

# The King's Highway

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When a man sinks to destruction he writes across the face of the world a tragedy too great for any but God to comprehend. King Saul did that, and handsome Absalom, and pathetic Judas.

In one of our eastern states was a man who had been redeemed from the slavery of strong drink. He united with the church. He was happy and useful. Years went by, and he moved to a new position of employment. Here he was thrown into close association with the boon companions of his dinking days. He fell. He was recovered. He fell again. Once more he got to his feet. Once more he went down. Years later the man who had been his pastor, now preaching in another city, met him. Said the preacher: "His once joyous face looked as dead as a parchment." Nothing that the pastor said aroused any hope or constructive shame in the man's heart. With all the dread despair of Poe's raven, he declared: "I have disgraced myself, my family, and my church. I will never try again."

That is the story of a life that has gone under! We have all seen it.

But before us now is a scene in which matters have not proceeded that far. Peter walking on the water to meet his approaching Lord! Peter becoming more aware of the surrounding water than he is of the sufficient Saviour! And then the frightful realization comes to him that he is—"beginning to sink!"

He didn't sink. That we know. For that we are thankful. The sinking process was reversed in time. What the emphatic phrase of our text brings out is that Peter had entered the first degrees of sinking. He was in danger of going down.

This situation of peril—not full-blown disaster but disaster in the making — is brought to our notice in many a passage of Holy Writ. One thinks of that confession which the Psalmist makes: "But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped" (Psa. 73: 2). "I nearly lost my footing" is the way Moffatt translates it. The crash, happily, was avoided, but the threat of it was close enough, as the Psalmist looked back upon it, to send a shudder through his soul.

## I

Observe, to start with, that Peter began to sink *where the waters were familiar*. This Galilee was Peter's lake, not simply because he loved it but because he knew it from one end to the other. He had waded its shores and sailed its depths. He had studied its endless moods and made his livelihood from its numberless fish. It was here, where the setting was completely familiar, before the eyes of those who knew him and were known by him, that he *began to sink*.

Does that say anything to you and to me muscles by subtle forms of carelessness in the

about a common danger that confronts us? Is it not true that Christian virtue and victory are often threatened more in the routine of family life and the ritual of church life than they are in the godless marketplace or within sound of the jazz of Vanity Fair? More than one person has said to me: "God has shown me that if my Christianity doesn't work at home, it doesn't work."

We have all heard of persons who have moved away to some strange, new city and there, spiritually and morally, have begun to drift. Let me suggest to you that for every case of that kind there are ten cases of persons who have begun to weaken their spiritual

## When Virtue Is In Peril

Dr. Paul S. Rees

"Beginning to sink. Peter cried, Lord, save me" (Matt. 14:30).

very homes in which they have lived for years and in the church whose aisles they have walked since childhood. A growing selfishness in your relations with other members of the family will do it. A creeping neglect of your quiet time with God and His Word will do it. The tightening habit of excusing yourself from responsibility in the work of your church will do it. The delusion that the prestige of your office as Sunday-school teacher, or committeeman, or board member is enough to "get you by" will do it.

In the waters of things perfectly familiar—indeed, too familiar—there is where some of us are "beginning to sink."

## II

Let it be noted, in the next place, that Peter began to sink *while expressing a quality of his personality wherein he was most forceful*.

Whether Peter was naturally a brave man who now and then lapsed into cowardice or was a fearful man who now and then rose to great bravery, is a question that students of his character are not agreed upon. But of one thing we are certain: he was a man who was warm, passionate, enthusiastic, and adventurous. This aspect of his temperament stood out. It was the stuff and fiber of his strength.

We see this in the story before us. Were the more cautious, sagacious, commonsense apostles quivering to get out of that boat and rush to Jesus? No. Did they stand up on the instant and beg Him for authority to stride out upon the water and meet Him? No. That kind of behavior was characteristically Peter's. For this very reason there was something about him that was fascinating and exciting.

Yet, mind you, it was precisely when he was giving vent to this ardor and daring that things began to buckle under him and he commenced to go down.

Let's make the application to ourselves. As

good Christian men and true, our dangers often lie, not in those areas of our lives where we know ourselves to be weak and vulnerable to temptation, but rather where we are strongest and have had the least of experience with defeat.

Here is a person who is even-tempered, placid, noninflammable. He was like this even before the Christian experience of conversion. "Flying off the handle," "blowing a fuse," getting "madder than a hatter"—whatever is meant by these colloquialisms is just not in his line. Yet this very absence of aggressiveness and high-powered emotion can become a spiritual snare as it settles, like a slow sogginess, into sloth and unconcern.

Or, here is a person in whom the social instinct is strong. No sealed-up introvert is he, always buried in a book, little concerned with how "the other half lives." On the contrary, he is sympathetic and understanding. Yet this very quality, unless it is sanctified and disciplined, can lead a Christian worker into sin, particularly with the opposite sex. More than one useful servant of the Lord and of His church has made shipwreck of his career through allowing an unchecked sympathy to develop into an unholy infatuation.

Some time ago I read a book in which there was a helpful chapter entitled "Making a Weakness Your Greatest Asset." There is that side of it also, you see.

Someone is reading at this moment who has thought yourself above temptation because of your real or fancied strength in at least one department of your living. Yet, owing to your false confidence, owing to your lack of understanding as to how the devil works, you are, at that very point, "beginning to sink." This is the Holy Spirit's moment for making you aware of it, and so to save you.

## III

From Peter's example we learn a third thing: one begins to sink *where there is in him more of fear than of faith*, more of cowardice than of conviction. The three words that precede our text-phrase give us the tell-tale phrase. "he was afraid."

The moment that conviction goes out of our lives—out of our ideals, our standards, our sense of responsibility — that moment virtue is in peril. The hour that suspicion creeps into our veins as to whether right is right, truth is truth, honor is honor, chastity is chastity—that hour the whole structure of our character begins to be undermined. The termites are already working, though neither you nor anyone else sees them.

The fear of being thought a Puritan and a prig, the fear of being unpopular and unwanted, has more to do with the loosening of our moral moorings in high school and college than many of us realize.

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