

ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

By

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CHAPTER THREE

ORDERED TO ZAREPHATH

(I Kings 17)

A FRIEND of mine, spending a few days in the neighborhood of our English lakes, came upon the most beautiful shrubs he had ever seen. Arrested by their extraordinary luxuriance, he inquired the cause, and learned that it was due to a judicious system of transplanting, constantly pursued.

Whatever may be the effect of such a process in nature, it is certainly true that our heavenly Father employs similar methods to secure the highest results in us. He is constantly transplanting us. And though these changes threaten at times to hinder all steady progress in the Divine life, yet, if they are rightly borne, they result in the most exquisite manifestations of Christian character and experience.

Another illustration of the same truth is given by the prophet Jeremiah, when he says, "**Moab hath been at ease from his youth; and he hath settled on his lees; and hath not been emptied from vessel to vessel; neither hath he gone into captivity: therefore his taste remained in him, and his scent is not changed**" (Jeremiah 48:11).

Grape juice, when first expressed from its ruddy chalice, is impure and thick; it is left in vessels for a time, till fermentation has done its work, and a thick sediment, called lees, has been precipitated to the bottom. When this is done, the liquid is carefully drawn off into another vessel, so that all the precipitated sediment is left behind. This emptying process is repeated again and again, till the offensive odor that came from the "must" has passed away, and the liquid has become clear and beautiful.

In the case of Moab, there had been none of this unsettling process; "**he had not been emptied from vessel to vessel,**" and in consequence the people had made no moral or spiritual progress; "**his taste remained in him, and his scent was not changed.**"

The quiet life is by no means the greatest life. Some characters can only reach the highest standard of spirituality by the disturbings or displacings in the order of God's providence. Will not this cast light upon God's dealings with Elijah?

Once he stood in the vessel "**Home;**" then emptied into the vessel "**Jezreel;**" then into the vessel "**Cherith;**" and now into the fourth vessel, "**Zarephath;**" and all that he might not settle upon his lees, but might be urged toward a goal of moral greatness which otherwise he had never reached, but which qualified him to take his stand in after-days on the Transfiguration Mount, the associate of Moses, the companion of CHRIST.

Take heart, ye who are compelled to be constantly on the move - pitching the tent to-night, and summoned by the moving cloud and the trumpet call to strike it to-morrow; all this is under the direction of a wise and faithful love, which is educating you for a glorious destiny. Believe only that your circumstances are those most suited to develop your character.

They have been selected out of all possible combinations of events and conditions, in order to effect in you the highest finish of usefulness and beauty; they would have been the ones selected by you, if all the wide range of omniscient knowledge had been within your reach.

And yet, when a human spirit is entirely taken up with God, as Elijah was, these changes become comparatively harmless and trifling - as a gnat sting to a soldier in the heat of battle.

To one who lives ever in the presence of the unchanging God, and who can say, "**Thus saith the Lord, before whom I stand,**" the ever-varying conditions of our lot touch only the outer rim of life; whatever they take away, they cannot take away that; whatever they bring, they cannot give more than that.

The consciousness of that Presence is the one all-mastering thought - the inspiration, the solace, the comfort, of every waking hour. And as we have seen a far-spread summer landscape through the haze of intense heat, so do all people and things and events show themselves through the all-enwrapping, all-encompassing presence of God.

- To fulfill His plans;
- To obey the least intimation of His will;
- To wait on His hand;
- To dwell in the absorbing vision of Himself;
- To be satisfied with the fullness of joy which fills His presence-chamber with sweetest perfume and with celestial music
- This is the one passion of the happy spirit, to whom, as to Elijah, this grace is given.

But such grace is for thee, through the Holy Ghost, if only thou wilt open to it all the capacities of thy heart and life. Why not seek it?

There are several lessons here.

I. FAITH AWAITS GOD'S PLAN

"It came to pass, after a while, that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land."

Week after week, with unfaltering and steadfast spirit, Elijah watched that dwindling brook; often tempted to stagger through unbelief, but refusing to allow his circumstances to come between himself and God.

Unbelief sees God through circumstances, as we sometimes see the sun shorn of his rays through the smoky air; but faith puts God between itself and circumstances, and looks at them through Him.

And so the dwindling brook became a silver thread; and the silver thread stood presently in pools at the foot of the largest boulders; and then the pools shrank. The birds fled; the wild creatures of field and forest came no more to drink; the brook was dry. Only then, to his patient and unwavering spirit, **“the word of the Lord came, saying. Arise, get thee to Zarephath.”**

Most of us would have got anxious and worn with planning long before that.

We should have ceased our songs as soon as the streamlet caroled less musically over its rocky bed; and with harps swinging on the willows we should have paced to and fro upon the withering grass, lost in pensive thought. And probably, long ere the brook was dry, we should have devised some plan, and asking God’s blessing on it, would have started off elsewhere. Alas! we are all too full of our own schemes, and plans, and contrivings. And if Samuel does not come just when we expect, we force ourselves, and offer the burnt-offering (I Samuel 13:12).

This is the source of untold misery. We sketch out our program and rush into it; and only when we are met by insuperable obstacles do we begin to reflect whether it was God’s will, or to appeal to Him. He does often extricate us, because His mercy endureth forever; but if we had only waited first to see the unfolding of His plans, we should never have found ourselves landed in such an inextricable labyrinth; and we should never have been compelled to retrace our steps with so many tears of shame. One of the formative words for all human lives, and especially for God’s servants, was given by God to Moses, when He said: **“See that thou make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount”** (Hebrews 8:5).

Moses was eager to do God’s work, and the best skill amongst the people was at his command; but he must not make a single bell, or pomegranate, or tassel, or fringe, or curtain, or vessel, except on God’s pattern, and after God’s ideal. And so he was taken up into the mount, and God opened the door into his own mind, where the tabernacle stood complete as an ideal; and Moses was permitted to see the thing as it lived in the thought and heart of God. Forty days of reverent study passed by; and when he returned to the mountain-foot, he had only to transfer into the region of actual fact that which had been already shown to him, in pattern, on the mount.

Surely some such thought as this must have been in the mind of our blessed Lord, when He said: **“The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He seeth the Father do”** (John 5:19). So utterly had He emptied Himself that He had abandoned even His own schemes and plans; He lived a plan-less life, accepting each moment the plan which His Father unfolded before Him; and being confident that that plan would lead Him on to greater and ever greater works, until the world should marvel at the splendor of the results - rising from Gethsemane and Calvary, through the broken grave, to the Ascension Mount, and the glory of His second Advent.

Oh, mystery of humiliation, that He who planned all things should will to live a life of such absolute dependence! And yet, if He lived such a life, how much more will it become us; how much anxiety it will save us; and to what lengths of usefulness and heights of glory will it bring us!

Would that we were content to wait for God to unveil His plan, so that our life might be simply the working out of His thought, the exemplification of His ideal! Let this be the cry of our hearts: **“Lord, show me Thy way; teach me to do Thy will: show me the way wherein I should walk, for unto Thee do I lift up my soul.”**

II. GOD'S PLANS DEMAND IMPLICIT OBEDIENCE

“**So he arose and went to Zarephath,**” as before he had gone to Cherith, and as presently he would go to show himself to Ahab.

A Christian lady, who had learned amongst us the blessedness of a surrendered life, and was soon after obliged to find another home across the ocean, came back quite recently, over thousands of miles of land and water, to visit the scene of that act, in the hope that she would find again her former joy, which had faded like the hues of a too radiant dawn. But to her disappointment, though she worshiped on the same sacred spot, and listened to the sounds of the well-known voice, she could not recover the priceless jewel she had lost. At last the cause appeared. She had been living in conscious disobedience to the will of Christ, expressed through her conscience and His Word. The motives that prompted the disobedience had a touch of nobility about them; but it was disobedience still, and it wrought its own penalty.

This is the true cause of failure in so many Christian lives.

We catch sight of God's ideal; we are enamored with it; we vow to be only His; we use the most emphatic words; we dedicate ourselves upon the altar. For a while we seem to tread another world, bathed in heavenly light. Then there comes a command clear and unmistakable. We must leave some beloved Cherith, and go to some unwelcome Zarephath; we must speak some word, take some step, cut off some habit: and we shrink from it - the cost is too great. But, directly we refuse obedience, the light dies off the landscape of our lives, and dark clouds fling their shadows far and near.

We do not win salvation by our obedience; that is altogether the gift of God, to be received by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ our Lord. But, being saved, we must obey.

Our Savior adjures us, by the love we bear to Himself, to keep His commandments. And He does so because He wants us to taste His rarest gifts, and because He knows that in the keeping of His commandments there is great reward.

Search the Bible from board to board, and see if strict, implicit, and instant obedience has not been the secret of the noblest lives that ever lit up the dull monotony of the world. The proudest title of our King was the “**Servant of the Lord.**” And none of us can seek to realize a nobler aim than that which was the inspiration of His heart: “**I delight to do Thy will, O my God.**”

Mary, the simple-hearted mother, uttered a word which is pertinent to every age, when, at the marriage-feast, she turned to the servants and said, “**Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it.**”

III. IMPLICIT OBEDIENCE SOMETIMES BRINGS US INTO A SMELT-FURNACE

“**Zarephath**” means *a smelting-furnace*. It lay outside the Land of Canaan, occupying the site of the modern Surafend, which stands on a long ridge, backed by the snow-clad steeps of Hermon, and overlooking the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

Many things might have made it distasteful to the prophet. It belonged to the land from which Jezebel had brought her impious tribe. It was as much cursed by the terrible drought as Canaan.

It was impossible to reach it save by a weary journey of one hundred miles through the heart of the land, where his name was execrated, and his person proscribed. And then to be sustained by a widow woman belonging to a heathen people!

He would not have so much minded to have sustained her; but it was not pleasant to feel that he must be dependent on her slender earnings or meager store. Surely it was a smelting-furnace for cleansing out any alloy of pride, or self-reliance, or independence which might be lurking in the recesses of his heart.

There was much of the refining fire in the character of his reception.

When he reached the straggling town it was probably toward nightfall; and at the city gate a widow woman was gathering a few sticks to prepare the evening meal. To some it might have seemed a coincidence; but there is no such word in faith's vocabulary - that which to human judgment is a coincidence, to faith is a Providence.

This was evidently the widow of whom God had spoken. Faint with thirst, and weary with long travel, but never doubting that his needs would be amply met, he asked her to fetch a little water in a vessel, that he might drink.

The widow may have had some premonition of his coming. There would seem to be some suggestion of this having been so, in the words, "**I have commanded a widow woman to sustain thee.**"

Her character will come out in due course; but there must have been something in her which could not be found in the many widows of the land of Israel (Luke 4:25, 26). It was for no arbitrary reason that God passed them over, and went so far afield.

She must have possessed qualities of character, germs of better things, sparks of heroism and of faith, which distinguished her from all her sorrowing sisterhood, and made her the befitting hostess of the prophet, and the glad sharer with him in his Father's bounty. To her the impression was probably given of the coming of the prophet - just as the visions to Saul and to Ananias, to Cornelius and to Peter, flashed upon them in duplicates.

She was not, therefore, surprised at the prophet's request, and silently went to fetch a cup of cold water (Matthew 10:42).

Encouraged by her willingness, Elijah asked her to bring with her a morsel of bread. It was a modest request; but it unlocked the silent agony of her soul. She had not a cake, but a handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse; and she was about to make one last repast for herself and her son, who was probably too weak through long privation to be with her; and, having eaten it, they had no alternative but to lie down together and die. It was very depressing for the man of God, after his long and weary march.

It is thus that God leads His people still. "**All that abideth not the fire, ye shall make go through the water;**" i.e., He will not suffer us to be tempted beyond that which we are able to bear; He will not thresh vetches with a sharp threshing instrument, nor turn a cart-wheel about on cummin. But it is written, "**Everything that may abide the fire, ye shall make it go through the fire, and it shall be clean**" (Numbers 31:23).

If, then, there is aught in you that can bear the ordeal, be sure you will be put into the furnace. But the fire shall not destroy; it shall only cleanse you. You will be put into it by the hand of Love; and kept in it only till patience has done her perfect work. The flames shall only consume the bonds that bind you; and, as you walk loose in the fire, bystanders shall descry at your side the form of one like unto the Son of God.

IV. WHEN GOD PUTS HIS PEOPLE INTO THE FURNACE, HE WILL SUPPLY ALL THEIR NEED

Circumstances were certainly very depressing; but what are they to a man whose inner self is occupied with the presence and power of God? God had said that he should be fed, and by that widow; and so it should be, though the earth and heaven should pass away. Difficulties are to faith what gymnastic apparatus are to boys, means of strengthening the muscular fiber. Like the fabled salamander, faith feeds on fire. And so with heroic faith Elijah said: **“Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: for thus saith the Lord God of Israel. The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth.”**

Our only need is to inquire if we are at that point in God’s pattern where He would have us be. If we are, though it seem impossible for us to be maintained, the thing impossible shall be done. We shall be sustained by a miracle, if no ordinary means will suffice. **“Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”**

We reserve for future thought that unfailing meal and oil; but, ere we close, remark with what different meaning different people may use the same holy words.

The widow said, as Elijah had done, **“The Lord God liveth”** (I Kings 17:12). But to her those words brought no comfort; because they were repeated from hearsay, and not from a living experience of their truth. God forbid that they should be a parrot-speech upon your lips, my reader! but, rather, may they be burned into your inmost being - so that you may go through life fearless of all save sin; and cheering timid hearts with the assurance of an unfaltering courage, **“Fear not!”** (ver. 13).

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