

The Returned

Father

by George C. Clark,
Sr.



*He looked his nephew
in the eyes, and the lad dropped his head.*

“He must work somewhere, Uncle Bill, and his job is legitimate. Ben is a good man and we need his financial support. I don’t see how you can afford to ask him to turn in his membership.”

“My intention is to make certain that it cannot be said that I endorse his involvement with liquor. I don’t want his blood to be on my hands. You know we tried our best to persuade him not to take this position, Bruce, but he refused to consider it after he learned of the profits involved. I will never go against my conscience, even if I have to stand alone. How could I let it be known that one of our members is involved in selling a substance which has ruined so many lives? How could any pastor sanction this evil and hope to retain the respect of the saints?”

“But someone must have that job,” the nephew persisted.

“I can’t argue about that,” the uncle said bluntly, “but once and for all, let me say, I will never endorse anyone who handles, sells, or uses liquor in any manner. I’d rather die and go on to meet my Maker than to do so. I only wish you felt as I do about this, Bruce.” The pastor’s eyes grew misty as they rested on his nephew, and he laid his hands lovingly on the youth’s broad shoulders.

“I had to be a father to you, my boy. You were only three when you lost your parents, and I have prayed . . .”

The impetuous young man cleared his throat, and asked, “Haven’t I always been good to you and Aunt Frances?”

“Yes, of course, but in this matter of permitting a member to be part-owner of a bar which serves alcoholic beverages, we just don’t see alike.”

The young minister breathed rather heavily, and then said quietly, “Uncle Bill, I . . . I think you’re a little fanatical about this. I suppose most religious folks have their pet peeves, especially ministers like you, but for myself, I have always tried to keep from going out on a tangent.” The youth turned, and was leaving the room when his uncle called him back.

“Bruce, you understand that while I am pastor, I can’t . . .”

“I think I understand your meaning, Uncle Bill,” the young man broke in, “and I think that since you feel the way you do, it would be better to get . . .”

“Don’t be in a hurry, son.”

“. . . someone who is more to your own way of thinking.”

“Bruce, you are the help I need. Why can’t we agree? You have more than ordinary ability, yet the congregation here is becoming less spiritual. I sympathize with your desire to get ahead. I was ambitious and young myself once. But you will accomplish nothing worthwhile for God unless you stand for truth and let everyone, especially the body of Christ, know that you are not a respecter of persons. Don’t let Ben’s money influence you. God will take care of us.”

“In other words, I must agree to the ousting of Ben Hodges and all those he may take with him, and be a fanatic all my days?” the young man cried bitterly. “Uncle Bill, you’ve never received the recognition you deserved, and it’s probably because of these extreme positions you’ve taken on unimportant matters. I don’t want to be like that. If at the beginning of my ministry I am to knock my head against a wall and dismiss our most prominent member because of a business decision . . .”

Pastor Byron sighed helplessly. “When you’ve seen as much of the effects of strong drink as I have, son, I think you’ll hate it as I do. In the years that lie before you, you’ll have plenty of opportunity to

observe its effects. Pastors have to counsel many whose homes are being torn apart, and you’ll find liquor to be the cause of a great deal of this. You’ll find my old object of hate cropping up in the most unexpected of places, and you’ll be called upon to pray for the souls of its victims, but you’ll find that from the insane thirst for liquor, and its consequences, escape is almost impossible.” Then he added solemnly, “And if you persist in your present attitude, you will probably fail to warn some poor innocent person in whose blood the unexpected craving lurks. Many of these poor victims never intend to become what they do become; therefore, they confidently buy their liquor and are taken in, believing that you, their trusted minister, give your endorsement to that which entraps them!”

He looked his nephew in the eyes, and the lad dropped his head. After a long pause, the elder continued, “Now, my boy, you know my mind. Think it over. It would grieve me more than you know to lose your service here as assistant pastor, a position which you have held with distinction for almost a year now. I’d rather work with you, Bruce, than any other minister we’ve had, but . . .”

The older minister sighed and looked at his nephew, who just shook his head, turned slowly, and walked out. With that, the conversation ended. For the rest of the week, Bruce Byron pondered his uncle’s words. Bruce was talented and ambitious, and the limitations put upon him by what he termed his uncle’s quixotic ideas irritated him unspeakably. “Why did he always have to stir things up?”

Saturday evening came, and a frown creased Bruce’s brow as he stood in the parsonage looking into the dreariness of a winter twilight. Across the street a poor wreck of a man, weather-beaten and dirty, staggered along in the snow, clinging now and then to the palings for support. The brisk wind sent his hat skipping along the icy sidewalk, and the young minister noticed that a deep scar ran across his scraggly grey locks. Pathetically, the old man pulled the collar of his ragged coat more closely around his

neck, as the biting winter wind whistled past. The minister's eyes followed him with growing disgust, and when he paused suddenly just opposite the window, young Byron hastily drew back into the shadows. "Surely he's not coming here," he muttered. While he watched, the drunken man stepped unsteadily off the curb, lurched forward, righted himself, and started to cross the street. The harsh hum of a motor signaled a car's approach as it turned the corner, and the young Bruce Byron at the window gave a startled cry.

Half an hour later, the intoxicated old man breathed his last, lying on a bed in the house. Uncle Bill and his nephew had prayed, but their prayers had not availed. Young Byron turned from the bed with a sigh, deeply touched by the earnestness with which his uncle had prayed.

"We've done what we could, Uncle Bill. If he had been your best friend you couldn't have prayed more sincerely." The elder minister seemed unusually contemplative. "Uncle Bill, sometimes I wonder why God doesn't answer prayers like the ones we just prayed." Bruce's eyes began to fill with tears of compassion and frustration. "The man was dying, obviously with no hope." His voice faded as he pondered the unknown. "Why wouldn't God hear us?"

"Hard as it may seem, son, sometimes people are on their death bed because they have rejected God's last call. I'm afraid that in such cases, to prevail in prayer is almost impossible." His uncle's voice had a depth of feeling that strangely stirred the young man's heart. He felt instinctively that something was terribly wrong, and looked up at his uncle. In the dim light, his face was white and distressed.

"What's wrong? Are you ill, Uncle Bill?"

The pastor did not reply. He was fumbling in his pocket, and presently drew out something which he handed to his nephew.

"You've seen this picture before, Bruce."

"Of course, Uncle Bill," he answered tenderly, though a shade of displeasure crossed his face as he

took the little picture and looked into the smiling brown eyes of the father he had scarcely known.

"It seems out of place – sacrilegious, almost – to mention him here. I wish he had lived," the youth sighed.

The pastor went over to the bed and stood looking down at the man who lay there. His hand went out and gently parted the grey hair from his furrowed brow. It seemed as if he suddenly had forgotten the young preacher's presence.

"Jim! My poor brother Jim!"

"Uncle Bill, what – what do you mean?" the nephew cried wildly. "My – my father died years ago!"

The uncle unsteadily crossed the floor to where young Byron stood, and turning, pointed to the bed.

"He died there, ten minutes ago."

The pastor swallowed, and took a deep breath.

"I had not meant to tell you, son, but . . ." The uncle was clinging helplessly to the nephew's arm. "Yes, it may be as well that you should know."

Bruce Byron found his voice at last. "That! My father?" he cried in horrified tones.

"Yes, there he lies, your father – and my brother. He was once a wonderful husband and father. The time has been when he could have bought a dozen homes costing as much or more than this one. He was a happy and prosperous business man, with a cheerful wife and baby. I saw the bloom of health and happiness fade from your mother's fair, young face as the demon of drink slowly won your father from her. I saw the peace and contentment of their home slip away as my brother plunged deeper and deeper into ruin. I saw their elegant house, with its nice furnishings, sold, just to satisfy a demonic urge to drink. I saw your mother's sad face slowly pine away as she toiled night and day to earn a scant living for herself, her baby, and her drunken husband. I heard her prayers and saw her tears fall unheeded. And, at last, I saw her laid away in what was little more than a crate in a ragged graveyard. And you, her child, were given into the care of your Aunt

Frances and me. This poor 'deceased' father of yours has wandered for almost twenty years, a drunken tramp, begging from door to door, while manhood, self-respect, and respect for others slipped away."

As the uncle concluded this sad story, young Byron's cheeks were bathed with tears, as were his uncle's.

That night, as the pastor and his nephew sat before the fire, young Byron asked, "Do you think that God had to send my father here to die, to get His point across to me, and to keep me from making a terrible mistake, Uncle Bill?"

The uncle looked at his nephew kindly, but wisely perceived that an answer from him was not needed and that God was communicating to the young man's heart.

"Uncle Bill," Bruce said brokenly, "I'm a young man, and life is before me. And I thank God that he let me see, now, which way to go. I'll fight the curse of strong drink with every ounce of strength God gives me. Your hate is now my hate, and from this day on, we are in perfect accord!"

The compassionate pastor pressed his nephew's hand and smiled sadly at the picture he still held.

Send for our CD series:

"All Things"

by John D. Clark, Sr.

Study with Pastor John the lives of the biblical men and women of greatest faith and learn the secret that enabled them to endure and overcome all things, both the good and bad things of this life, so that they might gain eternal life and peace with God. Write us at the address below for information on receiving this study on CD.

Write for free samples of our gospel tracts:

ORDERS

P.O. Box 99 Burlington, NC 27216-0099

Visit us on the Web, at: www.isaiah58.com