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The Silence of Sovereignty and the Action of Faith (1951)

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

"And he said, Thus saith Jehovah, Make this valley full of trenches... 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 Jehovah: he will also deliver the Moabites into your hand" (2 Kings 3:16-18).

These extracts relate to two very well-known incidents upon which many messages from the Lord have been based, and there are truly many things in them of considerable spiritual value. But I want just now to concentrate upon one thing alone, and that not a new thing to you, but one which is with me in a new and stronger emphasis in my own heart in these days. It is, I believe, something of great value and preciousness.

A Crisis Resulting from Human Failure met by Divine Grace

In each of the instances of 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. 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, one of the outstanding men of God in the difficult years of the divided kingdom, yet he did some unwise things, one of which was this allowing of himself to be drawn into this agreement to go out in campaign against the Moabites. It was human failure which brought about the great difficulty, resulting in that which threatened absolute disaster.

But while that is true, and while the crisis in both cases was brought about by the weakness of humanity we have 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 - 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 and might unto destruction. But that is not His normal way, and particularly when a matter concerns His people and His servants. His normal way is silence. In both of these instances, as you see, there was a great silence which embodied tremendous power, and in which the mighty sovereignty of God was bound up. Really it is all a matter of the Holy Spirit in relation to the covenant purpose of God and to the Lord's honour; for I take it that that 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. Then those waters which came down to save the situation in that terrible crisis in the life of Jehoshaphat are also typical of the Holy Spirit. But mark how silently they came. Not as in a whirlwind, an earthquake, a fire, but as in the voice of gentle stillness. "*Ye shall not see wind, neither shall ye see rain*"; indeed, they will see nothing until the event has happened.

How typical of very much of the mighty sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit! Take each of these instances. In Elijah's case the situation did seem to demand some tremendous demonstration of Divine power. Although there had been that wonderful manifestation on Mount Carmel, it did seem that Jezebel was in the place of greater power than Elijah at the moment. But how strange a thing this human nature is, how deceptive and desperately sick these human hearts are! When we have seen much of the mighty works of God, how utterly despondent we can become after all! And it is true, as James says, "*Elijah was a man of like passions with us*" (James 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 at this point at any rate it did seem as though a mighty demonstration of Divine power was the only thing that could result in the survival of the servant of God and of what he represented, the Lord's covenant purpose - yes, some sovereign act, unmistakable in its clearness of definition, something that no one could fail to acknowledge as an act of God that had saved the situation. Sometimes it seems that such a thing is the indispensable necessity and irreducible minimum. God must now do something that perhaps He has never done before. It can be true of our own personal spiritual experience, true of the work of God with which we are bound up, and true as to the whole testimony of the Lord involved in the world. It might just now be something like

that with many people on this earth, that all is going to the enemy, all is being lost, and a mighty inbreaking on God's part seems the only hope.

A Crisis of Enlargement

Well, it seemed like an end for Elijah - and I would not like to have been the man to argue with him at that point; I am perfectly sure I should not have moved him or persuaded him that things were not as bad as he believed. No, it was settled for him that this was the end: the best thing would be for him to die. But what so strongly and desperately seemed like an end was really a crisis of enlargement, as represented in the emergence of Elisha. There is no doubt about it that Elisha was an enlargement here upon Elijah, receiving the double portion of his spirit and carrying on his work in a mighty enlargement, and it all issued from this very point of apparent hopelessness.

Well, 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 an earthquake, upheaving and overturning everything, shattering and breaking. It was not in a 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.

Pass on to the other incident in the life of Elisha. Here we have the emergency which had arisen by reason of those who were the Lord's embarking upon this campaign against the Moabites, through the foolishness of an unequal yoke, a forbidden association, an alliance with the household of Ahab and Samaria. Well, Jehoshaphat and Jehoram went to the battle, and in the wilderness their water supplies gave out and disaster was imminent. The whole of their army - and it would seem that Israel and Judah had put all their available resources into the field - was involved in this terrible threat. You know what happened. Jehoram exclaimed, 'God has brought us out to destroy us'. That is the reaction of unbelief. When we get into situations such as this, there is always that within us which will say, 'The Lord is against us, He intends to make an end of us now'. Jehoram took that attitude; but Jehoshaphat, a man of God, turned to the Lord. He called for a prophet, and through the prophet the Lord gave His instructions regarding the digging of ditches, and a promise of deliverance.

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. Here God is not accepting passive 'faith'. He calls for action, the action of faith. But the valley was there, and 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 no, God is not just accepting it like 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 and unnecessary: the situation itself is surely enough and provides the Lord with a ground. No, that is a passive attitude. You have to do something in faith in this situation. You see the point. So often we are in a situation which seems to provide a most suitable opportunity for anything the Lord can do, which itself constitutes ground for His intervention. What more does the Lord want? He wants some action on our part right in the midst of it - faith's action.

How often a new, practical committal has been God's way when all seemed lost. Some of us remember in the first World War, when the whole situation was desperate, when the French were

well-nigh overrun, when the enemy was carrying everything before him, and the slaughter was terrible. Field-Marshal Haig was asked, 'What are you going to do?' and his answer was, 'I am going to take the offensive'. He did so, and turned the whole course of the battle. When it seemed hopeless, he took the offensive: and very often that is what the Lord calls for, when things are like that. He calls upon 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.

Faith Not Set Aside by Grace

The lesson of these incidents is very patent. Do we face a seemingly hopeless situation - and one which can even be put down to our foolishness or weakness or failure, and in which there is a good deal for which we can blame ourselves if we are inclined to? Well, the grace of God still abounds, and says, 'Nothing is hopeless if you are Mine. However badly you may feel about your own weaknesses and mistakes, and however impossible and hopeless you may feel the situation to be, you are Mine, and My covenant purpose is bound up with you, and therefore nothing is finally hopeless.' But you have to believe that, and you have to do something about your belief; you have to rise up and act in faith.

So 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. From where? Well, there came waters, that is all. No sound or sight of rain, no sound of wind, nothing ocular and nothing aural, but a quiet, silent movement of the Spirit of God. It just happened, as we say; 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, something that is evidence and proof that God is with us, something we can lay hold of, to which we can point and on which we can report; and such does not happen. Again and again when we have passed most critical points in our history and turned most serious corners, we have had to say, 'How did we do it, how did it come to pass?' Well, it just happened. It undoubtedly involved very great power on the part of God, and there is no doubt that, if God had not done it, that there would have been disaster; yet it is done. But how? We thought the Lord must come this way and that, and we were telling Him what He must do; but He never came by our way, never did it like that at all. It, so to speak, just happened. We are going on like that. It may be from time to time 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, the needed thing is being done.

And it is not just that we get over the stile and continue across another field until we come to another difficulty; it 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 read the whole history of the Church now, we should find that while there have been times when God intervened in wonderful ways, they are much fewer than those periods in which He silently and hiddenly worked and did marvellous things, both keeping His Church from destruction and also maintaining it in the way of enlargement. That is the story of our own inner experiences also.

If you are expecting the Lord to do some extraordinary, miraculous thing in your situation, it may

never happen. But what God does intend will happen if we will believe Him and act on our belief. That does sometimes mean a 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 and the fire, but the voice of gentle stillness. They turned the corner, they got through the crisis. "*Go, return... Elisha... shalt thou anoint...*" (1 Kings 19:15,16). The answer of God to such a situation is not less but more.