

Articles and Sermons :: The Obedience of Faith

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The Risen Lord and the Things Which Cannot be Shaken
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Chapter 12 - The Obedience of Faith

Reading: 2 Kings 7:1-2,16-20; Luke 1:5,8-15,18-23; Romans 12:1-2.

As we come to the close of these meditations around the Lord and His Word, we look to Him for that which will bring all that He has said to us at this time to some point of practical issue.

These passages have suggested to my own heart what that issue is, and their message lies right on the surface, so that we have not to seek deeply for it. They say to us quite clearly, I think, that although the Lord has His own wonderful and boundless resources, they are resources beyond our ken, altogether outside of our realm of natural apprehension and understanding, yet are nevertheless at our disposal, they are for us in Christ. But when everything has been said that can be said as to the fact and the nature of these resources, and the necessity for them, they still remain in Him, and are not of practical and living value in our own experience until we exercise appropriating faith in relation to them. The link between His fulness and our need is faith.

The two passages which are before us from the book of Kings and the Gospel by Luke are striking examples of a loss, through not exercising faith in God in relation to what was humanly impossible. In the one case this loss was even unto death, in the other case unto a silenced ministry. In both cases a miracle was required. In both cases what was foretold was altogether outside of the realm of the ordinary operation of nature. In both cases the Lord said that nevertheless what had been foretold could be, and should be. But in both cases there were those who were very closely connected with the Lord's things who questioned, who doubted, who allowed nature to govern, to dominate. Because of the tremendous difficulty in the way - not an imaginary difficulty, but a real one - because of the condition of things, or character of the situation, they took nature as the criterion rather than God's assurance, God's promise, God's word.

The man in the story in 2 Kings 7 lost his life, whilst Zachariah, for a time at least, lost his ministry. These two things may be interpreted spiritually. Our spiritual life will most certainly be forfeited to unbelief. This life of which we have been speaking, which is in Christ, this risen life of the Lord, will only be enjoyed, known, expressed, as we by faith transcend the natural conditions and believe in God more than we believe in the situation. Ministry also can be curtailed and limited for the same reason. There may come into our lives an experience which corresponds to Zachariah's being dumb for a season; that is, that on certain great things of tremendous importance we have no testimony; we are silent; there is a suspending of the fuller values of ministry.

The passage in Luke also presents us with a contrast. When the message came to Zachariah's wife, there was anything but dumbness in her case. She burst into a great song, and we have on record a beautiful psalm of worship. But Zachariah is dumb and silent.

The Nature of True Worship

These things are parables, and they lead us to this passage in Romans 12: "I beseech you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (your spiritual worship)". That is the first step. Such words bring into view the priest taking the unresisting sacrifice in his hands to the altar, where without any rebellion he is able to take its life, and offer it a burnt offering unto the Lord. "Present your bodies a living sacrifice", unresisting, un-rebelling, unquestioning. This is declared to be "your spiritual worship". Worship, as we have seen, is giving God His place, and His rights. Spiritual worship implies that we do not put any questions of ours in the place of God's will.

Then, as though he would explain that in spiritual terms, the Apostle says, "And be not fashioned according to this world:

but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind..." Is not that a beautiful exposition of these other passages which we have mentioned? What is it to be conformed to this world? We know that the governing principles of this world are the principles of sight and reason, of argument according to what is called common sense. The world is always saying that you must take things as you find them; you must recognise facts, and the facts are these; the situation is this, and it is perfectly folly to shut your eyes to it; you must take facts into account, reckon with facts! And for this world the facts have always been the things which are seen, things as they obtain. The world thinks it to be utterly absurd to say that what obtains is not to be taken as the final argument. That is the world.

Now the Lord Jesus never asks us to make facts other than they are. He never says to us that these things are not what they are, and that we are to try by some mental process of imagination to make things other than they are. But He does call upon us to see that there is something above things as they are. Faith goes beyond this world's facts. The world calls them hard facts, but faith can dissolve hard facts. To be conformed to this world is to say, like the man on whom the king leaned, The facts are that we are starving! Everything in the city has been devoured for food, save for a few horses that are left, and we are perishing in the severity of the siege; and, well, that is the fact, that is the situation! To say that the whole position can be reversed by this time tomorrow, and that in twenty-four hours we shall not only be getting something to eat, but obtaining it at an absurdly low price, even if God were to make windows in heaven that would be doubtful! That is conformity to this world.

It was the same in the case of Zachariah. In the presence of the angel, he said, in effect, Well, the facts are that I am an old man, and my wife is an old woman; one cannot blind one's self on this matter; nothing can alter the facts! That is conformity to this world. That is how the world reasons.

The Apostle says, "Be not conformed to this world..." Do you notice how he applies this to the mind? "...but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind..." That may be comprehensive, it may touch everything. It may touch our manner of life. It may touch everything that we would call worldliness in every direction whatsoever. But here is the special application for our present purpose, that a renewed mind changes the outlook, changes the attitude, changes the consciousness, changes possibilities, and changes therefore the individual in whom that mind is renewed.

Bringing that fact to bear upon the incidents in the passages before us, and all similar situations, that word simply means that we must have another mind about things, a new mind, not the natural mind, not the mind of this world. The mind of the spirit says: Well, the facts are these; the situation is a very difficult one; nature most definitely declares the position to be one of utter impossibility, but the Lord has given an assurance, a promise, an unveiling of possibilities; the Lord has said that there are resources which are beyond the reach and range of nature; and faith, bridging the gap, represents another mind - a renewed mind. Then you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God. Then you are like the living sacrifice, not dwelling on this side, where nature holds sway, but on that side, where God is your criterion, your argument.

All that means, then, is that we are challenged in relation to these resources in Christ. In the presence of any given need, or demand, for which provision has been made in Christ, we are called upon to take the attitude of appropriating faith.

I can quite clearly see that this whole meditation, wonderful as may have been the truths stated, the Divine provision unveiled, the glorious possibilities mentioned, must inevitably lead to that. Is it to be like that? That is for us to decide. Are we going to take our stand upon this ground, and in faith, as necessity arises, as occasion presents itself, as the demands come upon us, stand there, exercising faith by which the Lord can make it good? Are we going to do that? It is only thus that the permanent value of anything is entered into. The supreme importance of that which is permanent and abiding is one of the many things upon which emphasis has been laid in these meditations.

The Law of Permanence in Relation to (a) The World

I want to say a little more about that matter. If there is one thing which is clear about the Word of God, especially the New Testament, it is that it regards this world in its present state, along with all that has to do with it, as of transient duration, as being at most a passing thing. It is regarded as in a state of transience. "The world passeth away and the fashion thereof". Men are deceived by their own reasoning into thinking that because they are achieving so much more, and making the world so much more wonderful, this means that by all this progressive development, as it is called, the world will in time become a Utopia. It is all that which gives strength to the idea that we are going to develop into the millenium. The fact is that men are only now discovering and using what already exists, and toward the most wonderful discovery that ever man makes and shows to the world God takes the attitude that it has already existed. In effect He says, I made that

; that was there! You have only discovered it! When you have gone I am capable of bringing a race of men into all that knowledge and experience without any kind of discovery or investigation along the line of reason! All those things can immediately become for man's good, and man's benefit, without all these laborious years of research; they are all there! You spend your life discovering them, and then you are gone, but you have not added one whit to the content of the universe by all your discovery!

Thus, because of this transient, passing nature of things, the whole emphasis of the New Testament is upon the heavenly order, heavenly relationship, heavenly resources, and the fact that the believer is completely separated from this world in every way as to his life and his sustenance, and is a heavenly being, with everything heavenly. Though he be here on the earth, he is living out from heaven. That makes for permanence, and that is what gives to the believer's life its permanence. It is that which is summed up in the risen Lord, and His risen life; it is the life which is permanent, and which is not of this world. Personal union with the risen Lord and His resources makes, therefore, for the eternal character of the believer.

(b) The Church

The same applies to the heavenly and spiritual nature of the Church. When we commenced our meditations we gave to them the title of, "The Risen Lord and the Things Which Cannot be Shaken". It was that element of permanence which was so much in my heart in relation to our union with Christ risen. The Church is something which is permanent, which cannot be shaken, because it is united with the risen Lord. It is the expression of Christ risen, and everything called the Church which is other than that will pass.

That is the whole force of the letter to the Hebrews. "Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven." The things which can be shaken will be shaken, and the things which cannot be shaken will remain. An immediate application to the whole Jewish system was then in view. The letter was written about the time when Jerusalem was to be hurled to the ground, and its temple left with not one stone upon another, and the Jewish believers, being tempted to return to Judaism, were being warned by this letter that the time was at hand when there would be such a shaking of all things of this earth, even religious things, that everything that was attached to this earth, even of a religious kind, would be shaken to its foundations, and brought down, and pass away. The only hope for believers was that they should be a part of something heavenly, spiritual, which could never be shaken. The heavenly nature of the Church was revealed over against the earthly nature of Judaism; the permanent nature of the Church over against the transient, temporal nature of the Jewish Church. The true Church is eternal, because it is heavenly, and only on the grounds of its heavenliness is it possible for the gates of Hades to be defeated, and for the Church to triumph. It must be heavenly therefore.

(c) Heavenly Gifts and Ministry

Then the same thing applies to the elements of gift and ministry in the Church. We have touched upon all these things, and we just mention them again to show the connection of this permanent element, the abiding elements in gift and ministry. By this we are taken back to those parts of the New Testament where ministry and spiritual gifts are mentioned. If you go over such lists as are found in the first letter to the Corinthians, and elsewhere, you will notice that the Apostle uses this law of permanence as a means to determine the value of the gifts. In 1 Cor. 12 Paul goes through the gifts, and then when he has catalogued them, and divided them up, he brings the rule of permanence to bear upon them all, and in the following chapter goes on to say of quite a number of them, that they will pass. This latter chapter opens with a reference to tongues - "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels..." The difference, of course, there between tongues of men and of angels is the difference between that which happened at Pentecost and that which is met with subsequently. At Pentecost it was the tongues of men that were given, with the express object that the many there from diverse nations should hear every man the Gospel in his own language. That was related to human intelligence. The Apostles were intelligible because they were given the tongues of men. But later there is a gift of tongues, or another tongue, which is the tongue of angels, that is, the ecstatic worship of angels, and that is unintelligible naturally and demands interpretation. That can only be interpreted by a special gift of the Holy Ghost. There was no interpretation at Pentecost, but at these other times, when tongues were in operation, it was this ecstatic language of angels for worship, and demanded interpretation.

The Apostle says, "Though I speak with the tongues of men (intelligible) or of angels (unintelligible), and have not love I am as a noisy gong, a tinkling symbol". "Whether there be tongues they shall cease". Tongues are only for a time at best. Then Paul goes on to say there are other things, and brings the same rule upon them. They too shall pass away. "Whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall be done away." He sums up and says, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a

child; now that I am become a man, I have put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part but then shall I know even as also I have been known." "Now", and "then", represent the passing and the permanent. Again he says, "But now abideth...". "They shall be done away" - "But now abideth"; the passing, the abiding. "Covet earnestly the greater gifts", says the Apostle. "But now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love". It is the rule of permanence which is determining the ultimate value of things.

The Corinthian Assembly

You can see how completely conformed to this world the Corinthians were in relation to spiritual gifts, and I believe that is the key to the whole situation. Read the opening chapters of the first letter to the Corinthians, and you find worldly-mindedness, worldly wisdom, the natural man handling the things of the Spirit of God; human worldly-mindedness trying to bring Divine things down to the level of a human philosophy and human reason. Worldly-mindedness is displaying itself with regard to the ministries of men. What is the world's mind as to the ministries of men? Well, it is abroad today. You go to hear men preach because you like the man! It is an appalling thing how much of that there is about. At conventions, for example, you find some meetings are crowded because people like the man who is to speak; other meetings are not so crowded, because the man there is not attractive. It is his method, perhaps, which they dislike. That is to make it a matter of human consideration. I am not speaking of being drawn by spiritual help, which is quite another thing, but of being influenced by human preferences. That is worldly-mindedness; that is being conformed to this world; selectiveness amongst men, even the servants of God, on a human basis. Paul! Apollos! Peter! Paul makes it clear that all this belongs to spiritual immaturity, spiritual babyhood, childhood. That is just how children act. Children have no power to determine the real value of men. If they like a man they go after him, but they are simply influenced by their own likes and dislikes, by something quite superficial, and it may well happen that they take a dislike to the man of real value, who could be of far more help to them in time of need than any other man; but there is just the childish preference. Paul speaks of the Corinthians as children, and says that it is immaturity that governs them when they are making these choices, exercising these preferences, and more than this, that it is worldliness.

He carries the same thing right over into the matter of gifts, and he says, in effect, This is what it amounts to; you Corinthians are centering everything in these manifestation gifts; you are making a great deal of tongues, simply because some thing can be seen in connection with tongues. It is a thing of demonstration. These gifts of outward manifestation, are, to your mind, so obviously the proofs of power, that they assume the place of greatest importance to you. Yet when you look into them it is not the abiding value of those things which is their supreme quality. Tongues! Well, what is the abiding value of tongues? Healings! What is the abiding value of healings? But there are those things which are not manifested in the same way, namely, outwardly, which can make no appeal to the senses, and which do not supply you with anything to trade upon, or to glory of, in the flesh, nothing of which to shout, You see! You see! You see! This is the power! There are the things which you cannot prove like that which are of infinitely greater value. They are not capable of being demonstrated to the senses, but they have a permanence about them. Faith! Hope! Love! These carry on when everything else has gone.

You may have a healing. Well, if you have it until you die, there is not of necessity an abiding spiritual value in a healing. If it would have been of a larger spiritual value to Paul to have been healed, than it was for him not to have been healed, he would have been healed; for this is the man who is closely associated with gifts of healing, and yet his thorn in the flesh was undoubtedly a physical thing, and the Lord denied him healing, because of a greater and more abiding spiritual value which, I think, is proof positive that the greater value is not of necessity always in that gift.

Maturity Shut Up to Faith

Now, having said everything that could be said - and I know the difficulties and problems which may abound - the point is this, that what the Lord is after, of greater and more enduring account, is spiritual value. As you watch the New Testament, and watch Paul, and as you watch the movements of the Lord since New Testament times, I think you are bound to come to this conclusion, that the manifestation gifts, (I mean the tongues gifts, the healing gifts, the miracle gifts) belong to spiritual infancy, and are not in evidence so much, if at all, in spiritual maturity. I think that was true in Paul's own life. I think that was true in the Church itself at the beginning. I think it is always true. These manifestation gifts, of which a great deal is made, very often go side by side with an appalling spiritual immaturity. When you come to the question of spiritual revelation, the knowing of the Lord in a greater fulness, in a spiritual way, that is not always accompanied by the gifts which are of the outward order. That is one of the surprises, is it not, that this is so, and that spiritual immaturity, spiritual ignorance, lack of revelation, are found coupled with manifestation gifts?

We have often quoted Pastor Hsi in this connection; among his writings he has a passage on this very thing. He says th

at in breaking new ground, and dealing with new Chinese converts, fresh from the awful superstitions of their heathenism, the Lord wonderfully gave manifestation gifts amongst them. There were healings, miraculous healings, and other gifts, and signs. But he noticed that as these converts grew in grace, and became more mature, those things began to disappear, to fade away, and when the converts were established these outward signs and activities altogether disappeared, and they were left to believe in the Lord, not for what the Lord could do, but for what the Lord was in Himself.

That is maturity. That is the abiding value. The other may be very much of a temporary character, and we may become very worldly-minded about it, just as the Corinthians did. The permanent elements in gifts and ministry abide. It is upon that the Apostle lays so much stress. "Each man's work shall be tried... the fire itself shall prove each man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work shall abide... he shall receive a reward." Abiding! That is the thing that matters. What perishes, and what remains, is the thing that determines the spiritual value. "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal"; and they are the things to which we are to look.

The Gate-way to Living Knowledge

Perhaps this is enough for the moment, but you and I have to be initiated into the secrets of the Lord, and initiation into the secrets of the Lord is by way of that Cross which lays low in us, destroys in us, all that which hankers after what is temporal, what is seen, what is manifest, and gives us a relationship with what is spiritual and permanent.

I believe that is what the Apostle meant when he introduced this subject as he did. Look at the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12:1-3. What is the point of those verses? The Apostle is referring to the pre-conversion life of these Corinthians, and evidently many of these Corinthian converts had been initiated in former days into the mystic cults of paganism. A form of baptism was one of those initiatory rites, and when they had been initiated into those mystic rites they received a watchword by which they were able to have fellowship, and to know one another. If anyone could not give that watchword, then it was known that he was not within the compass of that rite, and must be recognised as an outsider, with whom it might be dangerous to talk of those things. It was the same thing as is found in Freemasonry today; the secret watchword of the initiated. The Apostle takes hold of that and says, You were led away by those dumb idols before you were converted! Now you have been initiated into something else, baptized into Christ. The watchword here is, Jesus is Lord! and no one can say that watchword, but by the Holy Spirit. No one knows that, but by the Holy Spirit. No one who has been initiated into the secret of Christ will ever say Jesus is anathema, but anyone who has been so initiated knows the watchword, knows indeed that Jesus is Lord. It is not the using of the language, it is the knowing of that which the language indicates. Anybody can say, so far as the phrase is concerned, Jesus is Lord! A great many of whom He Himself spoke will say to Him, Lord! Lord! of whom He foretold that He would have to say, "I know you not." No, it means knowing Jesus as Lord. It is seeing what that means. Jesus is Lord! Is He Lord? Is He in every realm Lord? Lord of demons? Lord of nature? Lord of men? Lord of heaven? Lord of earth? Jesus is Lord in all the spiritual content and meaning of that fact. You have to be initiated before you have that watchword, and you can never say that with its real meaning, or understand what it means, until you have been initiated, baptized into Christ, and have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a matter of knowing the Lord in the power of the Holy Ghost, and being delivered from everything that has a trace of that worldliness which all too often is thought of in such limited terms, as of its being worldly if you go to certain places, or if you dress in a certain way. Worldliness is something more than that. It may be that, but something far deeper than that is worldliness. Worldliness is bringing this world's standards and values to bear upon the things of the Spirit.

There was worldliness in Corinth in relation to spiritual gifts, such as tongues and healings, power and miracles. They loved these things simply because they brought satisfaction to the flesh, along the line of demonstration, outward proof. That was worldliness. That is all passing when it is like that. There is no permanent value. So the Apostle brought the real and permanent to bear upon everything, and in effect he said, The thing which contributes to the largest amount of permanent spiritual value is to be the thing for which we have concern! So of all these gifts he says that they are, in the Lord's mind, for edifying - the Greek word is "building up" - and immediately gifts fail to build up, they have gone out of their orbit, out of their realm, they have ceased to fulfil the purpose of the Lord.

Let us find encouragement in the thought that though none of these gifts by which things can be demonstrated may be ours, yet if the saints are built up because of us, that will be of far greater value. Even had we a gift by which to do miraculous works, these might not have the same effect, and the benefit of them would only be for a time at most. They might bring glory to God, but their permanence may be doubtful. I do not say that these things are wrong; I do not say that there are no such Holy Ghost gifts even today, but I do say that we have to be more careful as to what emphasis we place upon these things, and do not put first what Paul puts last, do not give the primary place that which was given secondary place. We have to recognise that the thing which takes primary place is that which contributes mostly to spiritual maturity

and permanence, the abiding.

We touch upon things in this broad way to emphasise one principle, and that is that the value of things is to be judged by their spiritual permanence, and the measure in which they lead to spiritual maturity. That is only another way of saying, a way from the world to heaven, to Christ, to His fulness.