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The Road to Heaven

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Abstract

The powerful sermon lasted for thirty minutes. Then Reverend Samson, the tall, slim, itinerant Scripture Union preacher called for a concluding, say-your-own-aloud prayer. He set the pace himself there at the lectern. He prayed with his eyes closed, his head nodding energetically, his lips fast-moving, his hands gesticulating and his whole face wrinkled and tense with enthusiasm.

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Stephen, sitting at the back pew, was lost in admiration. He wished he could pray like the forty-year-old preacher, full of the Holy Spirit. Then he was startled when the lady next to him, keyed up to excitement, bounced up, shrieking and ruffling up her clothes in prayer. The whole room of fifty brethren was rowdy with diverse prayerful demonstrations.

He should also show signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit in him, Stephen thought. The president of the prayer group was sitting, instead of standing, behind, apparently under the influence of the Holy Spirit himself. But he had the gift of discerning when a member had not received the Holy Spirit during general prayers, and would draw the member's attention soon after. Stephen had been mildly reproached twice before and didn't want another warning that night. Then he burst into his own prayer, rattling in tongues, jumping, yelling and clapping his hands.

Five minutes later, he noticed signs of choking in his lungs. Asthma again? He reduced the volume of his prayer; yet he lacked sufficient air. Something was pressing in his lungs. He felt dizzy which made his clapping irregular and the words escaping from his mouth without control. He was jabbering. Then came bouts of blackouts in his head until there was total darkness. He fell.

When Stephen opened his eyes one hour later, he was in his room in the hostel. Reverend Samson and three others, including the president, were there. 'Praise the Lord!' Reverend Samson said, and his companions responded halleluya. Stephen responded with a quivering smile. 'Brother Stephen,' Samson called, 'this is the work of the Holy Spirit. I know you have a message for us.'

Stephen smiled and nodded. He knew he had no message, except to say that he had had an attack. But he would not say it there. The brethren would frown at that, because his was the most spectacular 'trance' of the night's prayer meeting, and the visiting preacher would go home with a high opinion of the congregation. As the members rose to go, Stephen promised to say something in the future. 'I'm too overwhelmed to talk now,' he said. The brethren agreed with him and left.

Alone, Stephen was lost in thought. He had had this asthma from infancy. But until he left the secondary school, he never had it as bad as he had been experiencing since he came to the university. The university medical centre placed him on a special drug, but occasionally he abandoned it, expecting an instant cure from the Holy Spirit. At times, he felt better for months without the drug until, quite suddenly, the symptoms would return fully and force him to take his drug. This night's attack was the worst, without any antecedent symptoms for months.

Very early the following morning, he went to meet Reverend Samson, to tell him that what he experienced last night was an attack not a trance. 'There is no need pretending or telling lies about a message I never received,' he said. Reverend Samson said he was expecting nothing but how Stephen battled with the devil. 'You are hiding a terrible sin,' Samson said, 'and you will never be cured until you confess it.'

Stephen owned up to having taken an entrance examination for his friend two years ago. Samana, his best friend, was to take entrance examinations to two universities, one of which was where Stephen was already a student. Incidentally, the entrance examinations to the two institutions came up the same Saturday. Samana persuaded Stephen to represent him in the examination to the one in which Stephen was already a student, while he, Samana, sat for the examination to the other university. He passed the two examinations and was admitted to do engineering in both. Because of Stephen, he chose to come to this university where both were doing the same course, with Stephen in his third year and Samana in his second.

Having heard the details, Reverend Samson said, 'You must confess the sin and make amends. You must tell the university what you did before God forgives you completely.' Stephen must go and bring Samana immediately. He met Samana hurrying to the cafeteria and hinted that they would visit a place briefly after breakfast.

Thirty minutes later, they were in Reverend Samson's charlet in a guest house outside the university gate. 'The two of you must tell the university how you co-operated in a fraudulent admission into this place,' he said to them. 'Without that, all your labours here will earn you

hell.’ They should go to the registrar immediately and make the disclosure. Samana was worried and reminded Samson of the possible danger awaiting their action. He also argued, ‘I could have passed the examination to this university myself, and I could have gone to the other university but for my desire to be near Stephen.’ But Samson insisted that they must go and promised, ‘I will go on praying while you confront the registrar. He must expressly forgive you after hearing the story.’

When Stephen finished narrating the story of their impersonation, the bewildered registrar asked, ‘Do you know the weight of what you are saying?’ Stephen said he knew. The registrar called for their files, and after studying their academic records said, ‘Stephen Benja, by your records, you are heading towards the first class; your friend, Samana Damla, has shown similar signs. Don’t drag me into your conspiracy of self-destruction... Leave my office...’

Stephen cut him short, ‘It is devilish...,’ but the registrar would not allow him to continue. ‘I know you are a Scripture Unionist,’ the registrar said. ‘Get the degree, and, while you work, give all your earnings to the poor. God will accept that in atonement for your sins.’ He dismissed them without further argument.

Reverend Samson heard the reaction with a chuckle. He saw the registrar as speaking for the devil, who must be driven out of the campus that day. ‘What is the joy in following a first class degree to hell?’ he asked. He instructed that the two friends must write the whole story in a letter to be sent to the registrar immediately. ‘I shall pray over the letter, and once the registrar gets it, the sin becomes his and not yours.’

Samana refused to sign the letter which Stephen wrote hurriedly. Reverend Samson cajoled him into signing and following Stephen to deliver it by boasting of the efficacy of his prayers. ‘I will pray him into submission.’

Six hours later, Stephen and Samana were summarily expelled from the university. Samana, with a matchet in hand, went about hunting for Samson. But as the Scripture Unionists were smuggling Samson out of the university environment, Samson saw Stephen smiling artificially and said, ‘Praise the Lord! From now onwards, your road to heaven is an express-way.’