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The Silence of Sovereignty and the Action of Faith (1968)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-12).

"And he said, Thus saith the Lord, Make this valley full of trenches. For thus saith the Lord, Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain, yet that valley shall be filled with water: and ye shall drink, both ye and your cattle and your beasts. And this is but a light thing in the sight of the Lord: he will also deliver the Moabites into your hand" (2 Kings 3:16-18).

These are two very well-known stories and you have had many messages from the Lord based on them. There are truly many things in the whole of these two incidents of considerable spiritual value, but for now I want to concentrate upon one thing alone which will not be new to you, but which has a new and stronger emphasis in my own heart. It is, I believe, something of preciousness, wrapped up in a great deal more in these records.

A Crisis Brought About by Human Failure

In both of the instances from which we have read there was a crisis. In the first it was a crisis in the life of a prophet, and in the second a crisis in the life of a king. In both cases the crisis had been brought about by human weakness and failure. Elijah had inwardly collapsed and asked the Lord to take away his life. It was human weakness and failure. In the second case Jehoshaphat had made an alliance with Ahab's son. While Jehoshaphat himself was a man almost blameless in his own character and one of the outstanding men of truth for God in the difficult years of the divided kingdom, yet he did some unwise things and one of these was getting into touch with and allowing himself to be drawn into this conspiracy to go out in campaign against the Moabites. It was human failure which brought about the great difficulty and something which threatened absolute disaster.

The Triumph of the Grace of God

But while it is true that there was a crisis in both cases and in both cases a crisis brought about by the weakness of humanity, yet we see the triumph of the grace of God, a glorious issue from all just because of Divine grace.

The Silence of Sovereignty

Now the point upon which I am focusing at the moment is the silence of sovereignty and the sovereignty in Divine silence when the Lord's people are involved. There are times, of course, when the Lord breaks silence and comes out in a terrible manifestation of majesty, of might, unto destruction. But that is not His normal way and specially not His normal way with His people and with His servants. His normal way is silence. In both of these instances, as you see, there was a great silence which embodied tremendous power in which the mighty sovereignty of God was bound up. It is really a matter of the Holy Spirit in relation to the covenant purpose of God and in relation to the Lord's honour, for I take it that the still, small voice (or, as the margin has it, that voice of gentle stillness) is very typical of the Holy Spirit, if it was not the Holy Spirit Himself. I also take it that those waters which came down to save the situation in that terrible crisis in the life of Jehoshaphat are typical of the Holy Spirit, but how silently they came! He was not in the whirlwind, not in the hurricane, not in the earthquake, not in the fire - it must have been very tempestuous round about! - but in the voice of gentle stillness. "Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain", indeed, you will see nothing until it has happened.

How typical this is of very much of the mighty sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit! Take each of these instances. Elijah: well, the situation did seem to demand some tremendous demonstration of Divine power. Although there had been that wonderful demonstration on Mount Carmel, it did seem that Jezebel was even so in the place of greater power than Elijah at the moment. How strange a thing this human nature is, how deceptive and desperately sick these human hearts are! Even when we have seen much of the mighty works of God, how utterly despondent we can become after all. It is true, as James says, that "Elijah was a man of like passions with us" (5:17), but put it round the other way and it is just as true, we are people of the same infirmities as Elijah. Human nature is the same everywhere and it did at any rate at this point seem as though a mighty demonstration of Divine power was the only thing that could result in survival for the servant of God and what he represented, the Lord's covenant purpose. Sometimes it seems that the indispensable necessity and irreducible minimum is some sovereign act, unmistakable in its clearness of definition, something that no one could fail to acknowledge as an act of God that has saved the situation. It needs God's

intervention for the situation to be saved and the vessel of the Lord to be vindicated. God must now do something that perhaps He had never done before. This can be true to our own personal spiritual experience, it may be true to the work of God with which we are bound up, it may be true as to the whole testimony of the Lord involved in the world. The situation might just now be something like that for many people on this earth with all going to the enemy, all being lost.

A Crisis of Enlargement

It seemed like the end for Elijah and I would not like to have been the man to argue with him at that point for I am perfectly sure that I could not have moved him or persuaded him that things were not as bad as they seemed. No, it was settled for him that this was an end. The best thing to do would be for him to pass out, to die. But what so strongly and desperately seemed like an end was really a crisis of enlargement. There is no doubt about it that the introduction of Elisha after this crisis was for enlargement. Elisha inherited a double portion of his master's spirit and carried on his work with mighty enlargement. And it all turned on this very point of apparent hopelessness!

How was this really a crisis of enlargement? It was not by a hurricane. God did not just sweep in at this point with the irresistible wind carrying all before it. It was not in the earthquake, upheaving and overturning everything, shattering and breaking. It was not in the fire, consuming and burning and destroying. The crisis of enlargement did not come in any of those ways or in anything like those things. It came in a voice of gentle stillness, a still small voice.

We pass on to the other incident in the life of Elisha. The emergency had arisen by reason of those who had embarked upon this campaign against the Moabites in the foolishness of an unequal yoke, a forbidden association, an alliance with the household of Ahab and with Samaria. Jehoshaphat and Jehoram went out to the wilderness, they went to the battle, and in the wilderness their water supplies gave out. Disaster threatened and was imminent. The whole of their army - and it would seem that that army was all that Israel could put into the field - and the whole nation was involved in this terrible threat. You know what happened. Jehoram said, 'God has brought us out to destroy us'. That is the reaction of unbelief. We need not put the blame objectively onto Jehoram. When we get into situations such as this, there is always that inside us which will say, 'The Lord is against us. He intends to finish us now'. Jehoram took that attitude. But Jehoshaphat, a man of God, turned to the Lord, called for a prophet and the result was: 'The Lord will make this valley to be filled with water'.

The Call to Faith to Act

In such a situation the call is to faith to act. Faith is called upon to act when all seems hopeless, just to act. Here God is not accepting passive faith, He calls for action, the action of faith. The valley was there. What do you want more than a valley if you are going to have a river? The natural situation seemed to be sufficient to provide God with a channel, but God is not just taking that. He says, 'You dig, even in the valley. There is something extra called for from you, make ditches in the valley.' That seems superfluous, unnecessary. Surely the situation itself is sufficient, it provides the Lord with a ground. No, that is passive. In this situation you have to do something about it in faith, to go the extra, to take action. I am sure you see the point. So often we are in a situation which seems to be most suitable for anything the Lord would do, a situation which is itself a ground for the Lord. What more does the Lord want? He wants some action on your part right in that situation, the action of faith.

How often a new practical committal has been God's way when all seems lost. Some of us remember how in the First World War when the whole situation seemed lost, when France was well-nigh overrun and the enemy was carrying everything before him and the slaughter was terrible, Field-Marshal Haig was asked, 'What are you going to do?' His answer was, 'I am going to take the offensive', and he did and turned the whole thing. When it seemed hopeless he took the offensive. Very often that is what the Lord calls for when things are like that. He calls on us to do something, not to throw up our hands and say that the day is lost, but in faith to do something. They had to make ditches in the valley.

The story is told and the lesson is very patent. A seemingly hopeless situation exists which can be put down to our foolishness, our folly, our weakness, our failure. There is a good deal for which we can blame ourselves if we want to, if we are so inclined, but the grace of God still abounds and the grace of God says, 'You are Mine, nothing is hopeless if you are Mine. If you are bound up with My covenant purpose, nothing is hopeless, I am going to fulfil it.' All that is left for you to do is to take the attitude of faith and to act upon it. However badly you may feel about your own weaknesses and mistakes, however badly you may feel about the situation as an impossible and hopeless one, you belong to the Lord and His covenant purpose is bound up with you and therefore nothing is finally hopeless. But you must believe that and you must do something about your belief. You must act in faith, rise up and act.

So these people, these soldiers, turned to digging, digging ditches in a valley, doing something that seemed to be unnecessary, and the result was that there came waters. Where from? Well, there came waters, that is all. There was no sound of rain, no seeing of rain, no sound of wind, nothing ocular and nothing aural, just a quiet, silent movement of the Spirit of God. It just happened. And our history is going to be very largely like that.

Why am I saying this? Because we are so often found looking for, praying for, expecting, some mighty shattering intervention of God in our situation, the evidence and the proof that God is with us, something that we can lay hold of, something to which we can point, something that we can report on. But it does not happen and again and again when we have passed most critical points in our history, when we have turned most serious corners, we have to ask ourselves how we did it, how it came to pass. Well, it just happened. It undoubtedly involved very great power on the part of God and there is no doubt that if He had not done it, there would have been disaster. But it is done. How? We thought this and that, we thought the Lord must come this way or that way, we were showing Him the way, telling Him what He must do, and He never came our way, He never did it like that at all. It just, so to speak, happened. We are going on like that. It may be from time to time that the Lord will show His hand. He is the God of the sudden leap as much as He is the God of the long process, but normally the way of faith is this way: silently - almost imperceptibly - without any power to detect that He is doing it, it is being done.

It is not just that we get over the stile and continue across another field until we come to another stile. This is a way of enlargement and God is enlarging in this way, silently, almost imperceptibly. He is going on with His covenant purpose. That is the larger part of the Church's history. If we could write the whole history of the Church now, or read it, we should find that while there have been times when God broke in in wonderful ways, they are much fewer than those periods in which God silently and hiddenly worked and did marvellous things, kept His Church going, but kept His Church on the way of enlargement. And that is the story of our own inner experiences.

I feel this may be a word for us as a people and perhaps for some in their own spiritual life. If you are expecting the Lord to do some extraordinary, miraculous thing in your situation, it may never happen. What God does intend and has intended will happen, if we will believe Him and act on our belief. That does sometimes mean launching out on to water where it would be easy to sink if it were not for the Lord. "Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain, yet that valley shall be filled with water: and ye shall drink..." and "there came water". That is all. Not in the hurricane, the earthquake or the fire, but in the voice of gentle stillness they turned the corner and got through the crisis. For Elijah it was followed by the command of God to anoint Elisha. God's answer to such situations is enlargement, not less but more.