

## THE DANGER OF KEEPING BACK

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I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth (Isa. 43:6).

Isaiah was the evangelical prophet. His book spoke of law and grace, and many of his predictions foretold redemption. Some of his statements were easily recognized, but others, equally important, were less conspicuous. The Lord said disobedient Israelites would be scattered to the ends of the earth, but eventually brought back to their own land. Through His servant He advised nations to cooperate with the divine program. The Lord commanded people in the Northern Hemisphere to release their hold on the children of Israel and the nations of the south to follow that example. God told them plainly "to keep not back my sons and daughters."

Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, was an example of one who deliberately opposed the will of God. He promised to liberate the Hebrews but always, at the last moment, changed his mind. It is wise to obey God, for people who refuse lose everything. The Lord's plans are always beneficial, but often they require human cooperation. Some folk retain what should be surrendered.

#### The Man Who Kept Back Nothing... Thrilling

And he [God] said, Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of (Gen. 22:2).

The story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac has attracted universal attention. Moslems, Jews, and Christians have been fascinated by the account of a father who was ready to plunge a knife into the heart of his son. The account has challenged thought in every generation. It was unnatural for a parent to consent to such a deed and strange that God should require it.

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The early experience of the patriarch may be summarized under three headings: His fear, fellowship, and faith. It is impossible to understand the sacrifice of Isaac without being aware of the spiritual growth of his father. During the early periods of human history it was considered a punishment from God when a man had no heir. A woman was blamed for her inability to conceive, but it was not always her fault. When Abraham accepted his wife's suggestion to permit a maid to bear his child, it seemed an easy solution to the domestic problem. This led to the birth of Ishmael, but Abraham created endless trouble. If he had listened more to the Lord and less to his wife, tragedy would have been prevented.

The patriarch became the friend of God (James 2:23) because he walked with the Lord. He enjoyed fellowship with the Almighty, and that promoted spiritual growth when fear was replaced by faith. That was made possible because the man believed the promises of the Almighty. God indicated Isaac's seed would be as the stars in heaven and sand upon the seashore. The thoughtful parent considered that if Isaac died, he would never become a parent, and the fulfillment of

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God's promise would be impossible. On the other hand, if the boy were killed the Lord would need to raise him from the dead that the promise could be fulfilled. Centuries later the writer to the Hebrews said:

By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son. Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure (Heb. 11:17-19).

The Bible describes how Abraham's faith was strong even when he journeyed to the place of sacrifice. He said to the young men who accompanied him, "Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5). Abraham saw not the dagger in his hand, but the faithfulness of God. It may be safely asserted

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that without that confidence the journey to Mount Moriah would have been unpleasant. It would be interesting to know how much the patriarch understood at that time. When Isaac asked about the lamb, his father replied, "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:8). Many years later the Savior said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). When the ram took Isaac's place on the altar, the relieved father was elated. His boy would live because the offering died. He had held nothing back from the Lord, and because of his loyalty, he received treasure of incalculable worth. Centuries later Christ said:

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again (Luke 6:38).

The Man Who Kept Back Something... Tainted  
But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet (Acts 5:1-2).

The account of Ananias and Sapphira is one of the most unpleasant stories in the New Testament. It is impossible to read it without feeling a chill in the human spirit. The sunshine of happiness had risen upon the early church, and believers were rejoicing in what had happened. Then a cloud eclipsed the sun. Two people had dropped dead at the feet of Simon Peter, and, as the news spread, joy disappeared. Some people frowned. Others were critical of God's act, and everybody became apprehensive. Christians desired to know why God had permitted this disaster to overwhelm people who had just made a generous gift to the church. The apostles were solemn, but Peter was not responsible for the tragedy.

The formation of the Christian church had produced unprecedented problems. Difficulties which had only been

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experienced by individuals were widespread, and thousands of believers were unemployed. Most of the early converts had been employed by Jews who were enemies of the Gospel. Many widows who had been supported by their families had been disowned and left penniless. The apostles recognized the urgency of helping hungry sisters and hastily appointed a committee to supervise the distribution of food and money. Yet it had become evident that more help was required. Some thoughtful Christians sold property and donated the proceeds to the church. There was no law regarding this matter but the love of Christ prompted believers to help their brothers and sisters. Barnabas, Paul's first missionary companion, was a noble example of this kind of generosity (see Acts 4:37).

Within a certain home lived a man and wife who sold a piece of property and later discussed what should be done with their money. They wanted to contribute to the church treasury, but what about their future? If an emergency arose, would they be able to pay their debts? It might be wise to keep a little "for a rainy day." What would Peter say if he became aware of their deed? They shrugged their shoulders and decided this would be their secret.

It has often been claimed that history repeats itself, and this was true in the experience of the two conspirators who paid for their dishonesty. When Naaman, the Syrian general, offered to reward Elisha for services rendered, Gehazi, the servant, was shocked by his master's refusal to accept a gift. Secretly, he followed the former leper, told lies, and obtained illegally what the prophet had refused to accept. When he returned to the house, Elisha asked, "Whence comest thou?" (2 Kings 5:25). The unfortunate man discovered it was impossible to deceive his master, and "he went out... a leper as white as snow" (2 Kings 5:27).

If Ananias and Sapphira had explained to the apostles their offering was a part of what had been received for the property, their gift would have been graciously received. When they told lies, their dishonesty had to be exposed to prevent others from corrupting the whole assembly.

A similar truth was taught when God refused to permit

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Moses to enter the Promised Land. The patriarch only made one mistake, whereas the people who occupied Canaan were far more unworthy. Yet, as Dr. S. D. Gordon suggested, that incident was invaluable to successive generations of Hebrews. Women taught children about the great leader Moses who did so much for the nation. Their eyes shone with excitement when they heard of the man who defied Pharaoh. but finally the mother would say, "But he was not permitted to enter this beautiful land. He displeased Jehovah, and was denied the privilege." Thus did God teach millions of Hebrews the necessity of obedience.

Similar results were obtained through the death of Ananias and his wife, who might have become famous, but they died in shame. Jehovah only asked for a tithe - one tenth, and possibly these offenders gave more than a tenth. They might have given MOST of the purchase price, but their dishonesty destroyed the sanctity of a glorious gift to the Savior.

The Man Who Kept Back Everything... Tragic  
Then Jesus beholding him [the rich young ruler], loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt

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have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions (Mark 10:21-22).

The statement "Jesus loved him," elevated the young ruler to a place of eminence in the Scriptures. The Son of God loved everybody, so it might seem superfluous to suggest this man had a special place in the affection of the Savior. When the sisters of Lazarus sent to Jesus for help, their messenger said: "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick" (John 11:3). The writer of the fourth Gospel was also identified as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23). It would appear that these three men shared something unique. The rich young ruler was exceptionally wealthy and was admired by all who sought his advice. If they won approval in his court of appeal, they were elated, but also gracious in accepting defeat. A

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devout Jew, he had strictly obeyed the commandments of Moses and never asked others to do what he would not. His wealth was so great that if immortality had been for sale, he would have purchased enough for his family and friends. He realized some things were not bought and was candid enough to recognize and confess his need. The man was able to prepare for his funeral, but what lay beyond remained a secret. After death he would be a lonely traveler in an unknown country.

Then one day an itinerant Preacher came to his city to speak about eternal life. Jesus not only made special claims concerning the hereafter, He healed the sick and gave sight to the blind. The young man became so excited, "he came running" (see Mark 10:17). The enthusiasm displayed by a ruler was, to say the least, unusual. Listeners were astonished when he cried out, "Master, what shall I do that I might inherit eternal life?" At that moment evidence was forthcoming to prove good works could not supply what sincere people most desire. "And Jesus looked at him and loved him."

When the Savior said, "One thing thou lackest," it became evident the seeker was within a step of God's kingdom. Jesus appeared to say, "Young man, you have but one step to take." "What is it? Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest; go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me (Mark 10:21).

The silence that followed was ominous; the questioner stared into space while Jesus awaited a response. Maybe the angels who walked on streets of gold wondered why the man was reluctant to sacrifice what to them seemed baubles. The decision which was made in a few moments had eternal repercussions. The Bible says: "And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions." As far as is known that ruler never returned. "And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23).

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Casual readers might infer from this story that only poor people can enter the kingdom of God, but that conclusion

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would be inaccurate. When God tested Abraham, the patriarch was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, but it was only a test. Isaac was more useful alive than dead. The Almighty was providing Abraham with the opportunity of demonstrating who came first in the patriarch's life. Afterward Jehovah said, "Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore;" (Gen. 22:16-17). God is a jealous God. He does not appreciate opposition from His children. Men must choose whether to please themselves or allow Christ to become Lord of their lives. The rich young ruler retained the treasures of earth, but forfeited eternal wealth. Job said: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return" (Job 1:21). The treasures of earth are like bubbles, which, when a man grasps, disappear, leaving him with a hand full of nothing!

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