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The Danger of Coming Short

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Lest any one of you should seem to have come short" (Hebrews 4:1).

For those who, like the New Testament writers, have a real burden and sense of responsibility for the spiritual life of God's people, one of the most heart-breaking things is the way in which so many who gave promise of going right on with the Lord are caught in some side-track and turn to something other or less than He meant for them. Not necessarily to sin or to the world, but to something which, while it brings them a great deal of gratification for a time, eventually proves to be a diversion resulting in arrested spiritual growth, and they are found in a backwater, a cul-de-sac, occupied with an alternative to "the whole counsel of God". Their 'new discovery', or 'light', or 'guidance', as they speak of it, by reason of the let-up of some tension, solution to some problems, promise of release into self-realisation, and escape from pressure, when the novelty and glamour have worn off is found to have been "deceitful waters", producing Jericho's fruits which fall before they are ripe.

The pathway of God's eternal purpose is strewn with such tragedies. The Bible, in both its Testaments, records the sad story of many who have missed the way, turned aside, and - to use the language and fear of Paul - not attained 'unto the prize of the high calling'. The New Testament is predominantly occupied with warnings, admonitions, exhortations and entreaties, because of this possibility, and with the tragic contingency as the ever-lurking peril and threat.

There is a pathway from eternity to eternity marked out in the Divine councils which is beset by numerous and various perils, ever waiting for the feet of the saints; always with a view to turning them aside, tripping them up, impeding their progress, or frustrating their intended destiny in the full thought of God.

The little word "lest", with its sevenfold context in the Letter to the Hebrews, links on with some of the most terrible things in spiritual experience, and compasses a long history. It is not our intention to trace that history or attempt the impossible task of enumerating its many-sided context. What we shall do is, firstly, enunciate a general principle of safety, and then instance the peril in one or two connections.

The Principle of Safety

Whenever we are being faced with some new and different course, some fresh proposition or position, there is one all-governing question that we should ask, and which we should take ample time to ponder and pray over seriously. That question is - Does this thing before me stand in direct line with the full purpose of God, as revealed - not in a fragment - but in the fulness of His Word? God has left us in no doubt that He has a clearly defined purpose in view as the ultimate object of all His dealings. He has also made it abundantly clear what that purpose is. Further, it is distinctly shown that believers are "called according to his purpose", and that they are to 'make their calling and election sure'. One who was an aged and advanced believer, and a greatly used servant of God, said - *toward the end of his course* - that his great concern was that he 'might apprehend that for which he had been apprehended by Christ Jesus'.

It is the business and duty of every true Christian to study so as to be quite clear as to what that 'Eternal Purpose' is. Having done so, *everything* that arises to engage us must be brought to the judgment bar of that purpose, and interrogated in its light. God will not cut across our path, or give us particular light at any fork in the road, if we have not been diligent in this quest, or faithful to the light given. It just will not do to allow ourselves to be influenced by questions of comparative right or wrong, good or bad, permissibility, desirability, expediency, or policy. Nor must ambition, soul-gratification, enlarged prospects 'for the Lord', wider acceptance in Christianity, or any such thing, colour our judgment or affect our decision. Advantage and cost are ruled out here as deciding factors. One question, and one alone, will decide tragedy or glory: Does this that is before me stand directly in line with the full purpose of God? When the end is reached, the full story told, the sum taken, how much that is bound up with this will be stripped off, as having no real substance with what is Christ, and therefore fail to be carried over into the eternal? What will the River carry away, and what will emerge on the other side? This was the big question that Paul put to the Corinthians.

In all the generations of this dispensation God is at work, seeking to secure a maximum of *eternal* value in accordance with *eternal* purpose in His elect. His discipline is to sift out the chaff, the merely perishable, and store up the imperishable. When He has secured - *in heaven* - an adequate and commensurate measure of that which is His Son out of all these generations, the terminus of the age will be brought about, the world purged by fire, and that accumulated eternal value be brought in with the elect, to be the governing character of "the ages of the ages". Because so much hangs upon this issue, the course of the Purpose is beset by every means and effort for its frustration.

The peril or snare will be cunningly and ingeniously adapted to the 'prey'. What would capture some would make no appeal to others. The most spiritual will be presented with what *appears to be* most spiritual. Our particular temperament will be our peculiar danger. We shall have to, ever and always, be governed by principle, and not by feelings, preferences, arguments, or natural appeal. Intellectual palliatives, emotional ecstasies, activity-gratifications must be suspected or challenged. The one question must be paramount - Where does this lead? Does it essentially and intrinsically relate to the one supreme purpose of God?

Having enunciated the principle of safety, we proceed to touch upon the nature of the peril. Firstly, and in general, there is the ever-present snare of -

Mixture of Truth and Error.

It does not require a great deal of intelligence in order to recognise that, throughout the history of God's work, the master-stroke of the great perverter has been confusion. God is not the God of confusion, but of order. Satan is the god of confusion. To get order out of chaos, God said: "Let there be light". To get chaos out of order, Satan says 'Let there be confusion'. His it is to confuse issues and elements. To do this, he must - as the word suggests - fuse (or try to fuse) elements which are constitutionally different and do not belong to each other. Thus there is a constitutional contradiction and inconsistency. It is only when his master-method runs amok that we have utter and unmitigated wickedness. His main work is deception by mixture.

It is just here that the place, meaning, and sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in the life of the child of God has its meaning and importance. He is 'The Spirit of Truth'. He alone knows where truth ends and falsehood begins. Only as we truly "walk in the Spirit" shall we know the truth and be made free from error. A walk in the Spirit demands a 'circumcised heart', a heart in which the severance has been made between flesh and spirit, Christ and self.

There has never been a heresy that has not had in it sufficient truth to deceive very good people. Likewise, there has never been anything wholly of God but the strategy of the Evil One has been to fasten on to it some implication, insinuation, interpretation, or suggestion, that would make it questionable or 'dangerous'. He even did this with the Lord Jesus Himself. He did it with Paul all through his life. Let a demon-possessed girl in Philippi sponsor the preaching of Paul and Silas, and it is damned and discredited.

So, we come to this. A good thing can be made its own enemy, by being either confused, or taken out of its true meaning. Take, for instance, the doctrine of -

'Predestination' - 'Foreordination' - 'Election'.

Before we go on to illustrate our main object in this particular connection, one or two things must be said with emphasis. Firstly, let it be understood that we have no question as to whether 'predestination' is a true scriptural doctrine. When we speak of perils and side-tracks we do not include this doctrine in them essentially. *Rightly interpreted and understood*, the doctrine of election is of very great importance and value. Wrongly interpreted and related, because it is so great, there are few things more calculated to create confusion and spiritual arrest. Secondly, in what we say we do not claim to have any new revelation or special authority. Indeed, we only put forward our thought as a suggestion and in the form of a question. There may be more in it than that, but, whether we are wrong or right, we are determined to pursue the note of warning, because we have no small experience of many people of God being brought into limitation and division by this very thing. The thing itself may be right, but it must not be *everything*. If it is made that, then it can defeat its own purpose.

There has been more recently a considerable revival of what is called 'Reformed Doctrine' (or 'Theology'); that is, the teaching of the Reformers. Foremost (or almost so) among these is that which is especially associated with the name of Calvin. Indeed, it has become generally known as 'Calvinism'. It is the doctrine of predestination. There are very few subjects which have resulted in more controversy, divided teachers and followers, and led to greater confusion and perplexity.

We are not taking up the controversy on one side or the other, but we do suggest, by way of question, that one consideration may not have been given sufficient place. It may have escaped the eye of the exponents, or, if it has been facing them, they may have refused it adequate attention. The fact is that this matter of predestination has issued in very strong controversy, and not a little resentment or bitterness, for one reason. The reason is that it has been so much - if not entirely - related to, and confined to, salvation. Is it not possible that predestination, and its kindred terms, has nothing more to do with salvation than a relative connection? Supposing that it was taken out of that association, in its main conception, and put into relationship with Divine *Purpose* - i.e. Predestination to a Divine Purpose, the Purpose being the governing everything? Supposing, further, that salvation and purpose are, respectively, the way and the end, but that the purpose is much more than salvation, so that it is possible to have salvation but miss the full purpose? Would not this solve many problems and explain much of the teaching of the Bible?

Look at several contexts in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, where the words "predestinated", "foreordained", "elect" are definitely used.

1. This matter is almost, if not entirely, related to Christians after they have become such. All the instruction, exhortations, warnings, provisional 'ifs', and so on, are directed, not toward salvation or its conservation, but toward purpose, and that at the end or hereafter. It is all focused upon 'making the calling and election sure'. It is bound to an all-governing statement: 'foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son'.

2. Then note how closely this is connected with the Church as a corporate Body, and only to individuals as related to that Body. It is the Church that explains and answers election. Indeed, the designation "elect" is a collective-singular word; that is, the individuals are looked upon as one corporate entity - 'The Elect'. 'Chosen in Christ' relates to the Church. If we discern the particular *function* and vocation of the Church in the coming ages as governmental and administrative, implying the supreme place with Christ and His throne, and therefore implying that there will be other categories and ranks in the eternal Kingdom, we get beyond redemption and salvation to their full meaning. It is the purpose that gives meaning to election. Believers are "the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

3. The New Testament is very largely built upon the possibility of a great loss, even after justification by faith. Paul himself was deeply concerned about this "prize of the on-high calling", and that he might apprehend that for which he had been apprehended. Was he fearful of losing his salvation? Or was it what he called "the prize"?

4. Lest anyone should introduce here the argument of grace and works, let us hasten to point out that in Ephesians, where 'predestination' and the Church are most fully mentioned, and exhortations, urgings, and 'walking worthy of the calling' are so characteristic, grace is mentioned no fewer than twelve times. Grace is far more wonderful in relation to the immense and glorious Purpose than it is in basic salvation. Works and merit do not come into it. The greater the glory the greater the grace.

In the Old Testament, which is the book of foreshadowings of heavenly things in earthly matters, we read of the 'portion of the firstborn' in families. Israel was the firstborn in the family of nations. Their vocation was to be related to the nations, a sign and covenant to the peoples. For that, not merely for their own salvation, they were an elect nation. To them was given the portion of the firstborn, particularly in connection with the purpose. This they despised and lost by reason of pride, exclusiveness, and self-centredness.

The Church is 'the church of the firstborn ones, whose names are, written *in heaven*' (Heb. 12:23). It is not earthly, but heavenly. To the Church belongs the peculiar "calling", position, and vocation of an eternal and heavenly sort. This is what is called 'partnership in a heavenly calling', and "the on high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Heb. 3:1; Phil. 3:14).

To the Church as such, and in relation to her function in the ages to come, belongs the election; but to allow election to set aside perseverance (Phil. 3:12-15, etc.) is to make nonsense of all that teaching and admonition that is represented by such words as: "Give... diligence to make your calling and election sure", or "Walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called" (2 Pet. 1:10, Eph. 4:1).

There is a salvation which is "so as by fire", with the inheritance lost. There is a reigning with Christ with which a big provisional 'if' is connected.

We know only too well that the great and complicated subject of predestination cannot be solved or dismissed by a simple formula, but we have no doubt that election is governed by inheritance, to which salvation is relative and but the beginning. True, salvation is essential to the inheritance, but the inheritance is more than salvation - it is 'The Purpose' itself.

For want of space we must break off here. We may take up this governing issue in relation to other 'perils' later. In the meantime let us re-emphasize that the thing that matters is that no 'truth', 'doctrine', theory or teaching, whether it be good or doubtful, must ever be allowed to become either an end in itself, or a sidetrack. It must never be taken out of the essential context of God's full purpose.