

“COME AFTER ME”

“And walking by the sea of Galilee, he saw two brethren, Simon who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishers. And he saith unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:18-19).

“Little children, yet a little while I am with you. Ye shall seek me: and as I said unto the Jews, Whither I go, ye cannot come; so now I say unto you ... Peter saith unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee even now? I will lay down my life for thee” (John 13:33,37).

“Now this he spake, signifying by what manner of death he (Peter) should glorify God. And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me. Peter ... seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following ... Peter therefore seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me” (John 21:19-22).

You will recognize that in those three places there are three phases of relationship to the Lord on the part of one who is intended to be a servant of His, and a servant of value. These phases mark three stages in the life of such a one, and I think we can just sum it up under three words — Called, Sifted, Commissioned. Into those three words very largely a life history is gathered up, and the life history of many another beside Simon Peter whom the Lord has had in view to be of value to Him.

The initial call and a process begun

In the first passage in Matthew 4 we have the initial call, and it would be a mistake to regard that as the full call to service. We are told in another place that He chose twelve that they might be with Him and that He might send them forth (Mark 3:14). The first phase of the calling is to be with Him. They became known by the name of His disciples — that is, ones to be taught, or learners, and this initial call had that as its basic or immediate meaning — to be with Him, to be near Him, in order to learn from Him. We are able to see now, by a full or a fairly full record of those years of association with the Lord how it worked out, what it meant, what the effect of it was. We have the cumulative effect, and we can see that, among other things, one of the outstanding features of their so close association with Him and their learning was the discovery of what poor stuff they were. Not all at once, but here a little, there a little, line upon line, precept upon precept, being stung once, twice, thrice by their own *faux pas*, their own blunders, their own misunderstanding, their own — to use a colloquialism — putting their foot in it, gradually there was built up this avalanche of self-discovery which never would have come about but for their close touch with Him. Remember, that is the thing. It was not just introspective self-examination, it was not an analysing of their own make-up, it was not studied at all. There is all the

difference between that line of things, which is very deadly in a wrong sense, in an utterly hopeless sense — all the difference between that and what I am talking about, where, because you are in touch with Him, you get a different kind of self-revelation. You are not seeking for it — it comes. You have not been examining yourself at all, but you discover. A real association with the Lord just has that effect without your seeking it — perhaps without your wanting it, it happens. And so you can go through these four records of their three years' nearness to Him, and just see how there is a steady, progressive showing up of how different they are from Him, how far removed their ideas are from His, their expectations, their standards of values, their judgments, their feelings. An avalanche is not made all at once, just a few flakes at a time, and the avalanche breaks away and goes down and blots out the whole landscape only because one more snowflake has been added. It is the result of a steady, slow, quiet process.

That aspect of relationship with the Lord is an essential thing to service, to real usefulness to Him. We shall never discover the Lord until we have discovered ourselves, and we shall never discover ourselves until we come under the Lord's hand. When we do, let us be comforted by this, that it is a part of the dealings of God, of the sovereign activities of God, of the ways of God, that it should be so in relation to service.

It might be necessary in order to be able rightly to value His grace. We never really value our salvation, the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, until we have discovered how deeply it was necessary. But even that is only one side of things. When it comes to heavenly calling, heavenly vocation, usefulness to the Lord, it is necessary, very necessary, that we should discover the utter barrenness of our own lives as to any fruit and any possibility of fruit for the Lord, and, while there are other reasons for our being given the history of that period of their lives with the Lord, this is not one of the least — the Lord has had it preserved for all time to show us that, after He has called us, there is something to be done, and He does not call us because everything is done and we are ready. "Come ye after me, and — the correct translation is: — I will make you to become fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). That lies a little way ahead; the making is for the present. The aptness of the pupil, of course, does to some extent govern the period of this phase, and aptness, in this connection, means quickness of response — that is yieldedness, not sticking out against what the Lord is doing, not going off in a tantrum of offendedness because of His dealings with us, not giving it up in hopelessness and despair, and taking ourselves out of His hands because we have discovered or we are discovering that we are not suitable after all.

Do you not thank God every day of your life that through the whole Bible, in both Testaments, He has not covered up the poor stuff in His best souls? When people write biographies today of those who have been used of the Lord, they very rarely mention their faults. I have read biographies of people I have known most intimately, and I know that it is only one side. If only the other side had been mentioned, it would have been of tremendous value. But it is thought that, if you mention faults, it is going to prejudice the testimony for which they stood. The Bible does not accept that interpretation. God has not hidden from us Abraham's faults and weaknesses and gross mistakes, nor those of Moses, nor those of David, nor of any other man or woman that He has used. No, they are there, they are written plainly. And here for three years and more, these men, chosen, elect, brought into such a relationship with the Christ of God for such a purpose, with such divine meaning, have all their weaknesses and faults exposed to view, simply to say to you and to me — This is what God can do with very ordinary stuff. After all, these men are very like ourselves.

Yes, “Elijah was a man of like passions with us,” (James 5:17) “and he prayed.” Well, that is the positive side of this phase of our relatedness to the Lord, where God knows there is need for it, there is demand for it, that it becomes a very positive proposition. We have to believe that He can do something with poor stuff, that in the end His marvellous grace and wisdom and power will be glorified in vessels of mercy — just of mercy.

You see, to serve the Lord does not put us on to any different ground from that of being saved. It is still all of grace. You may be a chosen vessel from all eternity in the foreknowledge of God, and you may have the very heavens cleft asunder for your apprehending, for your arresting in relation to that eternal, predestined purpose, but you will never be off the ground of grace, it will all be by the mercy of God — and those men were good candidates for mercy. If ever we get on to any other ground, we are disqualified from usefulness to the Lord.

So it is made perfectly clear that, while it was necessary for the nature of the clay to be uncovered and shown particularly to those concerned — not to others, but to themselves — it was necessary for them to come through to a place where they had faith. Was it not that that the Lord was always trying to get into them? “O ye of little faith!” (Matt. 6:30, etc.) “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed ...” (Matt. 17:20). His appeal was to faith all the time. The Lord can do anything if you have faith; you may be the poorest stuff in creation, but the Lord can do anything if you have faith.

You remember that passage in the book of Deuteronomy — chapter 8. How unfortunate the translation is when it reads — “And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God hath led thee these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble thee, to prove thee, *to know what was in thy heart*, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments, or not.” Did the Lord have to put them through forty years in order to discover for Himself what was in their hearts? No; the right translation would be — “that he might ... make *thee* know what was in thy heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or not”. It is very necessary in the light of the full purpose of God.

That is a phase. There is a sad side to it, of course, a painful aspect, but there is the hopeful aspect, there is that which brings in promise and prospect, that with the disclosure of the truth, and the necessary disclosure of the truth, about ourselves, the Lord does not abandon us, He does not cast us off. If He has taken the initiative along the seashore of life, amidst the swarming crowds of this sea of humanity, if He has come along and said to you, Come after Me, He knows exactly the stuff that He has put His hand upon and therefore at no point will it be necessary for Him from His side to throw it back again into the sea. It will only go back if it chooses. That is what Simon did in John 21. He chose to go back to the sea for a bit. We have not reached that yet, that is not the Lord’s way with us. Let us take comfort from that.

A crisis reached

Without spending more time on that first phase, let us go on to the second. “Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now” (John 13:36). Strange to say that, to people to whom He had said, “Follow Me”, He is now saying, “Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow afterwards.” Simon said, “Why cannot I follow thee even now? I will lay down my life for thee.” Do you think the Lord was speaking only about His going to heaven? I am going to heaven and you cannot follow me now? Afterwards you shall go to heaven? I do not think that that was *all*

that He meant. You will see justification for that attitude, I think, in a minute or two. It became immediately, almost immediately, proved that this man could not go through the cross with the Master. Immediately the cross came up as an active proposition, this same man denied Him with oaths and curses to get out of it, not to be involved in it. This man could not go the way that the Master was going; this man could not follow on that *way* just yet. There came the impasse and a crisis, and it was the impasse of a false ground. Simon thought that he could go through with the Lord on his own ground, and that ground proved to be utterly false — the ground of his own courage, his own determination, his own confidence — that brought the impasse. In a little while, everything was at a standstill, locked up, there was no getting through at all. It is the crisis of this process. The Lord said no more than: Simon, you just cannot do it. Simon did not believe it and would not accept it. He had to prove it, and we know just exactly what happened. Down there in that hall with the fire, Peter was caught off his guard. If he had not been so self-confident, he would have foreseen possibilities of being caught just by being there; and it was only a little girl who tripped him up. It does not take a great deal to precipitate this issue when it reaches this point, a little thing can trip you up, and down you come crashing. It was the little flake on the avalanche that had been built up for so long, steadily growing, and finally away it went. The whole landscape of Peter's ambitions and visions, everything of a kingdom with himself figuring prominently in it, was obliterated. It was on a false basis.

Again it is written for our learning; it is here to be taken note of. Perhaps it is not necessary for this to be said to many of us here, and yet, somehow, it has got to be said, even if it only works its value on the reverse — that is, that we see again that a terrible crash, perhaps as the result of a long secret process, need not necessarily be the end of everything — it may be the beginning of everything. The ends which come under the hand of the Lord are different from the ends which come out of relation to Him. Every end under the hand of the Lord is a new beginning.

Well, here we have this false position bringing its crisis and impasse. Let us understand again that this is related to service, and the Lord is saying quite strongly and clearly — If pride is wrong in the *life*, it is disastrous in *service*. There is no room for bumptiousness, self-importance, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, in the service of God; that only leads to disaster. It will never get through. Self-emptying is the only way here.

The call renewed with a clear prospect

The next phase — John 21. You pass through the deeps; you are out on the other side. The call comes this time, not just for that initial phase of relatedness to the Lord in which we are to be dealt with, which ends in the impossibility of going through on that basis. Now the call comes — “Follow Me!” and it comes with a full clear prospect. The way is open now; he can go through. He could not follow the Lord before because that was the way of the cross, but now the Lord definitely refers to his fellowship with Him in the cross. “Another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. Now this he spake, signifying by what manner of death he should glorify God.” He also was going to be crucified — and he could go through with it now. But not only following the Lord in that way. Oh, what a lot of following was going to take place where Peter was concerned. Yes, the Lord is going on, the Lord is on His way, the Lord is taking that course marked out from eternity, and He is taking

Peter on with Him in that course, and Peter is going to make discoveries of ways unsuspected that the Lord was about to take, and if something basic had not been done in Peter, if there had not been this foundation laid and this basic work of the cross done in him, he would have come to shipwreck at certain points where he did waver, where he did have a momentary hesitation and question and controversy and argument with the Lord. The Lord is moving on. Peter's old conception was that the Lord must move along the narrow road of Judaism with only Israel in view, but the Lord is going up to Caesarea, to Cornelius, and there is a door there for the Gentiles, and the Lord is going through that door, and He says, Come on, Peter. And Peter says, Not so, Lord! There is a little bit of the old Peter coming up, but something basic has been done and it is soon got over, and on he comes. And that is not the only Gentile ministry of Peter. Peter was in Rome; he had John Mark with him as servant in Rome, and Rome was a very mixed church, Jews and Gentiles. Read the list of names and see what you can make of them. In the Roman letter you will find a lot of non-Jewish names, Latins and Greeks all mixed up, and Peter is there. He would never have thought of that at one time. He challenged the Lord over those "fourfooted beasts and creeping things of the earth and birds of the heaven" in the sheet let down from heaven. "I have never eaten anything that is common and unclean." He would never have gone this way — but the Lord is going that way. He says, Follow Me! The way is open because of something basic having been done. It does not mean that the root of the old Peter has been drawn completely out, but something has been done at the root, there is a strength that has been broken, there is a mastery that has been attained by the Lord, there is something there which makes it possible for these difficulties to be got over, for the battles to be fought through very quickly. The prospect is clear now, we can go on together, the way is open. Follow Me!

Now note where that comes in. It comes in at a point where I cannot help feeling that Peter had come to a new reticence, a reticence which was not natural to Peter. The Lord challenged him three times, but Peter refused to use the highest word for "love". He would not move away from a very limited word. "Thou knowest that I love thee." The Lord was using another word which meant so much more, but Peter would not go up to that. He was not now the old Peter who was ready at all times to take all that you could give him and more, and go all the way in his self-assurance. No, something has happened, he has been sifted, he has been broken, he has discovered himself, he has lost a good bit of that in the natural. If Peter is going to be characterised by boldness on the day of Pentecost, it is a new kind of boldness, Holy Ghost given boldness — it is not the old Peter. Here I think we must believe that there was a reticence, a silence. May it not have been that which made him say on that evening, "I go a fishing"? He had lost heart, lost confidence in himself; he really did not know where he was. All that had happened to him, all that had been going on, all the disappointment, the reverses, all this brought him to the place where now he was just inclined to draw out and do no more about it. Do you know something about that? We have failed, made blunders, mistakes, and we have repeated them. We have failed the Lord, disappointed the Lord, let the Lord down, we have brought dishonour upon the Lord — we know it. And we have done it so many times that we say, I give it all up! I'm going fishing, I am going back to my old job, I am not going to try again, I am not going on with it. I think there was something of that about Peter. If there was not, there ought to have been. There is something not natural about him if that is not true. After what he had done, the realisation of it, after seeing the look of the Lord as He passed out to His death, after going out and weeping bitterly — that is not superficial, sentimental emotion, and not just self-pity; that is shame, that is remorse

for having failed his Friend — well, if he was not reticent, he ought to have been, but I think he was, and disinclined to go on, to do any more.

And the Lord comes to him with threefold commission — “Feed my lambs, feed my sheep, feed my sheep.” No, I am not letting you go, I am not giving way to you, I am not accepting your resignation, I am not letting you off, I am not going to be influenced by your discouragement; I can do something, I know I can do something yet with you if you trust Me, but, look here, I am not going to do it for you. I am not going simply to put My hands on you and make you do it. I say, Go on, get on with it; I tell you, go and do it! Passivity is no good, even though it be the passivity of your disillusionment, of self-ashamedness, disgust, though it be the humility of humiliation, never mind, I want you to believe, trust and go on, be positive, be definite! The Lord was not discouraged with the discouragement of Peter. He came back and made the thing a very strong matter. “A threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Eccl. 4:12). You have denied Me three times; never mind, I commission you three times. Wonderful!

The need for positive faith

But what I want to emphasize here at this point is the necessity, even in the presence of our own failure and all the discouragement that it brings and all the lack of confidence in ourselves by this self-disclosure, even in the presence of that, faith has got to be positive and we have to get on with the Lord’s business. Myer in his “St. Paul” has this little clause — “God shall forgive thee all but thy despair.” The Lord did not accept the resignation of Elijah from under the juniper tree. He said, “Arise” (1 Kings 19:5). Let us forget ourselves, let us stop nursing our own griefs about ourselves and disappointments in life; let us recognise that these can just paralyse us and put us out of commission. Again and again some of us come to that position where it is an end, we cannot go any further, and the Lord has never come to us there. Has He ever come to you when you have been there under the juniper tree? Has He ever come to you and picked you up and put you on your feet? He never has to me, and many times I have been there and said, This is the end! Every time the Lord has come and has said, Look here, get up, and when you get up, I am going on with you; you get up, and I will go on, but while you are there, I will do nothing. “Arise, and stand upon thy feet”, and we will go on. The Lord is not going on with a crawling man or woman.

Well, this is very practical in its meaning. We have got to be positive, not in trying to pick ourselves up and make ourselves believe that we are better than we are, but simply trusting the Lord, believing in the Lord, get on with it, give our quota, forget ourselves as far as we can, get outside of ourselves. Here is need, there are people of God in need, we should get on with His business, and as we do so, we shall find that He can repair the damage. The Lord can get over all that which would so thoroughly have destroyed us and put us out, and He does it, and we are people who worship. We know we are not fit for it, we are not worthy of it, what rubbish we are, and yet the Lord is using us, the Lord is doing it simply on His own ground of mercy, faithfulness, grace. He is doing it, but again and again He has to say, Come on, don’t you stop there, don’t you get down there, don’t you let go. Come on, trust Me; keep going on with Me. The enemy is always trying to use anything just to put us out, and he will even use that necessary work of the Lord in discovering us to ourselves. The enemy will encamp upon that ground and paralyse us and put us out. The Lord never

meant the cross to have that effect, but only to bring us to the place where He can do what will bring glory to Him and none to our flesh.

A personal responsibility

Just one closing word here. The fourth “Follow Me!” Peter seems to have risen to it, responded, and the Lord had said something serious about how he would glorify God by his death. Peter seemed to have responded and to have said, All right, I am going on, Lord. That seems to have been his attitude. Then, looking round on his brethren, — Well, what about these men? There is John; he spies him. “And what shall this man do?” The Lord says, “If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.” Well, all I am going to say about that is this, make this your personal business, and have a single eye. This has been put to *you*; now then, this is *your* matter. There is a lot more to be said about that, but I am not going to say it. Simply this, it ends up here. I have been dealing with *you*, I have had *you* in view, under My hand, I have brought *you* through to this position; now then, *you* recognise that this is *your* matter, and don’t you be transferring this to other people; this is *your* matter with God, it becomes *your* personal response, I shut this up to *you* for the moment, I have My thoughts about others, I have My purposes in others, but this is *your* matter. The peril is sometimes just to say, That is a fine word for So-and-so; I am so glad you said that; So-and-so I know was there and just needed that word. “What is that to thee?” This is *your* business; I am dealing with *you*. That is where we finish. The business for the moment is with you personally and individually. “Follow *thou* me.” Come on; if others do not, you come on; if there are other purposes for others, *you* come on. He brings it right down to personal application, and says, I have singled *you* out from the beginning, I pulled *you* away from that sea, and I have been dealing with *you*. Of course, there is the collective and the corporate, and we are always talking about that. Let us remember this, there can be no corporate or collective apart from the individual. The corporate is only the aggregate of the individual. The church will be what the individual members are, and in that sense it has to become a very personal matter. And so the Lord would say in some things — You have got to face this matter as though you were the only person in the universe. “Whether one member suffereth, all the members suffer with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). So much hangs upon the individual, and you have to look upon it in that way. It does matter, we are not lost in a crowd; we are taken out of the crowd, and it does matter whether we go on or not.