

P.S.

## Under attack!

**A FEW MONTHS** ago I attended a presentation given by some former SAS operatives who had been involved in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. They had since gone on to form a consultancy providing information and advice about political stability in Saudi Arabia and the future of the House of Saud (it was in this capacity that that they came to our firm). They also advised companies on security issues and provided security solutions for visitors to the oil states.

It was fascinating stuff. There was the smell of danger in the air as they talked of the tensions and conditions which exist in those societies, particularly for the stranger. For the foreign business traveller, a trip to Saudi Arabia is potentially more dangerous than a visit to Iraq, and many of the princes of the House of Saud are now emigrating because of the escalation of tensions that they foresee. Roughly one foreigner a month is murdered by fundamentalist groups in Saudi Arabia. Thus far these have always been at gas stations or on the street as the foreigner makes his way between car and store. As yet no one has been shot 'at home' in their compound, but it is only a matter of time.

What struck me in particular was their depiction of the compounds where ex-pats live and stay. They are impressive affairs. They have huge facades with prominent security features, and look as though they ought to be impregnable. Many have armed guards. But although some of them are indeed well protected, for the majority all a would-be assassin or kidnapper has to do is drive round the back, to find the other side of the building completely vulnerable! There are virtually no defences at all; anyone could get in.

It is a bizarre situation. Just who is being fooled in such a scenario? What sort of a deterrent do the front-facing defences provide, and for how long will this remain? The presenters were quick to point out that none of their clients would, of course, end up in such a building, but this is the risk which many visitors to the region will face unless they are scrupulous in demanding better provision from their sponsoring firms.

It was the concept of half-baked defences that intrigued me, the idea that one could be well defended against attack from one angle and yet completely defenceless and exposed on another.

Can humans really be so careless, so reckless in their precautions? Apparently the answer is 'Yes' where literal danger of a very obvious kind is concerned. So what is the probability that they might be similarly in danger where subtle spiritual matters are concerned? Perhaps even higher.

I might consider myself to be well defended. I may be keenly aware of real and present dangers from particular influences and attitudes in the world. I may know of false doctrines prevalent in churches round about me, and I may be thoroughly versed in the techniques and passages required to combat these errors. And yet there is the frightening possibility that I might leave myself completely open—utterly exposed and unguarded—in another area.

Our defences need to be well-rounded and balanced. It is of little value to be walled up to heaven against one potential assailant but completely unprepared to combat a threat of a different kind. We must avoid a mindset which obsesses so much on one particular danger that it completely ignores the myriad of other threats that loom. False teaching, wrong practices, divisive attitudes, the spirit of the world—these things do not always arrive in the form we expect, machine guns blazing, at the front door.

In all this there is also a call to personal consistency and proportion. The image of the Saudi compound, armed fortress at the front and unlocked plywood door at the back, is a powerful one. Our Lord spoke of the importance of proportion in his parable of the mote and the beam. We must be sure that we are not so busy concentrating on what we know to be 'obviously' wrong (or worse, what we personally dislike), that we do not question other aspects of our lives where danger may lurk and disaster threaten. Knowing some things to be wrong, and how to avoid and denounce them, does not automatically mean that everything else in our lives is right. Let us not be so busy tackling the onslaught of materialism in our midst, let us say, that we completely neglect the showing of compassion to our neighbour, or the emphasis on the role of Israel in God's purpose. As the hymn captures it, we must walk carefully, for danger is near. It might not always take the form we anticipate.

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