

Chapter 13. Following The Pillar Of Cloud And Fire

~Other Speakers M-R: A.T. Pierson:

"THE steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord." (Psalm xxxvii.23.) Some one quaintly adds, "Yes, and the stops, too!" The pillar of cloud and fire is a symbol of that divine leadership which guides both as to forward steps and intervals of rest. Mr. M  ller found it blessed to follow, one step at a time, as God ordered his way, and to stand still and wait when He seemed to call for a halt.

At the end of May, 1843, a crisis was reached, which was a new example of the experiences to which faith is liable in the walk with God; and a new illustration of the duty and delight of depending upon Him in everything and for everything, habitually waiting upon Him, and trusting in Him to remove all hindrances in the way of service.

Some eighteen months previously, a German lady from W  rtemberg had called to consult him as to her own plans, and, finding her a comparative stranger to God, he spoke to her about her spiritual state, and gave her the first two parts of his Narrative. The perusal of these pages was so blest to her that she was converted to God, and felt moved to translate the Narrative into her own tongue as a channel of similar blessing to other hearts.

This work of translation she partially accomplished, though somewhat imperfectly; and the whole occurrence impressed Mr. M  ller as an indication that God was once more leading him in the direction of Germany, for another season of labour in his native land. Much prayer deepened his persuasion that he had not misread God's signal, and that His time had now fully come. He records some of the motives which led to this conclusion.

1. First, he yearned to encourage believing brethren who for conscience' sake had felt constrained to separate themselves from the state churches, and meet for worship in such conditions as would more accord with New Testament principles, and secure greater edification.
2. Being a German himself, and therefore familiar with their language, customs, and habits of thought, he saw that he was fitted to wield a larger influence among his fellow countrymen than otherwise.
3. He was minded to publish his Narrative in his own tongue wherein he was born, not so much in the form of a mere translation, as of an independent record of his life's experiences such as would be specially suited to its new mission.
4. An effectual door was opened before him, and more widely than ever, especially at Stuttgart; and although there were many adversaries, they only made his help the more needful to those whose spiritual welfare was in peril.
5. A distinct burden was laid on his heart, as from the Lord, which prayer, instead of relieving, increased-- a burden which he felt without being able to explain-- so that the determination to visit his native land gave him a certain peace which he did not have when he thought of remaining at home.

To avoid mistake, with equal care he records the counter-arguments.

1. The new orphan house, No. 4, was about to be opened, and his presence was desirable if not needful.
2. A few hundred pounds were needed, to be left with his helpers, for current expenses in his absence.
3. Money was also required for travelling expenses of himself and his wife, whose health called for a change.
4. Funds would be needful to publish four thousand copies of his Narrative and avoid too high a market-price.
5. A matron for the new orphan house was not yet found, suitable for the position.

In this careful weighing of matters many sincere disciples fail, prone to be impatient of delay in making decisions. Impulse too often sways, and self-willed plans betray into false and even disastrous mistakes. Life is too precious to risk one such failure. There is given us a promise of deep meaning:

"The meek will He guide in judgment;

**And the meek will He teach His way."
(Psalm xxv.9.)**

Here is a double emphasis upon meekness as a condition of such guidance and teaching. Meekness is a real preference for God's will. Where this holy habit of mind exists, the whole being becomes so open to impression that, without any outward sign or token, there is an inward recognition and choice of the will of God. God guides, not by a visible sign, but by swaying the judgment. To wait before Him, weighing candidly in the scales every consideration for or against a proposed course, and in readiness to see which way the preponderance lies, is a frame of mind and heart in which one is fitted to be guided; and God touches the scales and makes the balance to sway as He will. But our hands must be off the scales, otherwise we need expect no interposition of His in our favour. To return to the figure with which this chapter starts, the meek soul simply and humbly waits, and watches the moving of the Pillar.

One sure sign of this spirit of meekness is the entire restfulness with which apparent obstacles to any proposed plan or course are regarded. Then waiting and wishing only to know and do God's will, hindrances will give no anxiety, but a sort of pleasure, as affording a new opportunity for divine interposition. If it is the Pillar of God we are following, the Red Sea will not dismay us, for it will furnish but another scene for the display of the power of Him who can make the waters to stand up as an heap, and to become a wall about us as we go through the sea on dry ground.

Mr. M^äller had learned this rare lesson, and in this case he says:

"I had a secret satisfaction in the greatness of the difficulties which were in the way. So far from being cast down on account of them, they delighted my soul; for I only desired to do the will of the Lord in this matter."

Here is revealed another secret of holy serving. To him who sets the Lord always before him, and to whom the will of God is his delight, there pertains a habit of soul which, in advance settles a thousand difficult and perplexing questions.

The case in hand is an illustration of the blessing found in such meek preference for God's pleasure. If it were the will of the Lord that this Continental tour should be undertaken at that time, difficulties need not cast him down; for the difficulties could not be of God; and, if not of God, they should give him no unrest, for, in answer to prayer, they would all be removed. If, on the other hand, this proposed visit to the Continent were not God's plan at all, but only the fruit of self-will; if some secret, selfish, and perhaps subtle motive were controlling, then indeed hindrances might well be interferences of God, designed to stay his steps. In the latter case, Mr. M^äller rightly judged that difficulties in the way would naturally vex and annoy him; that he would not like to look at them, and would seek to remove them by his own efforts. Instead of giving him an inward satisfaction as affording God an opportunity to intervene in his behalf, they would arouse impatience and vexation, preventing self-will from carrying out its own purposes.

Such discriminations have only to be stated to any spiritual mind, to have their wisdom at once apparent. Any believing child of God may safely gauge the measure of his surrender to the will of God, in any matter, by the measure of impatience he feels at the obstacles in the way; for, in proportion as self-will sways him, whatever seems to oppose or hinder his plans will disturb or annoy; and, instead of quietly leaving all such hindrances and obstacles to the Lord, to deal with them as He pleases, in His own way and time, the wilful disciple will, impatiently and in the energy of the flesh, set himself to remove them by his own scheming and struggling, and he will brook no delay.

Whenever Satan acts as a hinderer (1 Thess. ii.18) the obstacles which he puts in our way need not dismay us; God permits them to delay or deter us for the time, only as a test of patience and faith, and the satanic hinderer will be met by a divine Helper who will sweep away all his obstacles, as with the breath of His mouth.

Mr. M^äller felt this, and he waited on God for light and help. But, after forty days' writing, the hindrances, instead of decreasing, seemed rather to increase. Much more money spent than was sent in; instead of finding another suitable matron, a sister, already at work, was probably about to withdraw, so that two vacancies would need to be filled instead of one. Yet his rest and peace of mind were unbroken. Being persuaded that he was yielded up to the will of God, faith not only held him to his purpose, but saw the obstacles already surmounted, so that he gave thanks in advance. Because Caleb "followed the Lord fully," even the giant sons of Anak with their walled cities and chariots of iron had for him no terrors. Their defence was departed from them, but the Lord was with His believing follower, and made him strong to drive them out and take possession of their very stronghold as his own inheritance.

During this period of patient waiting, Mr. M^äller remarked to a believing sister:

"Well, my soul is at peace. The Lord's time is not yet come; but, when it is come, He will blow away all these obstacles, as chaff is blown away before the wind."

A quarter of an hour later, a gift of seven hundred pounds became available for the ends in view, so that three of the five hindrances to this Continental tour were at once removed. All travelling expenses for himself and wife, all necessary funds for the home work for two months in advance, and all costs of publishing the Narrative in German, were now provided. This was on July 12th; and so soon afterward were the remaining impediments out of the way that, by August 9th, Mr. and Mrs. M^äller were off for Germany.

The trip covered but seven months; and on March 6, 1844, they were once more in Bristol. During this sojourn abroad no journal was kept, but Mr. M^äller's letters serve the purpose of a record. Rotterdam, Weinheim, Cologne, Mayence, Stuttgart, Heidelberg, etc., were visited, and Mr. M^äller distributed tracts and conversed with individuals by the way; but his main work was to expound the Word in little assemblies of believers, who had separated themselves from the state church on account of what they deemed errors in teaching, practice, modes of worship, etc.

The first hour of his stay at Stuttgart brought to him one of the sharpest trials of faith he had ever thus far experienced. The nature of it he does not reveal in his journal, but it now transpires that it was due to the recalling of the seven hundred pounds, the gift of which had led to his going to Germany. This fact could not at the time be recorded because the party would feel it a reproach. Nor was this the only test of faith during his sojourn abroad; in fact so many, so great, so varied, and so prolonged were some of these trials, as to call into full exercise all the wisdom and grace which he had received from God, and whatever lessons he had previously learned in the school of experience became now of use. Yet not only was his peace undisturbed, but he bears witness that the conviction so rooted itself in his inmost being that in all this God's goodness was being shown, that he would have had nothing different. The greatest trials bore fruit in the fullest blessings and sometimes in clusters of blessings. It particularly moved him to adoring wonder and praise to see God's wisdom in having delayed his visit until the very time when it occurred. Had he gone any earlier he would have gone too soon, lacking the full experience necessary to confront the perplexities of his work. When darkness seemed to obscure his way, faith kept him expectant of light, or at least of guidance in the darkness; and he found that promise to be literally fulfilled:

"As thou goest, step by step, the way shall open up before thee."
(See the Hebrew, of Prov. iv.12.)

At Stuttgart he found and felt, like Jude, that it was "needful earnestly to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints." Even among believers, errors had found far too deep root. Especially was undue stress laid upon baptism, which was made to occupy a prominence and importance out of all due proportion of faith. One brother had been teaching that, without it, there is no new birth, and that, consequently, no one could, before baptism, claim the forgiveness of sins; that the apostles were not born from above until the day of Pentecost, and that our Lord Himself had not been new-born until His own baptism, and had thence, for the rest of His mortal life, ceased to be under the law! Many other fanciful notions were found to prevail, such as that baptism is the actual death of the old man by drowning, and that it is a covenant with the believer into which God enters; that it is a sin to break bread with unbaptized believers or with members of the state church; and that the bread and the cup used in the Lord's Supper not only mean but are the very body and blood of the Lord, etc.

A more serious and dangerous doctrine which it was needful to confront and confute was what Mr. M^äller calls that "awful error," spread almost universally among believers in that land, that at last "all will be saved," not sinful men only, but "even the devils themselves."

Calmly and courteously, but firmly and courageously, these and kindred errors were met with the plain witness of the Word. Refutation of false teaching aroused a spirit of bitterness in opposers of the truth, and, as is too often the case, faithful testimony was the occasion of acrimony; but the Lord stood by His servant and so strengthened him that he was kept both faithful and peaceful.

One grave practical lack which Mr. M^äller sought to remedy was ignorance of those deeper truths of the Word, which relate to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit of God in the church, and to the ministry of saints, one to another, as fellow members in the body of Christ, and as those to whom that same Spirit divides severally, as He will, spiritual gifts for service. As a natural result of being untaught in these important practical

matters, believers' meetings had proved rather opportunities for unprofitable talk than godly edifying which is in faith. The only hope of meeting such errors and supplying such lack lay in faithful scripture teaching, and he undertook for a time to act as the sole teacher in these gatherings, that the word of God might have free course and be glorified. Afterward, when there seemed to be among the brethren proper apprehension of vital spiritual truths, with his usual consistency and humility he resumed his place as simply a brother among fellow believers, all of whom had liberty to teach as the Spirit might lead and guide. There was, however, no shrinking from any duty or responsibility laid upon him by larger, clearer acquaintance with truth, or more complete experience of its power. When called by the voice of his brethren to expound the Word in public assemblies, he gladly embraced all opportunities for further instruction out of Holy Scripture and of witness to God. With strong emphasis he dwelt upon the presiding presence of the Blessed Spirit in all assemblies of saints, and upon the duty and privilege of leaving the whole conduct of such assemblies to His divine ordering; and in perfect accord with such teaching he showed that the Holy Spirit, if left free to administer all things, would lead such brethren to speak, at such times and on such themes as He might please; and that, whenever their desires and preferences were spiritual and not carnal, such choice of the Spirit would always be in harmony with their own.

These views of the Spirit's administration in the assemblies of believers, and of His manifestation in all believers for common profit, fully accord with scripture teaching. (1 Cor. xii., Romans xii., Ephes. iv., etc.) Were such views practically held in the church of this day, a radical revolution would be wrought and a revival of apostolic faith and primitive church life would inevitably follow. No one subject is perhaps more misunderstood, or less understood, even among professed believers, than the person, offices, and functions of the Spirit of God. John Owen, long since, suggested that the practical test of soundness in the faith, during the present gospel age, is the attitude of the church toward the Holy Spirit. If so, the great apostasy cannot be far off, if indeed it is not already upon us, for there is a shameful ignorance and indifference prevalent, as to the whole matter of His claim to holy reverence and obedience.

In connection with this visit to Germany, a curious misapprehension existed, to which a religious periodical had given currency, that Mr. Müller was deputed by the English Baptists to labour among German Baptists to bring them back to the state church. This rumour was of course utterly unfounded, but he had no chance to correct it until just before his return to Britain, as he had not until then heard of it. The Lord had allowed this false report to spread and had used it to serve His own ends, for it was due in part to this wrong impression of Mr. Müller's mission that he was not molested or interfered with by the officers of the government. Though for months openly and undisguisedly teaching vital gospel truths among believers who had separated from the established church, he had suffered no restraint, for, so long as it was thought that his mission in Germany was to reclaim to the fold of the state church those who had wandered away, he would of course be liable to no interference from state officials.

The Lord went before His servant also in preparing the way for the publishing of his Narrative, guiding him to a bookseller who undertook its sale on commission, enabling the author to retain two thousand copies to give away, while the rest were left to be sold.

Mr. Müller, about this time, makes special mention of his joy and comfort in the spiritual blessing attending his work, and the present and visible good, wrought through the publication of his Narrative. Many believers had been led to put more faith in the promises of the great Provider, and unbelievers had been converted by their perusal of the simple story of the Lord's dealings; and these tidings came from every quarter where the Narrative had as yet found its way.

The name of Henry Craik, hitherto affixed to every report together with George Müller's, appears for the last time in the Report of 1844. This withdrawal of his name resulted, not from any division of feeling or diminution of sympathy, but solely from Mr. Craik's conviction that the honour of being used of God as His instrument in forwarding the great work of the Scriptural Knowledge Institution belonged solely to George Mueller.

The trials of faith ceased not although the occasions of praise were so multiplied. On September 4, 1844, at day-dawn, but one farthing was left on hand, and one hundred and forty mouths were to be fed at breakfast!

The lack of money and such supplies was, however, only one form of these tests of faith and incentives to prayer. Indeed he accounted these the lightest of his burdens for there were other cares and anxieties that called for greater exercise of faith resolutely to cast them on Him who, in exchange for solicitude, gives His own perfect peace. What these trials were, any thoughtful mind must at once see who remembers how these many orphans were needing, not only daily supplies of food and clothing, but education, in mind and in morals; preparation for, and location in, suitable homes; careful guards about their health and every possible

precaution and provision to prevent disease; also the character of all helpers must be carefully investigated before they were admitted, and their conduct carefully watched afterward lest any unworthy or unqualified party should find a place, or be retained, in the conduct of the work.

These and other matters, too many to be individually mentioned, had to be borne daily to the great Helper, without whose Everlasting Arms they could not have been carried. and Mr. Müller seeks constantly to impress on all who read his pages or heard his voice, the perfect trustworthiness of God. For any and all needs of the work help was always given, and it never once came too late. However poor, and however long the suppliant believer waits on God, he never fails to get help, if he trusts the promises and is in the path of duty. Even the delay in answered prayer serves a purpose. God permits us to call on Him while He answers not a word, both to test our faith and importunity, and to encourage others who hears of His dealings with us.

And so it was that, whether there were on hand much or little, by God's grace the founder of these institutions remained untroubled, confident that deliverance would surely come in the best way and time, not only with reference to temporal wants, but in all things needful.

During the history of the Institution thus far, encouragement had been its law. Mr. Müller's heart grew in capacity for larger service, and his faith in capacity for firmer confidence, so that while he was led to attempt greater things for God, he was led also to expect greater things from God. Those suggestive words of Christ to Nathanael have often prompted like larger expectations:

"Believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these."
(John i. 50.)

In the year 1846, the wants of the mission field took far deeper hold of him than ever before. He had already been giving aid to brethren abroad, in British Guiana and elsewhere, as well as in fields nearer at home. But he felt a strong yearning to be used of God more largely in sending to their fields and supporting in their labours, the chosen servants of the Lord who were working on a scriptural basis and were in need of help. He had observed that whenever God had put into his heart to devise liberal things, He had put into his hand the means to carry out such liberal purposes; and from this time forth he determined, as far as God should enable him, to aid brethren of good report, labouring in word and doctrine, throughout the United Kingdom, who were faithful witnesses to God and were receiving no regular salary. The special object he had in view was to give a helping hand to such as for the sake of conscience and of Christ had relinquished former stipends or worldly emoluments.

Whatever enlargement took place in the work, however, it was no sign of surplus funds. Every department of service or new call of duty had separate and prayerful consideration. Advance steps were taken only when and where and so fast as the Pillar moved, and fresh work was often undertaken at a time when there was a lack rather than an abundance of money.

Some who heard of Mr. Müller's absence in Germany inferred plenty of funds on hand-- a conclusion that was neither true nor legitimate. At times when poverty was most pressing, additional expenditure was not avoided nor new responsibility evaded if, after much prayer, the Lord seemed plainly leading in that direction. And it was beautiful to see how He did not permit any existing work to be embarrassed because at His bidding new work was undertaken.

One great law for all who would be truly led by God's Pillar of cloud and fire, is to take no step at the bidding of self-will or without the clear moving of the heavenly Guide. Though the direction be new and the way seem beset with difficulty, there is never any risk, provided we are only led of God. Each new advance needs separate and special authority from Him, and yesterday's guidance is not sufficient for to-day.

It is important also to observe that, if one branch of the work is in straits, it is not necessarily a reason for abandoning another form of service. The work of God depends on Him alone. If the whole tree is His planting, we need not cut off one limb to save another. The whole body is His, and, if one member is weak, it is not necessary to cut off another to make it strong, for the strength of the whole body is the dependence of every part. In our many-branching service each must get vitality and vigour from the same source in God. Nevertheless let us not forget that the stops, as well as the steps, of a good man are ordered of the Lord. If the work is His work, let Him control it, and, whether we expand or contract, let it be at His bidding, and a matter of equal satisfaction to His servant.