

Faith's Persistence. a Factor in the Making of a Servant

by T. Austin-Sparks

Faith's persistence is essential for God's servants, as it allows them to stand fast against God's seeming indifference and to trust in His promises.

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:41

Topics: "Faith", "Persistence in Prayer"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical nature of faith's persistence in the life of a servant of God, using the story of Elijah and the drought in 1 Kings 18:41-44. He highlights the tension between God's seemingly slow responses and the necessity for unwavering faith, as demonstrated by Elijah's servant who was tasked with looking for rain. Despite multiple reports of 'nothing,' the servant's persistence ultimately led to the manifestation of God's promise. Sparks warns against complacency after spiritual victories, stressing that true servanthood requires a steadfast faith that endures even in the face of apparent indifference from God. The sermon concludes with the reminder that God is more focused on developing the character of His servants than on immediate results.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Kings 18:41-44.

In this small fragment we have crowded two of the major things in the spiritual life and experience of the people of God. One is the fact of the seemingly slow and hidden ways of God; the other is the demand for faith to be found in His servants. It is not my intention at the moment to enlarge much upon the former. You will know quite well how much there is in the Bible about it. You have only to look into the Psalms, and you will find again and again the Psalmist crying out because of the seemingly slow response, or the entire absence of any response, from God. "O God, why hast thou cast us off?" (Psa. 74:1). Whole Psalms are given up to that problem, and in many other places we find the same thing. In our own spiritual experience it is very true that not least among our trials is this same one - that God is so slow in His response, so hidden in His answers; often it would appear that He is almost indifferent or careless; and that is here in this little fragment. I think we shall be convinced of that before we are through, but for the moment we mention it and dismiss it, having just one object in saying anything about it at all, and that is that we might again recognise that this is a very common experience amongst even the greatest and most devoted of

the servants of God. It is not the experience alone of the novices, of the ordinary people. It has been the experience of the most outstanding of God's servants through all the ages; they have been confronted with this problem. The Lord does seem to be slow and not at all anxious to respond; though to His people the situation may seem to be exceedingly critical.

The Critical Issue

The second thing is that upon which I want to concentrate for these few moments - the demand for faith's persistence in God's people. This in a sense was the most critical point of the whole chapter. It might be thought that the most critical point was when the prophets of Baal had exhausted themselves without any response, and Elijah, having built the altar of Israel and saturated it with water and filled the trench, called upon the Lord. We might say this is a breathless moment, everything depends upon what happens now. Perhaps it is true that was the high point of the story; but, after all, supposing it had stopped there! Three years of drought, with all their disastrous consequences, involving the whole question of the possibility of the continuation of life at all - that was all gathered into the moment when the rain began to fall; and, although the people had cried, "The Lord, he is God," if the rain had not come it would have been easy for them to say that some magic had been performed in the bringing down of the fire, and that they were none the better for it all. So there is a sense in which the real crisis is at this point - rain, new life, new prospect, new hope, new possibility; all the rest goes for nothing if the rain does not come.

God's Seeming Indifference

How critical, then, was this moment! and the Lord knew how critical it was. It might well have been thought, 'Well, the people have now turned from Baal, they have cried, "The Lord, he is God," it seems that the great reformation has been completed. That issue is settled; surely the Lord can send the rain now. The heavens ought at once to be filled with clouds.' But it was not so, and, while the prophet was quite assured in his own heart and gave words of assurance, he went up higher in the same mount of crisis, and before God, with his head between his knees, began to pray the supreme issue through. James tells us "Elijah was a man of like passions (infirmities) with us, and he prayed fervently (he prayed with prayer)," implying something very, very strenuous and definite, something more than ordinary praying - and even so he had to hold on and on and on. It seems that God is slow, even in the presence of the greatest crisis, the most serious situation. Why this?

Well, I think it relates to this anonymous servant, and, in relating to him, it is something for all time. I call him an anonymous servant, because we do not know who he is or where he came from. Evidently Elijah had a servant, though very little is known of him. In the record of Elijah at the brook Cherith, and at Zarephath, no mention is made of a servant; and later, when Elisha joins Elijah, it is stated that "they two went on," implying the absence of any other. But at the point of the story which we are now considering mention is made of a servant, though not by name. This man just comes like that, without name. Being anonymous, he seems to represent the principle of service, and, if that is true, we can understand at least a good deal of the meaning of this strange episode, the seeming delay of God. The battle had been fought through, a mighty victory had been secured, they knew that the issue was in hand, and yet, and yet, something had got to be done.

A Warning Against Complacency

Here in the first place is a very serious warning against anything in the nature of complacency, even after we have poured ourselves out and been assured that we have got through. The principle or spirit of

service is gathered up surely into this, that there is a persistence of faith which is the very essence of true service or servanthood. You will not find in the whole Bible any servant of God of account, of value, who did not need to have developed in him this persistence of faith. Here is this servant. The next servant who comes into view is Elisha, and after his call the one recorded phase of his association with Elijah is that which precedes the taking up of Elijah into heaven. Elijah said unto Elisha, "Tarry here... the Lord hath sent me as far as Bethel" (2 Kings 2:2). Stage by stage, "Tarry here..."; "tarry here..."; but Elisha would not have it. He said, "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee." At last the whole issue was gathered up into that request of Elisha for a double portion of his master's spirit, and Elijah's response, "If thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee." It was the element of persistence that was brought into view.

Now, if you analyse this, you will see that there had been a tremendous thing done. They had got through on Carmel, they had reached a place of very real consequence. We might think that they would have been perfectly justified in saying, 'Now, that is done; now we will wait to see the Lord working it all out; it is His matter, so we will fold our arms and see Him do it.' If you had gone through the ordeal that Elijah had gone through and seen that tremendous thing, and felt that assurance that the end was reached, would you not have felt justified in speaking like that? And yet Elijah went higher up into the mount. "Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel" - to pray. Something more had to be done to see this thing through to the final issue.

The Persistence of Faith

Then comes in this servant. "Go up" - still higher. There is still something more to be done in exercise. "Look toward the sea." He went up and came back. "There is nothing!" After all, nothing is happening. After all that battle, after all that conflict, after all that prayer, all that exercise, all that exhausting ordeal, laying hold of God and getting something of an inward witness that it is all right - after all, nothing happening! Have you ever been there? It is like an anticlimax. "There is nothing." Oh, that is the most perilous point! Everything can collapse there! The tremendous reaction that can set in there! After all, there is nothing. We are just where we were, despite all that we have done and endured.

What are you going to do? Well, one of two things. Either you will say, 'After all, somehow or other, it has all been an illusion.' You know that sort of thing - a counsel of despair; paralysed by the seeming unresponsiveness of the Lord. Or there is the other side. "Go again seven times." "There is nothing." A second time - "there is nothing." A third time - "there is nothing." A fourth time "there is nothing." I try to imagine what the servant's voice was getting like as he went on toward the sixth time. I am not sure that he did not add a few words! 'What is the good of it all - there is nothing; I told you there is nothing!' It could be like that: that is human nature. 'I do not see the use of going right up there again, I am tired of this business, there is nothing.' "Go again seven times." The seventh time - what? A cloud as small as a man's hand. In the vast heavens, a cloud the size of a man's hand! That is all. God is doing a very deep thing. He is carrying this matter of faith's persistence a long way. You need not interpret the number seven literally, but there has to be a rounding off in spiritual perfection in this matter of faith's persistence. The issue broke; it broke only in something very small. That small thing is just a token, it is not the whole. But the token was given, and Elijah says, "Go up, say unto Ahab, Make ready thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not" - the token is taken as the whole. "Now faith is... the title deeds of things unseen" (Heb. 11:1) - the token of the whole. And as they went, the heavens were full of clouds.

A Quality Inwrought into the Servant

I think the message is clear. It is so easy to make a big start, with a good deal of strength and shouting and activity, thinking that something is going to happen, that the Lord is going to come right in and do some big thing. Then it does not happen, the Lord does not do as we expected, and then our prayer begins to lessen, our spiritual diligence to wane. All that zeal and energy and devotion which marked us at one time is declining. The Lord is not fulfilling our expectations. But what is He doing? He is making a servant. You go into the service of God and think you are going to get quick returns and instant interventions of God from heaven in difficult situations; you look for the immediate response to your cry, especially in what seems to you to be the most critical situation; you expect that; and because you do not get it, are you going to fade out and give up and lose your zeal? No true servant of God has ever known it to be like that. The real servant, the useful servant, is the one who persists in faith - a persistence that is demanded even when interests that are clearly the Lord's are at stake. "The Lord, he is God." God had to vindicate that again, not this time in the fire, but in the water, in the rain; not only in the passing of judgment but in the maintaining of life; not only in the death, but in the resurrection. But it is sometimes the most testing thing for a servant of God to believe that God's strange behaviour really does not mean that God is indifferent about His own name. Do you grasp that? His delays, His hiddenness, His strange, seeming indifference - does it imply that He is not as concerned about His name as we are? The true servant has to learn otherwise. God is making a servant, and in so doing He sometimes does appear to be indifferent, slow. Faith's persistence is required to "seven times" persistence right through to completion. God may test us. We are not to sit down. There has to be a persisting in faith, and holding on for the issue. God is more concerned about the constitution of His servants on true Divine principles than He is about the doing of things by way of demonstrating His power. God can demonstrate His power if He wants to. But no, He has to work into the very constitution of His people that faith which can hold on, stand fast, even against His own seeming indifference. And in the end the rain came in abundance; all knew about the rain. But there was a double battle. There was the battle first with Baal, and then with inward unbelief - the battle of self; the outside and the inside battle; and very often the whole issue hangs upon the battle within.

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