

THE STRANGE SILENCES OF THE SAVIOR
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A time to keep silence, and a time to speak. (EccI. 3:7)

Many years ago, when I was an open-air preacher, I was challenged by a man in Wolverhampton, England. That encounter has never been forgotten; it was one of my strangest experiences. The preaching service had ended, and my colleagues and I were mingling with the crowd hoping to assist some who had expressed a desire to become Christians. Suddenly a raucous voice shouted, "What you said was untrue. Jesus Christ does not satisfy the needs of men!" To say the least I was astounded, but the man's statement made the audience come closer. I responded saying, "What do you know about it?" He replied, "Everything. I was saved once, and I can tell everybody that Jesus does not satisfy the needs of men. You are misleading these people."

He was an evil man and it was evident arguments would be useless. The listeners were staring at me, and I was embarrassed. I was a young preacher just over twenty years of age, very inexperienced and perhaps overconfident. My response may not have been wise when I said: "I dare you in Christ's Name to repeat that statement. If you do, I will never preach again." I was foolish, but was constrained to issue my own challenge. That man and I stared into each other's eyes, and suddenly he became restless. I prodded him with verbal jabs when he seemed reluctant to respond, and asked if he were scared; why did he not do as I requested? Then dramatically, he walked away. He had either lost his voice, or God had struck him dumb. I have never forgotten the events of that remarkable evening and might have been very embarrassed had not the kindness of God rescued His impetuous servant. That incident introduces this study concerning the silences of Christ.

Preserving His Future ... Challenging

And he straitly charged them [the evil spirits] that they should not make him known. (Mark 3:12)

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It may be important to recognize that John Mark, who was the amanuensis of Simon Peter, mentioned ten different occasions when Jesus was extremely careful to avoid problems. The Lord's foresight prevented interference from many quarters. Three times during his opening chapters. Mark wrote of the Savior forbidding the witness of demons. As the evil man in Wolverhampton tried to damage my own testimony, the evil spirits would have nullified the words of Jesus (see Mark 1:24-25; 1:34; 3:12). The reason given for the enforced silence was "They knew him."

Simon Peter could not forget the evening when the area around his cottage in Capernaum became an open-air cathedral. The miracle in the synagogue, the healing of his mother-in-law, and the evening benediction for a crowd of people made indelible impressions upon the big fisherman. It was incomprehensible that Jesus could do what was apparently impossible. Another detail had captured Peter's attention. The demons that had been expelled from human bodies had been forbidden to publicize their knowledge of the Savior. They knew of His preexistence and were ready to testify to the fact. They confessed He was the "Holy One of God," and "the Son of the most high God" (see Mark 1:24; 5:7). Evidently, this was the first time they had been confronted by Jesus of Nazareth, and their recognition of the Lord indicated they had known Him from the beginning of time. Their witness was true, but dangerous. Had they been permitted to broadcast their knowledge, all kinds of rumors might have been placed in circulation and the influence of the Lord hindered throughout the nation. Even the Savior knew it would be foolish to erect barriers that later

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would need to be destroyed.

Protecting a Friend... Charming

And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talith-acumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise. And straightway the damsel arose, and walked; for she was of the age of twelve years. And they were astonished with a great astonishment. And he charged them straitly that no man should know it; and commanded that something should be given her to eat. (Mark 5:41-43, emphasis mine)

Today's media would have had a field day reporting the miracle that restored a little girl to her parents. Within a few days, every household in Palestine would have been aware of the apparent betrayal by the

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synagogue ruler. He, who in all probability had warned the congregation of the dangers of associating with a heretic, had disgraced and dishonored his calling by becoming a hypocrite! He had been inconsistent, for he had done what earlier he had denounced. The mitigating circumstances would have no effect on the final judgment of his people; they were ready to use any weapon against the Lord. Most of today's evangelical leaders would have publicized the startling fact that a renegade had been converted, a miracle had been performed, a girl had been restored to her parents. It was startling that Jesus commanded Jairus to withhold information from inquiring people.

Had the man broadcast the exciting news of his daughter's deliverance, disastrous repercussions would have followed. The ruler of the synagogue would have lost his position, his income would have been forfeited, and his future placed in jeopardy. The Lord seemed to say, "Be quiet; and even if people deny the miracle, let them. Sometimes, men gain more by seeking less; there are occasions when the longest way around is the shortest way home!"

Preventing a Falsehood ... Careful

When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John . . . He left Judaea, and departed again into Galilee. (John 4:1, 3)

The entire population was excited; two famous evangelists were operating in the same area. Some listeners liked John, others favored Jesus; comparisons of the two preachers were inevitable. It was never revealed if the disciples of the two parties ever intermingled, but if they did, their conversation was predictable:

"How did you get on last night? Did you have a good congregation?"

"Yes," John's disciple would reply, "we had at least five hundred people, and the sermon was marvelous. How did you get on?"

"Oh, we had at least a thousand folk, probably more, and the results were terrific! Hundreds of people responded to the invitation of Jesus."

John's representative was thoughtful when he replied, "Did you get any baptisms?"

"Oh yes, we were kept busy all night, for many candidates requested to be baptized. Did you baptize anybody?"

"Yes, a few, but John's sermon was outstanding; I could have listened all night."

"That's great," Peter or another disciple would respond. "John is a

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good man. He is different from Jesus, but he is good. Yet, it is to be regretted that he never performs any miracles. When our Master heals the sick, opens the eyes of the blind, or cleanses lepers, everybody is

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thrilled. The people laugh and sing and everyone knows God is among the people."

"Yes, we wish John healed the sick. That would be an added incentive for strangers to attend the services. Evidently John has no gift of healing" (see John 10:41).

Jesus was aware of what was taking place, but his sudden decision startled His followers. He left Judea. "But, Master, is this change necessary? You are a better preacher than John; he is unable to perform miracles. If the kingdom of God is to be established soon, your departure will be just what Satan desires. Let John go away, for he predicted he would decrease and you would increase. Lord, please reconsider your decision." Jesus calmly responded, "Let's go." And as they obeyed, He rejoiced that His faithful servant would have a larger congregation at the next service, and the criticism of the Pharisees would be "nipped in the bud" before any damage was done.

Portraying a Fact ... Catastrophic

And he cometh to Bethsaida; and they bring a blind man unto him, and besought him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking. After that he put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly. And he [Jesus] sent him away to his house, saying, Neither go into the town, nor tell it to any in the town. (Mark 8:22-26, emphasis mine)

This is a very provocative story; it suggests several things. Evidently, the blind man lived outside of town, otherwise the Lord's command would have prevented a return to his home and family. After his sight was restored, he was told "Neither go into the town, nor tell it to any in the town." The command of Jesus deprived the local inhabitants of hearing the thrilling testimony. This is alarming for it suggests that Jesus had abandoned hope of changing the people of the area.

Capernaum and Bethsaida were two of nine cities close to the Sea of Galilee; their citizens were among the first to hear the preaching of

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John the Baptist. When the wilderness preacher first issued his call for repentance, those early listeners were probably thrilled and excited, but when huge crowds began to arrive from all parts of the country, a subtle change took place in their attitude. Visitors needed accommodation and other amenities to make their stay enjoyable. The business people of Bethsaida became more interested in the possibilities of increasing their profit than in listening to God's preacher. Every night the traders counted their money and hoped John would stay forever! As requests for lodgings increased, people with rentable properties raised their charges. Business boomed, and the local inhabitants were too busy to attend any meetings. If their consciences were ever active, they found comfort in the fact that their sacrifice made it possible for others to go to the services. The preaching of John and the miracles of Jesus became unattractive; the people of Bethsaida were gaining the world, but losing their souls.

Jesus became aware of this procedure, and said, "Woe unto thee, Chorazin, woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained unto

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this day" (Matt. 11:21-23). The citizens of Capernaum and Bethsaida sacrificed their souls upon an altar of greed, and the incident concerning the blind man supports that conclusion. It is interesting to remember that although the Savior made a special journey to meet the woman at Sychar's well (see John 4), He forbade His new friend, the healed blind man, to testify to his neighbors. Wise people consider this fact, knowing there is a limit even to the patience of God.

Years ago when I was a lad in Wales, I was shocked by the downfall of one of Britain's heroes. Horatio Bottomley was the champion of the working classes, for he fearlessly denounced the moral degradation of many of his peers. Many important people feared the man who was noted for his publications. If they had skeletons in their cupboards, Bottomley was sure to find them!

Then, when Bottomley was sixty-three years of age, his own crimes were discovered and he was sent to prison for seven years. A Church Army officer visited the notable prisoner and told how the grace of God had changed his life. The officer had heard Canon Hay Aitkin address

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a large audience in Bristol and had been stirred by the text, "Ye must be born again." The prisoner listened attentively and recalled how he also heard that same message. Unfortunately the young Bottomley had reacted differently. He responded to the gospel message by saying, "Not I, this is not for me. I will run my own life." Looking at the officer, Bottomley said, "It's too late now, but a life lived without God is a mistake."

The story had often been told regarding one of the final acts of Bishop Phillip Brooks. When the old saint lay seriously ill, visitors were not permitted to disturb him. Yet when Robert Ingersol, the notorious agnostic, heard of his friend's illness, he hastened to the bishop's home and was admitted immediately. Ingersol said to the bishop, "I appreciate this very much, but why do you see me when other friends are not permitted to enter?"

"It's this way," responded the sick man, "I feel confident of meeting my other friends in the next world, but this may be my last chance of meeting you."

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