

## The Old Prophet of Bethel

1 Kings 13: 1-32: 2 Kings 23: 17, 18.

Hamilton Smith.

The events recorded in the Thirteenth chapter of the First Book of Kings transpired in a day when the nation of Israel was falling into apostasy. For this reason they have special significance, and warning, for believers whose lot, as in the present day, is cast in the midst of a corrupt Christendom fast moving on to the great apostasy.

The story unfolded is mainly concerned with three persons — King Jeroboam, "a man of God out of Judah," and "an old prophet in Bethel."

Jeroboam had received a definite word from God through the prophet Ahijah, that he should reign over the ten tribes of Israel; and, he was told, that if he would hearken unto God's commands, walk in God's ways, and keep the statutes and commandments of the LORD, God would be with him and establish his house. Alas! when Jeroboam came to the throne, instead of depending upon God and His word he sought to establish his kingdom by his own devices. Having no faith in God he fell back on natural reason, and human schemes to keep the professing people of God together. So acting, he sealed the doom of his kingdom by setting up two golden calves, and saying to the people, "Behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12: 28). One calf he set in Bethel and the other in Dan. The solemn result was the people became worshippers of these false gods, "sacrificing unto the calves;" and were thus led into apostasy. Bethel, where Jacob had set up a pillar as a witness to God's unconditional promise of blessing to the seed of Jacob, and God's unchanging faithfulness to His own word, becomes the witness to man's sin and apostasy. Through their leaders the enemy had succeeded in undermining the people's confidence in God and thus separating them from Him.

God, however, raised up a witness against this fearful evil. He sent a man of God out of Judah to Bethel to condemn the wickedness of Jeroboam. "By the word of the LORD," this man was enlightened as to the evil in Bethel. He learnt that this evil was so abhorrent to God that the day was soon coming when God would deal with it in judgment (v. 1, 2). He was directed by sign and word to witness against the evil (v. 3). He was specially warned against weakening his testimony by associating with the evil. He was to deliver his message, give his sign, and then depart. On no account was he to eat bread, or drink water, at Bethel, nor was he to turn again by the same way that he came. He was to have no fellowship with the false position of those who, while professing to be the people of God, were walking in disobedience to the word of the LORD (v. 9, 10).

With great faithfulness the man of God delivers his message and gives the sign, which comes to pass. The enraged king charges his servants to lay hold of the man of God, who is silent in the presence of threats and acts in interceding grace when God smites the man by whom he is threatened. Finally he is proof against the king's offer of rewards, and, in obedience to the word of the LORD, firmly refuses to eat or drink at Bethel.

In all these ways the man of God faithfully discharges his mission, and yet withal in a spirit of grace, while firmly refusing to be drawn into association with evil.

Passing on to the latter part of this instructive story, we find that faithfulness to the word of the LORD is put to a further and yet severer test. This portion of the story is introduced with the significant words: — "Now there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel" (v. 11). In the very place of the evil that the man

of God was sent to denounce, and with which the LORD said he was not to have any association by eating or drinking — in this place, a brother prophet had found his dwelling. He was truly a prophet, and was aware of the evil, but, dwelling in a wrong association he not only was unable to witness against it, but actually put his sanction upon it. It is through this "brother" and "prophet" that the obedience of the man of God is put to the test. It is a severe test, for not only could this old man plead that he was a brother and a prophet, but he could plead the experience of age. Moreover, he shows much gracious hospitality to a weary and hungry brother. "Come home," he says, "with me, and eat bread." Above all he claims that an angel had given him "the word of the LORD" to bring the man of God back to his house.

To refuse such an appeal would appear to be putting a slight upon a brother prophet. It would also have the appearance of disrespect for old age, it would look like indifference to brotherly kindness that was so ready to show hospitality. Above all it would have the appearance of ignoring the direct word of the LORD by an angel. Yet the story clearly shows that behind all these specious reasons that nature might plead, there was the effort of the enemy to undermine the word of the Lord by involving the man of God in a wrong association.

How does the man of God act in the presence of this strong and subtle temptation? Alas! apparently on the plea of respect for old age, response to brotherly kindness, fellowship with a fellow-servant, and professed obedience to the word of the LORD, though this communication of the old prophet plainly invalidated and contradicted his first instructions from God, he allowed himself to be drawn into a wrong association by disobedience to them. An old prophet may alas! become a deceiver and seduce one from loyalty and obedience.

It is easy to see how serious was this disobedience to the word of God.

First, in turning back to eat and drink with the old prophet at Bethel, the man of God put his sanction on an association which God's word condemned.

Secondly, he put his sanction upon the unfaithfulness of the old prophet in living in such an association.

Thirdly, he nullified his own testimony by sanctioning the very evil against which he was sent to witness.

What, we may ask, should have kept the man of God from falling into this snare? His own word gives the answer, for he confesses, "So was it charged me by the word of the LORD, saying, eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest." Evidently, then, his safeguard against every effort to draw him into a false association was unswerving obedience to the word of God. In reference to this scene one has truly said, "Whenever God has made His will known to us, we are not to allow any after influence whatever to call it in question, even although the latter may take the form of the word of God . . . In every case our part is to obey what He has said."

If the word of God charged him not to eat and drink at Bethel, in spite of the fact that a brother prophet was dwelling there, was the man of God to turn back and eat and drink because a brother prophet was at Bethel? If his eye had been single would he not have discerned why the word of God so strictly forbade him to associate with the old prophet? How was it that, when God was denouncing evil at Bethel, He has to send a prophet from Judah, seeing there was already a prophet at Bethel? Does not this action tell us that the old prophet at Bethel was not himself separate from evil, and therefore not a vessel fit and meet for the Master's use?

Being in a false position the old prophet was ready to go to great lengths to get the man of God to

sanction his unfaithfulness by associating with it. Alas! the man of God fell into the snare and destroyed his own testimony by associating with one who, while admitting the evil, yet bore with it.

Thus, as it has been truly said, of this man of God, "He is proof against temptation when presented in the form of evil, and he falls when tempted by apparent good. The voice of a brother, his standing and reputation, are honoured above the word of God. He disobeys God and accredits a lie in his brother . . . He triumphed over the opposition of the world without, and is seduced into unfaithfulness by a brother within." By abstaining from eating and drinking with the king he took God's part against the evil: by returning to eat and drink with the old prophet he took his part in associating with it.

The last part of the story (verses 20 to 32) clearly shows that God is not indifferent to the unfaithfulness of the old prophet nor the failure of the man of God. In the governmental ways of God both come under His chastening.

The old prophet is justly punished inasmuch as God compels him to expose his own duplicity by pronouncing judgment upon the man of God. As to the man of God, he has to learn that, if he regards the word of his brother more than the word of God, the very one by whom he has been drawn into disobedience will be the instrument in God's hand for exposing his sin.

The severity of the judgment that overtakes the man of God clearly shows how deeply God resented his disobedience.

The LORD had given this man of God great light as to the evil of Bethel and His abhorrence of it, and the judgment that was coming upon it. Great honour had been put upon him in being used as a witness against the evil. God had plainly warned him against being entangled in a false association. In spite of light, and privilege, and warning he allowed himself to be drawn into a false association with the result that in spite of all former faithfulness, and boldness, his career as a witness for God is closed on earth. It is no small matter to disregard the word of God and sin against the light.

Nevertheless we are permitted to see that if God, in His holiness, has to chasten His people for their failure and unfaithfulness, yet He is not unrighteous to forget any work or labour of love that has been shown toward His Name. So it comes to pass that three hundred and fifty years after these events, when Josiah carries out the word of the Lord, by the man of God, and burns the bones of the false prophets, he spares the sepulchre of the man of God who came from Judah and the old prophet of Bethel. Through their unfaithfulness, the people of God may come under His chastening: but, through the faithfulness of God they will not share in the judgment that overtakes the world (2 Kings 23: 15-18).

In seeking to apply the lessons of this striking story, we do well to remember three great facts:-

First, in the day in which we live there has been, by the grace of God, a recovery of the great truths concerning Christ and the Church as revealed in the word of God.

Secondly, in the light of the recovery of the truth many have had their eyes opened to see how far Christendom has departed from the truth. Like the man out of Judah, we see that, as it was in Israel, so in Christendom, the corrupt condition of the professing mass is leading to apostacy and judgment.

Thirdly, with our eyes opened to see the departure from the truth, we have also been enlightened as to God's mind for the individual believer in relation to the corruption of Christendom. We have learned that the knowledge of the truth on the one hand, and the corruption of Christendom on the other, demands entire separation from that which is a denial of the truth and is coming under the

judgment of God.

Christendom has organized itself into a number of systems and denominations which form a religion established on earth, having a human order of priests between the people and God — a religion suited to man in the flesh. Such a religion was Judaism, and such Christendom has become. God calls this system "the Camp," and from such, true believers are exhorted "To go forth ... unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach" (Heb. 12: 13),

Moreover, we read, "Let everyone that nameth the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity," and, again, we are to "purge" ourselves from vessels to dishonour, and "flee also youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2: 19-22).

Thus the word of God makes it very clear that in a day of ruin the separation to which we are called is both ecclesiastical and personal. Alas! there may be one without the other. We may be truly separate from the ecclesiastical evil and yet fail in personal holiness. Or there may be personal separation, as in the church at Sardis where there were a few names which had not defiled their garments, but no separation from a lifeless and condemned ecclesiastical system. True separation to Christ combines both. And, as in the days of the man of God from Judah, so in ours, the power of our testimony will be in proportion to the reality of our separation.

This being so, those who have gone without the Camp unto Christ will find, as with the man of God from Judah, all the efforts of the enemy will be directed to marring their testimony by once again drawing them into associations condemned by the word of God. To gain his ends the devil employs today the same devices by which he sought to encompass the downfall of the man of God. First, he will seek to entangle us in false associations by some worldly advantage that the association may offer, even as he sought to entice the man of God into disobedience to the word of God by the King's rewards. Secondly, having failed to turn us aside by this device he will endeavour to do so by the much more subtle device of a fellow Christian in a false position.

Many, like the man of God of old, may firmly reject the first device only to fall by the second. We may see that the association is condemned by the word of God, and one, if there were no Christians in it, that we should have nothing to do with. This being so we may well ask ourselves, Are we right in going back into a false association under the plea that Christians are there? If God calls us out of the Camp, in spite of some remaining in the Camp, can it be right to return to the Camp because they are there?

Nevertheless the appeal to go back often comes with great force and under many specious pleas. Brotherly love, old friendships, the desire to help the Lord's people and strengthen the things that remain, may all be used as reasons for going back into associations condemned by the word of God. Moreover, we have the flesh in us, and at times the call to go back may flatter the vanity and self-importance of the natural heart. Nor can we shut our eyes to the fact that the brother, who seeks to draw us back, also has the flesh in him, and, as with the old prophet of Bethel, may seek to draw us into a wrong association with the low motive of seeking to justify himself in that false position.

The fact that we have left associations condemned by the word of God, is in itself a testimony against them. To go back is to annul our testimony and, in principle, build again the things we have destroyed.

Moreover, we may well ask, Does the brother by going back into a false association really help the Christians in the false position? Or, will he by so doing deliver such from a false association? It is evident that the man of God by eating and drinking at Bethel in disobedience to the word of God,

neither helped the old prophet nor delivered him from his false position

Furthermore, by going back into wrong associations are we not in danger of not only destroying our testimony against the evil, but also, like the man of God from Judah, ending our career as a witness for the truth?

It is only as we walk in unswerving obedience to the word of God, that we shall escape the devices of the enemy to draw us back into the wrong position. Let us then seek that the word may have its absolute authority over our souls, and be content to take the outside path with all its obscurity, content if the Lord can say of us, "Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept My word and hast not denied My Name" (Rev. 3: 8). H. S.