, some nurse, and your silence is condemned by the witness of that new girl; some missionary, and the standard of your devotion to Jesus Christ; or lack of it; is condemned by another? Tell me, have you got a pride that will not be humbled? You have come to Keswick, but in your heart you are pursuing some devilish purpose to bring that one down by fair means or foul, that they too may come under condemnation, for having dared to suggest that you, with your position, with all your experience, and at your age, that you were wrong?

Listen, dear brother, very briefly as I close. You and I have been looking into the mirror of God's truth in the light of this old prophet. We have seen the lethargy that marked his service, the animosity that seared his spirit; note finally

Re: - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2005/7/2 23:40

The Tragedy That Crowned His Success

For the old prophet succeeded. And listen: you too can succeed. Parent, you can take the love of your child for Christ, that love, that burden for souls, and you can kill that. Brother minister, you can temper all the burning zeal of that young fellow, and quench it. Christian worker, you can lower the standards of that other young person, you can silence that fresh and artless testimony. You can. The old prophet did. And to do it, you will use the weapon of the tongue. And with a blend of friendliness, a touch of authority, a suggestion of divine guidance, with his tongue the old prophet—were you listening?—he lied. And as he spoke, he knew he lied. You, too, can use your tongue—one of the most powerful and deadly things we possess. That is why it is one of the touchstones of Christian maturity: if any man offend not in word (in tongue), the same is a perfect man. You can go on talking persistently: you can speak authoritatively, you can even use the language of spirituality; and in the use of your tongue you can lie. And even as you are claiming that what you say is right, you know in your heart that you are lying.

The old prophet knew that he lied. Is there some older Christian here, and you are—am I being hard?—in your dealings with the young, whoever it is, with that other servant of God, whether flagrantly, whether obviously, or whether rather cleverly and with just a tinge of suggestion, you are a liar, and you know it. The weapon you used was the weapon the old prophet used. It was the weapon the devil used when he said to our first parents, “Ye shall not surely die!”

The weapon he used: and the wreckage he saw—for he brought the young man to the path of disobedience. He brought him into the path of danger. He brought him to the place of death. For suddenly, a leap from the lion, a moment of agony, and a life of usefulness was over—the tragedy that crowned his success.

You see, he did succeed. And one of the supreme tragedies of age is that when we succeed, we kill somebody’s devotion and surrender. We succeed, and we slay. Old prophet, how many lives of usefulness have you ended? The life of one of your children? A member of your church? Somebody on the mission station? Somebody who came under your authority? You lied, and you slew. Old prophet, is there somebody you have not killed yet, but are planning to? Come, stand for just one moment as we close, by the wreckage of the life you led to destroy. Can you see the face, as the old prophet looked on the face of the man of God on the road that day? The love you killed, the devotion you slew, the testimony you silenced, the consecration you destroyed, the usefulness you ended?

Come, stand by the old prophet. I wonder if you have one thing more in common with him? Listen. The lethargy that marred his service; the animosity that seared his spirit; the tragedy that crowned his success; can you share this—the agony that broke his heart?—And the old prophet came to the city, to mourn—Thank God for his tears that flowed! Do you know anything of tears like these? If you don’t know what it is to weep here, I only hope that God will give you a place in heaven where you can weep, and weep, and weep—for the child of God whose usefulness you killed, whose love you extinguished. Ah, there are those alive today, but all the testimony, all the usefulness, everything worthwhile is dead. And it was an old prophet that did it.

If we share the agony that broke the heart of the old prophet, and know something of the tears that flowed, then possibly we too may share one other thing in the agony that he knew, for we read in the story, not only of the tears that flowed, but of the testimony that fell from his lips. For at last the old prophet would seem to have been brought back to God, and the lips that had been sealed and silent for so long without any real testimony bore this testimony: “The saying which he cried by the word of the Lord shall surely come to pass.” And if you know that your experience of the past months, or even years, has been that of the old prophet that dwelt at Bethel, then may God grant that your lips, too, may be unsealed, and that once again a testimony of the word of the Lord may fall from your lips, bringing grace and mercy and salvation to others.