

PRIDE GOETH BEFORE THE FALL

Proverbs 16:18-21

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be lowly in spirit along with the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud. Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers, and blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD. The wise in heart are called discerning, and gracious words promote instruction.

Message:

FOR THE LAST SEVERAL SUNDAYS MY MESSAGES HAVE FOCUSED ON THE PROBLEM OF PRIDE. PRIDE WAS MANKIND'S ORIGINAL SIN AND IT IS THE MOTHER OF ALL OTHER SINS BECAUSE IT LEADS MAN TO PLACE HIS TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN HIMSELF RATHER THAN IN GOD. TODAY I WANT TO GIVE YOU A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE OF HOW EASILY PRIDE CAN DISTORT A PERSON'S THINKING AND LEAD THEM ASTRAY. THE PERSON I'M REFERRING TO IS ME.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I RECEIVED A LETTER FROM OXFORD UNIVERSITY IN ENGLAND. IT WAS SIGNED BY A DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY WHO WAS THE LEADER OF A GROUP CALLED THE OXFORD ROUND TABLE. THE LETTER EXPLAINED THAT THE OXFORD ROUND TABLE WAS A FORUM WHERE ACADEMIC AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD MET SEMI-ANNUALLY TO DISCUSS ISSUES OF GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE. THE SUBJECT FOR THE NEXT MEETING WAS "RELIGION AND SECULARISM IN THE MODERN WORLD" AND I WAS INVITED TO PRESENT A PAPER FOR DISCUSSION AND FOR SUBSEQUENT PUBLICATION.

WELL! I WAS FLATTERED! IN FACT I WAS *VERY* FLATTERED. I DECIDED, HOWEVER, THAT I WOULD NOT MENTION THE INVITATION TO ANYONE UNTIL I CHECKED OUT THE GROUP TO MAKE SURE THAT THEY WERE LEGITIMATE. AND I KEPT THAT VOW—FOR ABOUT THREE HOURS. THEN I DECIDED THAT MAYBE THERE WERE JUST A "FEW" PEOPLE I MIGHT MENTION IT TO—LIKE MY WIFE, MY CHILDREN, A FEW FRIENDS AND THE ENTIRE EXECUTIVE BOARD OF THE CHURCH. "*I'VE BEEN INVITED TO SPEAK AT OXFORD!*" OF COURSE I GOT THE RESPONSES I WAS HOPING FOR: "*WOW!*" "*WHAT AN HONOR!*"

I BEGAN TO BECOME MORE AND MORE IMPRESSED WITH MYSELF. I PICTURED MYSELF SAYING TO PEOPLE, "*OH YES, JUST THE OTHER DAY I WAS AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY CHATTING WITH THE PRIME MINISTER OF FREDONIA. WE WERE BOTH PRESENTING PAPERS, YOU SEE.*" I IMAGINED THE PRESIDENT OF THE CONGREGATION ANNOUNCING THAT, "*PASOR WOODS IS OUT OF TOWN THIS SUNDAY; HE'S PRESENTING A PAPER AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY IN ENGLAND.*" I

BECAME SO HAPPY WITH MYSELF THAT I DECIDED TO CELEBRATE WITH A FEW GLASSES OF WINE, TOASTING MY NEW ROLE AS ONE OF THE “RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF THE WESTERN WORLD.” BUT IN THE COLD LIGHT OF DAWN IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT TO THINK OF MYSELF AS “ONE OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF THE WESTERN WORLD” MIGHT BE A BIT OF A STRETCH. SOLON, OHIO, MAYBE, BUT NOT “THE WORLD.”

IN ANY CASE, I DECIDED I'D BETTER CHECK OUT THE OXFORD ROUND TABLE. I CALLED A PROFESSOR AT CONCORDIA SEMINARY IN ST. LOUIS WHO HAD RECEIVED HIS DOCTORATE FROM CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY IN ENGLAND AND ASKED HIM IF HE HAD EVER HEARD OF THE GROUP. HE HADN'T. BUT HE SUGGESTED THAT I GOOGLE THEM. I GOOGLED THEIR WEBSITE AND CHECKED OUT THEIR BOARD OF DIRECTORS. IT WAS IMPRESSIVE. IT INCLUDED BISHOPS OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, PRESIDENTS OF UNIVERSITIES AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS FROM AROUND THE WORLD. SO FAR, SO GOOD.

BUT THEN FLIES STARTED TO APPEAR IN THE OINTMENT. AS IT TURNED OUT, THE OXFORD ROUND TABLE HAD VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH OXFORD UNIVERSITY. THE OXFORD ROUND TABLE WAS ACTUALLY AN AMERICAN CORPORATION THAT USED THE NAME AND FACILITIES OF OXFORD UNIVERSITY TO HAVE MEETINGS. I CHECKED OUT THE LIST OF PAST PARTICIPANTS IN MEETINGS AND FOUND THAT IT WAS COMPRISED OF HUNDREDS OF FACULTY MEMBERS FROM COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES I HAD NEVER HEARD OF. GATLENBERG JUNIOR COLLEGE. THE IDAHO INSTITUTE OF POTATO STUDIES. YOU GET THE PICTURE. AFTER PERUSING THAT LIST I BEGAN TO WONDER IF THERE WAS ANYONE WHO HADN'T BEEN INVITED TO SPEAK AT THE OXFORD ROUND TABLE.

FINALLY, IT TURNED OUT THAT THE COST OF REGISTRATION WAS \$3000—AND THAT DIDN'T INCLUDE THE COST OF TRAVEL AND LODGING. THE MORE I LOOKED INTO IT THE MORE IT BECAME APPARENT THAT THE OXFORD ROUND TABLE WAS A MONEY-MAKING VENTURE DESIGNED TO APPEAL TO THE EGOS OF TEACHERS AND PREACHERS—MOST OF WHOM HAD PROBABLY NEVER BEEN INVITED TO SPEAK ANYWHERE OUTSIDE OF THEIR OWN CLASSROOMS AND CHURCHES. NOW THIS WAS MASSIVE TRAUMA, FOLKS! IN A MATTER OF MINUTES I HAD BEEN DEMOTED FROM A RELIGIOUS LEADER OF THE WESTERN WORLD TO A PATSY. WHAT A BUMMER! WHAT P. T. BARNUM HAD SAID CAME TO MIND: *“THERE'S A SUCKER BORN EVERY MINTUTE!”*

WHAT'S THE LESSON? IT'S SIMPLE. PRIDE GOETH BEFORE THE FALL. THERE'S NO EASIER WAY TO CORRUPT A PERSON'S JUDGMENT THAN TO APPEAL TO THEIR EGO. THAT IS, AFTER ALL, EXACTLY HOW THE DEVIL LURED EVE INTO BREAKING GOD'S COMMAND. JUST THINK: GOD HAD PLACED ADAM AND EVE IN A PARADISE WHERE THEY LIVED IN PERFECT HARMONY WITH EACH OTHER, WITH GOD AND WITH CREATION. THEY HAD EVERYTHING THEY COULD EVER WANT AND THEY HAD IT FOREVER.

YET ALL THE DEVIL HAD TO SAY TO CONVINCING THEM TO THROW IT ALL AWAY WAS, “...WHEN YOU EAT OF IT YOUR EYES WILL BE OPENED AND YOU WILL BE LIKE GOD.” THAT’S ALL IT TOOK—A RIDICULOUS PROMISE THAT YOU BE LIKE GOD. AND THAT’S ALL IT WOULD HAVE TAKEN IF YOU AND I HAD BEEN THERE. MY EGO WAS CORRUPTED BY A LETTER WITH A FANCY LETTERHEAD FROM AN OUTFIT THAT TURNED OUT TO BE ON A PAR WITH THE FOLKS WHO INVITE YOU TO PAY MONEY TO BE LISTED IN “WHO’S WHO IN AMERICA.” YOU THINK I COULD HAVE RESISTED AN INVITATION TO BE LIKE GOD? ARE YOU KIDDING?

OUR EGOS ARE THE MOST SENSITIVE AND CORRUPTIBLE PARTS OF OUR NATURE AND THEY ARE FERTILE SOIL FOR THE DEVIL TO PLANT SEEDS OF PRIDE. PRIDE MAKES A WOMAN WANT TO BE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE ROOM. PRIDE MAKES A MAN WANT TO BE THE MOST SUCCESSFUL MAN IN THE ROOM. PRIDE TURNS US FROM SERVING EACH OTHER IN LOVE INTO COMPETITORS WHO WILL DO ALMOST ANYTHING TO WIN BECAUSE WE DETEST THE IDEA OF LOSING. GIANT INDUSTRIES LIKE THE FASHION INDUSTRY, THE COSMETICS INDUSTRY THE PLASTIC SURGERY INDUSTRY, THE HIGH-END AUTO INDUSTRY AND THE HOUSING INDUSTRY—ALL PROFIT FROM PRIDE. THE DESIRE TO OWN A MORE EXPENSIVE CAR, A BIGGER HOUSE, A MORE BEAUTIFUL FACE—EVER SINCE THE GARDEN OF EDEN PRIDE HAS RULED IN THE KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD.

AND PRIDE IS THE GREATEST ENEMY WE HAVE OF OUR FAITH. FAITH IS SUSTAINED BY HUMILITY—THE KNOWLEDGE OF OUR HELPLESSNESS BEFORE THE AWFUL POWER OF SIN, AND OUR NEED FOR A SAVIOR TO FREE US FROM THAT POWER. PRIDE ON THE OTHER HAND REGARDS SIN AS MERELY A MINOR BUMP ON THE ROAD TO HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY. HUMILITY SOFTENS OUR HEARTS BUT PRIDE HARDENS THEM. HUMILITY DRAWS US TO GOD, BUT PRIDE DRAWS US INTO OURSELVES.

THE BIBLE IS FILLED WITH ACCOUNTS OF PEOPLE WHO FOUND THEMSELVES HELPLESS AND TURNED TO GOD FOR DELIVERANCE. WHEN MOSES LED GOD’S PEOPLE OUT OF EGYPT PHARAOH SENT HIS ARMY AFTER THEM AND THEY ENDED UP TRAPPED BETWEEN THEIR ENEMIES AND THE RED SEA. HELPLESS. THEN GOD PARTED THE WATERS OF THE RED SEA AND DELIVERED THEM OUT OF PHARAOH’S CLUTCHES.

WHEN THE PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM WERE SURROUNDED BY THE ASSYRIANS WHO OUTNUMBERED THEM SEVEN TO ONE THEY WERE HELPLESS. BUT KING HEZEKIAH PRAYED TO GOD AND GOD SAID: “THEY WILL NOT ENTER THIS CITY; I WILL DEFEND THIS CITY AND SAVE IT...” AND THE NEXT MORNING 185,000 SOLDIERS IN THE ASSYRIAN CAMP LAY DEAD. JOSEPH WAS HELPLESS IN AN EGYPTIAN DUNGEON UNTIL GOD DELIVERED HIM. PAUL AND SILAS WERE CHAINED TO A PILLAR IN A PRISON WHEN GOD DELIVERED THEM. GOD HELPS THE HELPLESS WHEN THEY ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR HELPLESSNESS AND TURN TO HIM FOR HELP. JUST AS GOD DELIVERED MOSES AND THE PEOPLE OF JERUSALEM AND JOSEPH AND PAUL AND

SILAS—HE WILL DELIVER US WHEN WE ACKNOWLEDGE OUR HELPLESSNESS AND TURN TO HIM FOR HELP. AND HE DOES IT THROUGH THE HUMBLING POWER OF THE CROSS.

IN 1968 DURING THE DEMOCRATIC PRIMARIES, BOBBY KENNEDY WAS SCHEDULED TO SPEAK TO A LARGE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CROWD IN INDIANAPOLIS. AS HIS PLANE WAS LANDING IN INDIANAPOLIS HE RECEIVED THE NEWS THAT MARTIN LUTHER KING HAD JUST BEEN ASSASSINATED. HIS AIDES BEGGED HIM TO CANCEL HIS SPEECH, FEARING THAT WHEN THE CROWD GOT THE NEWS OF KING'S DEATH, VIOLENCE WOULD ERUPT AND HIS LIFE WOULD BE IN DANGER. BUT KENNEDY INSISTED ON APPEARING BEFORE THE CROWD AND OF BEING THE ONE TO ANNOUNCE THE NEWS OF KING'S ASSASSINATION TO THEM.

WHEN HE DELIVERED THE AWFUL NEWS THE CROWD WAS STUNNED. AS THEY WERE TRYING TO ABSORB WHAT THEY HAD JUST BEEN TOLD, KENNEDY SPOKE THE FOLLOWING WORDS: "I TOO HAD A BROTHER WHO WAS ASSASSINATED BY A WHITE MAN. BUT I TAKE CONSOLATION IN THE WORDS OF THE POET AESCHYLUS: *"EVEN IN OUR SLEEP, PAIN, WHICH CANNOT FORGET, FALLS DROP BY DROP ON THE HEART, UNTIL, IN OUR DESPAIR AND AGAINST OUR WILL, COMES WISDOM THROUGH THE AWFUL GRACE OF GOD."*

IN THE WEEKS FOLLOWING KING'S ASSASSINATION, RIOTING BROKE OUT IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITIES IN CITIES ACROSS AMERICA, BUT THERE WAS NO RIOTING IN INDIANAPOLIS. THE PATHWAY THAT LEADS TO THE PEACE OF CHRIST IS OFTEN A TRAIL OF TEARS. JESUS DID NOT PROMISE US PLEASANT LIVES IN THIS WORLD. HE SAID, *"IN THIS WORLD YOU WILL HAVE TROUBLES"* (John 16:33) AND *"COUNT THE COST."* (Luke 14:28)

BUT IF WE ALLOW HIM TO, JESUS WILL USE THE TROUBLES THAT COME OUR WAY TO DRAW US CLOSER AND CLOSER TO HIM AND GIVE US HIS PEACE—THE PEACE THAT PASSES ALL OUR UNDERSTANDING. HE WILL SHOW US HOW HELPLESS WE ARE SO THAT WE WILL TURN TO HIM FOR THE HELP WE NEED. *THE PSALMIST WRITES: "THE KING IS NOT SAVED BY HIS MIGHTY ARMY; THE WARRIOR IS NOT DELIVERED BY HIS STRENGTH; A HORSE IS A FALSE HOPE FOR VICTORY—IT WILL NOT DELIVER ANYONE THROUGH ITS GREAT STRENGTH; BUT THE EYE OF THE LORD IS ON THOSE WHO FEAR HIM, WHO HOPE FOR HIS LOVINGKINDNESS TO KEEP THEM ALIVE IN FAMINE AND DELIVER THEIR SOULS FROM DEATH."* (Psalms 33:16-17)

PRIDE IS THE GREATEST ENEMY WE HAVE OF OUR FAITH. PRIDE BLINDS US TO OUR FAULTS AND BINDS US TO OUR SINS. WHEN WE SIN, PRIDE SAYS, *"THERE'S NO NEED FOR ANYONE ELSE TO KNOW ABOUT THIS! PRETTY SOON YOU'LL FORGET ABOUT IT AND IT WILL BE AS IF IT NEVER EVEN HAPPENED."* "BESIDES, YOUR SINS AREN'T NEARLY AS BAD AS OTHER PEOPLE'S SINS! I MEAN, YOU'RE NO SERIAL KILLER—SO WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?"

PRIDE CAN EVEN CONVINCEN US THAT SIN ITSELF IS AN ANTIQUATED CONCEPT— THAT WHAT USED TO BE CALLED SINS ARE MERELY IMPERFECTIONS IN OUR PERSONALITIES THAT ARE NOT WORTH WORRYING ABOUT. AND ALL THIS MAKES US FEEL BETTER ABOUT OURSELVES. BUT IT POISONS OUR SOULS.

THERE'S A SAYING AMONG THERAPISTS WHO TREAT PEOPLE WHO SUFFER WITH ADDICTIONS: *"WE ARE AS SICK AS OUR SECRETS."* WHEN WE REFUSE TO TAKE OUR SINS SERIOUSLY, REPENT OF THEM, CONFESS THEM TO GOD AND ASK HIM TO FORGIVE THEM, PRIDE GOES TO WORK IN OUR HEARTS AND THEY BEGIN TO HARDEN. THE INSIDIOUS THING IS THAT THIS DOESN'T NECESSARILY FEEL BAD: A HARDENED HEART DOESN'T FEEL PAIN JUST LIKE AN ANAESTHETIZED TOOTH DOESN'T FEEL THE DRILL. BUT IT'S STILL A DISEASED TOOTH AND IT'S STILL A HARDENED HEART.

THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN DO NOTHING WITH A HARDENED HEART: THERE IS NO REPENTANCE, NO UNDERSTANDING OF THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS, NO DESIRE FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH. THE INDIVIDUAL WITH A HEART LIKE THAT FLOATS ALONG AIMLESSLY, SELF-SATISFIED, DETACHED FROM GOD AND HEADED STRAIGHT FOR HELL. AS THE PROVERB SAYS, *"THERE IS A WAY THAT SEEMS RIGHT TO A MAN, BUT ITS END IS DEATH."* (Proverbs 14:12)

GOD WANTS MALLEABLE HEARTS TO WORK WITH, HEARTS THAT HAVE BEEN SOFTENED BY THE KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR SINFULNESS—HEARTS HE CAN CLEANSE AND TEACH AND MOLD. AND THE WAY TO KEEP YOUR HEART MALLEABLE IS NOT TO EXALT YOURSELF WITH PRIDE, WHICH GOETH BEFORE THE FALL, BUT TO HUMBLE YOURSELF BY CONFRONTING YOUR HELPLESSNESS, CONFESSING YOUR NEED, AND TURNING TO GOD. *"THE MAN WHO LOVES HIS LIFE WILL LOSE IT, WHILE THE MAN WHO HATES HIS LIFE IN THIS WORLD, WILL KEEP IT FOR ETERNAL LIFE."* (John 12:25)

PRIDE IS THE GREATEST ENEMY WE HAVE OF OUR FAITH. ALL IT TOOK TO SET PRIDE LOOSE IN ME WERE SIX GOLD LETTERS THAT SPELLED "OXFORD." BUT IF WE HUMBLE OURSELVES BY CONFRONTING OUR OWN HELPLESSNESS AND TURNING TO GOD FOR HELP HE WILL STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH AND CLEANSE OUR HEARTS. *"IF WE CLAIM TO BE WITHOUT SIN, WE DECEIVE OURSELVES AND THE TRUTH IS NOT IN US. [BUT] IF WE CONFESS OUR SINS, HE IS FAITHFUL AND JUST AND WILL FORGIVE US OUR SINS AND PURIFY US FROM ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS."* (John 1:8-10) AMEN.