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Faith's Persistency

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Now Elijah said to Ahab, "Go up, eat and drink; for there is the sound of the roar of a heavy shower." So Ahab went up to eat and drink. But Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he crouched down on the earth, and put his face between his knees. And he said to his servant, "Go up now, look toward the sea." So he went up and looked and said, "There is nothing." And he said, "Go back" seven times. And it came about at the seventh time, that he said, "Behold, a cloud as small as a man's hand is coming up from the sea." And he said, "Go up, say to Ahab, 'Prepare your chariot and go down, so that the heavy shower does not stop you.'"" (1 Kings 18:41-44)

Two of the major elements in the spiritual life and experience of God's people are the seemingly slow and hidden ways of God and the demand for persistent faith in His servants. As to the former, you will know quite well how much there is in the Bible about it. Again and again you will find the psalmist crying out because of God's seeming delay or indifference. Whole psalms are given up to this very problem, and also in other parts of Scripture we encounter the same phenomenon.

In our own spiritual experience we often find that not least of our trials is the fact that God seems so slow to respond, so inexplicable in His ways; sometimes it would appear that He is careless or indifferent. This is a common experience, even among the greatest and most devoted of God's servants. It is not an experience confined to novices; in fact perhaps they know little of it, but throughout the centuries even the most outstanding of God's servants have been confronted by this problem of the slow response of the Lord. It sometimes looks to His people as though He were unhurried to the point of being tardy, and that just when their needs were most acute.

Faith's Importance

In this short passage our attention is also drawn to the second point, namely the demand for persistent faith. It might be thought that the most critical moment on Mount Carmel was when the prophets of Baal had exhausted themselves in vain prayers and had to give way to Elijah with his water-saturated altar and his simple, dignified appeal to Israel's God. This was indeed, a breathless moment and the high point of the story the great miracle when fire fell from heaven; but supposing that had been the end! For we must remember that the country had been suffering from three years of intense drought, and if life were to be sustained it was not fire that they wanted but water. What they needed was rain, and plenty of it. Wonderful and emotional as the burning sacrifice must have been, there could be no new hope if the rain did not come.

Now the Lord knew how critical their condition was and might have been expected to act, now that the people had repudiated Baal and committed their case to Him. When the crowd shouted, "The Lord, he is God" the reformation seemed to be complete, and the natural sequel should surely have been clouds, rain clouds, and water pouring down on a thirsty land.

Yet no rain came. Elijah was quite assured in his own heart, and he unhesitatingly told Ahab that it was coming. Nevertheless he did not relax at all but went higher up on this mountain of crisis, put his head between his knees, and set himself to pray the issue through. The reference in James' letter tells us that "he prayed earnestly" or 'he prayed with prayer,' implying that something more than ordinary prayer was needed on such an occasion; it seemed to call for concentration and persistency. There was no sign of rain. God seemed so slow at this time of crisis. How can we explain His apparent lack of response?

For my part I think that this has a close connection with the anonymous servant, giving us all a lesson concerning service. This man not only is given no name but there is no mention of where he came from. Until this experience on Mount Carmel it seems from the narrative that Elijah was alone. After this he was dismissed at Beer-sheba, and later it was Elisha who served Elijah as a servant. The anonymous servant is just mentioned in this episode and then passes off the scene, but not before he had helped to illustrate to us one of the principle features of service to God, which is persistency. The battle had been fought through: it seemed that a mighty victory had been obtained; and yet - still no rain!

Faith's Disappointments

This provides a very serious warning against anything in the nature of complacency. Even after we have poured ourselves out and been assured that we have succeeded, we must beware of letting go too soon. The principle or spirit of service surely demands a real persistence of faith. You will not find any servant of God of account or true value in the Bible who did not have developed in him this persistence of faith. We can see it in the case of this man, and strangely enough this was the very test put to the next servant, Elisha, whose real life's work started the day when Elijah was taken up to heaven. That was the time when Elijah said to Elisha, "Tarry here...the Lord hath sent me as far as Bethel" (2 Kings 2:2). The same suggestion was repeated stage by stage, "Tarry here...Tarry here...," but Elisha would not agree to do so, his response being, "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee." At last the whole matter was gathered up into this one issue, so that Elijah promised Elisha "If thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee" - a double portion of the Spirit for service was consequent upon this exercise of persistency.

Now, to return to Carmel, there was no doubt that Elijah's faith had produced a remarkable answer from God. The fire had fallen. We might think that he would have been perfectly justified in telling himself that all he now had to do was to see God working the whole matter out. He could have

folded his arms, or taken his ease, while God did the rest. If you had gone successfully through an ordeal like Elijah's, seen such a tremendous victory and had an inner assurance that the end was reached, would you not have been inclined to sit back a bit and just watch events? Elijah, however, did nothing of the sort; he went higher up into the mountain to get closer to God. "Ahab went up to eat and drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel" - to pray. He knew that his business was not finished yet, and was determined to see the matter right through.

At this point, our attention is drawn to the servant. He, too, must go up still higher, for there was something more to be done if the rain were to come. He was told to look toward the sea, the direction from which it would come. He looked and saw nothing, so he came back again to his master and reported, "There is nothing!" After all that spiritual battle, after all that prayer, that exhausting ordeal of laying hold of God and seeing the fire fall, was it possible that, after all, the skies were as closed as ever? "There is nothing!" Many of us have had to pass through similar experiences - we may be doing so just now - and we find it to be a most painful anticlimax. This is a moment of great peril for our faith, to have battled so far and expected so much, only to be disappointed to find a complete lack of any evidence of God's working.

What can you do? Well, one of two things. The first is to conclude that after all the whole thing has been an illusion, and to give way to the paralysis of despair because of the seeming unresponsiveness of God. The alternative is to keep going - if necessary seven times. There was nothing the first time, so the servant must go and look again. There is nothing! And yet a third time, but still a third time "There is nothing!" The man had to go a fourth time, but there was still no vestige of an answer. I try to imagine the tone of his voice as he returned the fifth and the sixth time, and think that he may even have added a few comments. 'What is the good of it all?' he might have questioned - 'there is nothing!' It would have been natural enough if he had remonstrated, "I do not see the use of going right up there again; I am tired of continually coming back to report just nothing." In any case he was sent a seventh time, just once more; this time he was able to report a tiny cloud. That was little enough in all conscience, to find that all there was to be seen in the expanse of the sky was just one little cloud the size of a man's hand. It is surprising that God went so far in pressing this matter of faith's persistency. Whether there is any significance in the number seven is of little importance, but certainly there had to be the full continuance in faith until at last the situation broke. The little cloud was only a token, but it was enough to Elijah who immediately warned Ahab to prepare for a deluge. Faith is the title deeds of things unseen, and accepts the token for the whole. It was right to do so, for soon the heavens were full of clouds.

Faith's Victory

I think that this makes the message plain. It is so easy to make a big start, with a good deal of noise and activity and high expectations of something big which we think God is going to do, and then to lose heart because of disappointments and delays. Our prayers are apt to wane and our energy and enthusiasms to decline just because God seems to be unresponsive. What is He doing? He is making a servant; to Him this is more important than the actual service which is being done. Such a servant has to learn that the Lord is more concerned about His own name than we are, and knows best how to vindicate it.

"The Lord, He is God." The Lord had to make that clear a second time, not only in the fire, but in the water, in the rain; not only in the judgment but in the mercy; not only in the death but in the resurrection life. His delays, His hiddenness, His seeming indifference, are all the testing means by which He develops true faith in His servants, and works something of His own Spirit into their very constitution. It was easy for Him to send the rain; what was more difficult but infinitely more

worthwhile was to enable His servant to go on watching and praying for the full seven times, never despairing, never doubting, never giving up. In the end there was no lack of rain. But it came as the result of a second battle. First there was the battle with Baal, and then the battle with unbelief; the outside battle and the battle inside. It is on the last inward battle that the whole issue depends. Full victory comes as a result of faith's persistency.