

ALL MANNER OF EVIL . . . FALSELY

In this evil world a believer may expect to be the subject of slander, calumny, misrepresentation and false accusation; at least from time to time. This is the clear implication of our Lord, as he closes his Beatitudes [Matthew 5.11-12].

Such verbal persecution has a long history. Joseph languished in prison because of the lying tongue of Potiphar's wife. Moses was bitterly accused of plotting the murder of God's people. In the Psalms, David frequently complained that misrepresentation was his daily experience, and that he had no relief from the malicious words of his enemies. Naboth lost his life through slander. The prophets Elijah, Amos, and Jeremiah, all went through it, and the tender spirit of the latter was almost broken by it.

Even our holy Lord was accused in turn of being a winebibber, a blasphemer, a demoniac, and a seditious trouble-maker with kingly ambitions, while the apostle Paul was falsely indicted as being an apostle of his own making. **All saints are exposed to slander** [Luke 6.22, 2 Timothy 3.12], and especially those in places of spiritual leadership and authority [Romans 3.8, 2 Corinthians 6.8, Jude 8]. There are times in history when evil is peculiarly rampant, and at such times the sin of slander is especially prominent [2 Timothy 3.3].

The polluted source from which this evil stream flows is the human heart.

Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, and so an evil man brings forth evil things [Matthew 12.34-35, 15.19]. Such men have no revulsion for the spoken iniquity which they exhibit, but, in fact, love it [Psalms 52.1-4]. It is the outward and audible sign of their inward lack of grace.

The more wicked or hypocritical a person is, the more this is evidenced by his untruthful speech [Psalms 50.20, Proverbs 11.9].

'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' This childish statement is simply not true. **God's Word spreads no such illusion.** It insists, rather, that 'the words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly' [Proverbs 18.8]. Misrepresentation is deeply hurtful. It also has other appalling effects. It separates close friends [Proverbs 16.28], sows discord amongst brethren [Proverbs 6.19], and goes hand in hand with murderous conspiracy [1 Samuel 24.9, Psalms 31.13, Ezekiel 22:9].

No-one must underestimate the power of the tongue. James describes it as an untameable and unruly evil which is full of deadly poison. It is a fire, which itself is set on fire by hell. Its small size belies its great power. A large forest fire, ravaging the countryside, endangering life, and creating untold devastation, may be started by a small spark [James 3.1-10].

God's view of this sin is plain. It is a direct transgression of his holy Law, summarised in the Ten Commandments [Exodus 20.16, Deuteronomy 5.20], and underlined elsewhere in the Scriptures [Matthew 19.18, Luke 18.20, Romans 13.9].

He lists it as a sin which he particularly hates [Proverbs 6.16-19].

It disgusts him. It is an abomination to him [Proverbs 12.22, 8.13]. His wrath hangs over all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. But he has used especially clear terms in pledging himself to judge this sin. He will show ungodly men that they are not lords over their own lips [Psalms 12.3-4]. Lying tongues will be plucked out and destroyed [Psalms 52.2-5]. False witnesses shall not go unpunished, and those that speak lies shall perish [Proverbs 19.9].

The day is coming when lying lips shall be stopped [Psalms 63.11].

The infallible Son of God roundly warns all who use idle words of the coming judgment, and his holy apostles assure all impenitent liars of their eternal damnation [1 Corinthians 6.10, Revelation 21.8, 27, 22.15]. This is because a slanderer, in spreading malicious lies about others, unambiguously reveals his own character. He is a person who does not know God [Jeremiah 9.3, 5-6, 8]; a character of abject wickedness [Psalms 10.7-8].

It is hate and iniquity that motivate him to act as he does [Proverbs 26.28].

He may be one whose conscience is seared [1 Timothy 4:2]. Left to himself, he can only get worse [Proverbs 17.20]. If he has any show of religion at all, it is to be discounted, for it is nothing but an empty show [James 1.26]. Indeed, evil speaking is the badge of an apostate [Jude 8, 10, 2 Peter 2.10]. In the eyes of God, the slanderer is a prating fool who is certain to fall headlong [Proverbs 10.8].

These things being so, it is little wonder that believers of both Testaments are so sternly warned to forsake this sin. Moses told the Israelites to keep a distance between themselves and any false matter, and forbade all forms of tale bearing [Exodus 23.7, Lev 19.16]. David was clear that all who desire life will specifically turn their backs on falsehood [Psalms 34.12-13]. Roman soldiers were instructed by the thundering Baptist that repentance and false accusation were mutually exclusive [Luke 3.14]. Paul taught the early believers that conversation is intended to build up and to minister grace, and therefore words which unjustly pull down others have no place in the Christian life [Ephesians 4.25, 29, 31, Colossians 3.9]. Titus was informed that this was something of which the infant churches needed to be constantly reminded [Titus 3.1-2]. The thought that he might find this sin at Corinth filled Paul with horror [2 Corinthians 12.20-21].

No apostle allows any room for it at all [James 4.11, 1 Peter 2.1].

Does idleness aggravate it? Then away with 'time on your hands' [1 Timothy 5.13]! Are rumours more likely if they have at least some foundation in truth? Then live in such a way that no-one will ever be able to say 'There is no smoke without fire' [1 Peter 3.16].

The lips of believers, then, abstain from this heinous crime.

Yet it still continues in the world. God's people are surrounded by slander and false reports, although not personally engaged in such things. What are they to do when reports of others come to their ears? Even here the Bible is not silent, and clearly tells us our duty.

No report is to be entertained on the testimony of one witness.

Scripture prescribes two witnesses, and preferably three [Deuteronomy 19.15]. Only then may we heed what is said about others. And we need to ensure that those conveying the news are, indeed, witnesses; and not merely purveyors of rumour.

No report is to be listened to if it comes from a person nursing hatred,

however plausible he may otherwise appear to be. Scripture is quite clear on this [Proverbs 26.24-28]. We are certainly to be concerned with what is just [Philippians 4.8], but not with malice, evil speaking, and personal vendettas. Possibly there may be a large element of truth in what the person says. But hatred perverts his judgment, and biases the manner in which his report is made. He becomes more concerned with personal advantage than righteousness. His report, therefore, is not to be countenanced.

If anything we hear is obviously untrue, we are to listen to it no longer.

Only a wicked person would continue to give ear to it [Proverbs 17.4]. We thus avoid the danger of being implicated in the slander [Exodus 23.1], and rob the talebearer of scope to ply his foul trade. His ambition is to set alight more and more people with his flame of untruth. We should remember that a fire goes out if no fuel is put on it [Proverbs 26.20-21], and not permit ourselves to be ignited by him. It is far better to drive him away with holy anger [Proverbs 25.23]!

But how are we to respond when we ourselves are slandered? Many believers who are clear on what we have said so far, are confused here. How are we to react to those who falsely accuse us? What are we to do when false rumours about us are spreading? What action should we take when we learn that we have been maliciously represented and lied about?

We should not be surprised. The servant is not greater than his Lord. He was slandered before us, and we surely do not expect to be treated any differently. We are only going the way the Master went. It is time once more to consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself! If we do not, we shall be wearied and faint in our minds [In 15.18-20, Hebrews 12.1-4].

Instead, we should rejoice and leap for joy! To have our names cast out as evil, and to have all manner of evil said against us falsely, is a privilege, if it be for Jesus' sake.

We are going the way of the Lord, and the way of his prophets. The world does not persecute its own, but only those who no longer belong to it. Genuine believers and true pilgrims have ever been the subject of lying tales, false rumours, and unfounded indictments.

The world no longer owns us, but heaven does – and our reward there will be great [Matthew 5.11-12, Luke 6.22-23]. Reproaches for Christ's sake are something we should actually take pleasure in [2 Corinthians 12.10]. They are to be a source of happiness [1 Peter 3.14]. To suffer as an evildoer is a disgrace; but to be reproached for Christ's sake is nothing less than a high honour, and an evidence that the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us [Philippians 1.28-29, 1 Peter 3.14].

This does not mean that slander fails to hurt and distress us. We add our own tears to those of David and Jeremiah. Yet through those tears we can see, even more vividly than before, that we really are God's children. So it is that persecution, verbal or otherwise, never ruins us, but in fact excites in us new longings for, and expectancy of, heaven [2 Corinthians 4.8-10, 16-17].

Yes, even this is working for our good; and nothing in this heart-rending experience is capable of separating us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. The power of this consolation is immeasurable. While awaiting our safe arrival on a better shore, we can commune with God amid our present agonies. He cares for us, and invites us to cast all our care upon him, reminding us at the same time that identical afflictions are accomplished in our brethren throughout the world [1 Peter 5.7, 9]. He assures us that we are in his hands, and not the hands of our enemies [Psalms 37.32-33]. There may be no earthly comfort for our unprecedented pains, but there is always a heavenly ear open to our cry [Psalms 69.20, 33]. Our reputation may be ruined, and our character assassinated. Yet still we may cry to heaven for help [Psalms 119.86], protection [Psalms 64.2-5], deliverance [Psalms 120.1-4], vindication [Jeremiah 18.18-23], and even for the silencing of our false accusers [Psalms 31.17-20]. Slander has a marvellous way of driving us into the embrace of our heavenly Father. It removes our trust in lesser things, and brings us nearer, nearer to him. All may be against us, but he is still for us. Our hope and comfort is in him alone. Thus the spiteful calumnies we endure, despite their satanic origin [John 8.44-45]; prove to be a great blessing to us. God turns to our good what was meant for evil, and makes the wrath of man to praise him.

When suffering slander we should not make any attempt to rebuild our reputations.

What we are is known to God, and there is no other consideration which is relevant [2 Corinthians 5.9]. The Day of Judgment is not far distant, and there, when perfect justice is meted out, we shall be fully and publicly vindicated [2 Corinthians 5.10]. Meanwhile we have other work to do [2 Corinthians 5.11]. Could we ever think that God would restrict our usefulness simply because of what lying lips have said about us?

It would, then, be folly to spend our remaining days busily engaged in something which is not commanded; namely, self-vindication. It is wisdom, rather, to spend and be spent in the Master's cause. As with David, so let it be with us. He made the false accusations of the wicked an occasion to pledge himself to a new obedience to his God [Psalms 119.69, 95, 161]. The consciences of faithful men detect the truth about us, despite all that they may hear to the contrary [2 Corinthians 5.11].

The pride of our hearts urges us to spring to our own defence. But to abstain is the right course. Christ has left us an example that we should follow in his steps. When he was reviled, he reviled not again. When he suffered, he did not threaten. His sole action was to commit himself to him that judges righteously [1 Peter 2.19-23]. Paul and his fellow-workers followed this Divine example. When reviled, they blessed. When persecuted, they patiently put up with it. When defamed, they continued with their ministry of comfort. They were considered to be the scum of the earth [1 Corinthians 4.11-13]. But has anyone ever laboured more fruitfully? Is there anyone who is more honoured by the Lord's people than the godly Paul? Following Christ's example was right for him. And it is right for us.

However, some definite action should be taken if the slander is jeopardising the spiritual health of fellow-believers. We must sadly admit that some slander originates from those who profess to be Christians. From what we said earlier, it is evident that such persons are in grave spiritual danger. The trespass is against us, and so the onus is on us to seek to restore the erring brother in the manner prescribed in Matthew 18.15-17. But we must be careful to remember that in no sense is self-vindication the reason for our action.

We have one object alone, and that is to gain this brother!

This principle explains those passages where Paul appears to be engaged in self-justification. For instance, in the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians, Paul spends time and energy defending his claim to be a true apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. He had been slandered as one who had taken this office upon himself. It was an attack upon his integrity and apostolic authority.

But it is worth noticing that Paul does not write to the slanderers themselves, but to those who had been influenced by their words.

He re-establishes the truth of his apostleship in their minds, because their spiritual well-being depends upon it. To honour pseudo-apostles as true apostles would ruin the Corinthians. Unless they could distinguish the true from the false, there was no hope of their spiritual advance.

Paul's only motivation is a concern for their welfare. He is in no way engaged in a programme of self-justification, and is even apologetic for his vindictory style. He is careful to draw the distinction between contending for the truth, and campaigning for personal esteem. So should we be!

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