

The Starting Place of Heavenly Fullness

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Reading: 1 Kings 19:9-10; 2 Kings 19:29-31; Isaiah 59:17; John 2:14-17

The word we see to be common to those passages strikes the keynote for our present meditation: The Zeal of the Lord, or: The way to Heavenly Fullness. Heavenly fullness in a very real and special way is set before us in the life of Elisha. This fact will impress us every time we read that life, or anything in connection with it. From beginning to end, wherever Elisha is seen to come into a situation, the result is fullness, living fullness, fullness of life. That fullness is heavenly fullness because it came out from heaven, had its rise in heaven. It was when Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven, and his mantle fell upon Elisha, that Elisha's real life and ministry commenced. So that it was a heavenly fullness, and it is of this that his life speaks to us.

Elisha, then, was the outcome and fullness of Elijah. Elijah laid the foundation and provided the ground for Elisha's ministry, and in spiritual things Elijah indicates, therefore, the way, the basis, the foundation of heavenly fullness. Elisha required Elijah. In a very real sense he sprang out of Elijah. But Elijah also needed Elisha. He needed that which would be the increased expression of his own life. Here you have part and counterpart. Here you have the ground or foundation, and the superstructure. Here you have the seed and fruit and fullgrown tree. You need to know the nature of the seed, to know exactly what it is you are planting or sowing, and it is likewise important to recognize what Elijah stands for, in order that you may get the Elisha result. It is very nice to take up what is presented to us of heavenly fullness in Elisha, and be drawn out to that, and to say: Well, we desire with all our hearts to have the heavenly fullness, the resurrection life, the power of His resurrection as brought out by Elisha, but it is quite impossible for us to enter into that, to know anything about the heavenly fullness, unless we stand upon the Elijah ground which provides for it.

The Starting Place of Heavenly Fullness

We therefore look to Elijah, to see the starting place, the foundation, the basis of heavenly fullness. Before we go on in our consideration of Elijah in this particular connection - and there is no doubt whatever that that is the meaning of the life of these two viewed as one life: seed and fruit; foundation and building; root and branch - there are one or two preliminary words of a general character to be said, though they are of great importance.

God has a fixed starting place. God never changes that starting place, nor does He move from it. The importance of recognizing that to be so is that everything in the matter of progress is determined by the starting place. The starting place governs all the later life. That means that if we take up things at a point beyond God's starting place, we shall have that much to go back upon and to undo, or we shall otherwise be limited as to the measure of divine fullness for ever after.

I am sure that strikes you as being of some significance, for there are undoubtedly a great many who take up things of the Lord a long way beyond God's starting-point, and therefore a great deal of time is occupied by the Lord in taking them backward rather than forward, in undoing a great deal of history. They do not immediately move on from the point at which they sought to begin, but we find them being humbled, undone, and their movement for a long time seems rather backward than forward, rather down than up. The explanation is that they have taken things up elsewhere than at God's starting-point.

On the other hand, where there is not the yielding to that work of God, that work of the Spirit which seeks to bring back by undoing, but rather a forcing on, a taking of things up at a point other than at God's starting-point, if there is an unwillingness to be brought right back to God's basis, and a pressing on and determined taking up of work on the part of such, there remains to the end a limitation. This would explain many difficulties and problems which arise.

There are many who refuse the work of the cross in its deepest meaning, who will not have it, who have yet taken up the things of God, and the work of God, without that deep work of the cross in their lives, the need of which they refuse to acknowledge or to recognize. They seek to force their way onward, and to forge ahead with the work of God. They build. What they build may reach great dimensions, and according to the standards of men may appear to be something successful, something big, something full of activity and energy, but when you come to measure it with the golden reed, that is according to the Lord's estimate of its spiritual value, it is very limited, very thin, very superficial, and represents but very little of the fullness of Christ in the lives of those concerned. These builders are full of activity, but they are babes in spiritual intelligence and understanding. The trouble is that things have been taken up somewhere beyond God's starting-point, and there has not been a yielding to the Spirit to bring back to that point, and therefore there is a remaining

limitation to the end, and tragically enough for ever.

These are alternatives which arise from recognizing the fact that God has a fixed starting-point which He never changes, and from which He never moves. It is necessary, on the one hand, to come to His starting-point. Right at the beginning is the best time to come there. However, if by reason of lack of knowledge, understanding, proper teaching, or because of our ignorance, we have been drawn into things without knowing of God's starting-point, then in His faithfulness to Himself, and in His faithfulness to us, but always with the highest and fullest interests in view, God will take in hand to bring us back, to undo, if we will let Him. On the other hand, unwillingness and unyieldedness leave the other alternative open, which is to go on, but to be for ever in limitation, which God never willed for us.

Two Practical Issues

There is another thing to remember in this connection and it is that, while God's starting place is unalterable, on our side there are two things of a practical character in relation to it.

a) An Acceptance of God's Position

Firstly, there must be an acceptance of all the implications of the fact in one definite act of faith and consecration. You and I will never know at any one time all the implications. We shall never be able to see all that God means in laying down this law of a fixed starting place. Everything, from the divine standpoint, is bound up with that, and takes its rise from that, but we shall only realize this as we go on. It is for us to take the attitude of faith and consecration toward all the implications of it, though we do not fully know what they are. In one definite act we have to come to the place where we say: Now Lord, what You mean by bringing me to Your starting place, and all that is bound up with that, I stand into by faith. It is one definite act of commitment, acceptance, and consecration.

Many people have a very insufficient conception of the meaning of consecration. So often it is thought to be just a handing over of the life to God, a giving of oneself to the Lord in complete surrender. Of course, it is that, but there is far more in such an act of consecration than is generally recognized. Complete consecration means that we are going to allow the Lord to do all that He means by consecration, and not merely what we may think it to mean. When the Lord gets both His hands upon a life, as it were, and that life is completely in His hands, the Lord does extraordinary things with and in that life; strange things; deep things; many things which were not looked for, not expected; things which are very unpleasant to the flesh and very mysterious, which the natural mind can never reconcile with the wisdom of God, nor with the love of God. That is all a part of consecration. Consecration means that we are henceforth in the Lord's hands for Him to do what He sees is necessary. It is rather the surrender of an inner life, an inner being to God, than the mere superficial idea of just putting your life into the hands of God, with the thought that now God is going to use you mightily. There is something very much more in consecration than that, and from the standpoint of God, Who knows us, knows the requirements, knows what is necessary, there are many implications bound up with coming to God's starting place.

You and I have to recognize that, and in one act of faith hand ourselves over to all the implications which are clear before His eyes, and not only to what we may see of them at the moment. We find that as we go on, and things which we never thought of, never imagined, never anticipated, begin to arise in our experience, and we come to crises, to something in the nature of an impasse with the Lord, where we have a controversy over the Lord's ways with us and come face to face with the Lord in a challenging attitude, the Lord will wait until we soften toward Him, and then He will say to us: "But this was in the original reckoning! This is nothing new! This is not something that has just come in by the way! This was all in the original reckoning, and you told Me I could do just exactly what I liked! Are you prepared to stand on your original ground? This is what consecration and surrender means, and you accepted it for all that it meant. Are you going to stand there now?"

Many of you know what is meant, although you have not had it presented in this way to your minds. You know that every fresh crisis only takes you back to your original position with the Lord. It at once recalls you to the place where you started, where you gave yourself to the Lord for all His way and will. Now you are saying: But I did not think it meant this! But the Lord did mean this, and He has thought a great deal more than we have ever yet conceived. God's starting place has to be accepted in all its implications in one act of faith in Him.

b) A Progressive Outworking

Secondly, there is the other side of this. There will be a progressive working out of the implications. God does

not bring us in experience in one complete act into all those implications. They are all settled in Him, all perfected in Christ, but in us the implications will be worked out progressively. This, however, will only be on the ground that we have given the Lord full permission to work them out, and given Him an open way. Then He will work out progressively the implications of God's starting place.

For different people that will mean different things. For some it will mean going back a bit, being taken back over the road traversed in order to get back to God's starting place, to the end that they might have a greater fullness of the Lord and be released from the present limitation. That necessitates humility of spirit. It means that we shall have to let go a great deal of our assumed spiritual position; that we shall have to have our ideas about things very greatly changed. We have the generally accepted ideas, and conceptions, and definitions of spiritual things and work, the work of the Lord, ministry, and all such things, and now that system of thought and ideas is going to be ruled out, and we are going back to the beginning to discover that ministry is not the professional sort of thing that we had imagined it to be. Ministry from God's standpoint is simply the outworking of what God has been doing inwardly, the fruit of spiritual history. Our ideas have to be entirely transformed, turned upside down, and we have to come back to God's standard. Some of us know what all this implies. For years we had a certain idea of what ministry was, and then we had to come to the place where we started all over again with God's idea of ministry, but it has been worthwhile. We regard ourselves as such fools now for having thought that what we formerly cherished was God's idea of ministry. Oh, blessed be God, He has met us at a point and caused us to traverse the past backward and come right to the beginning of ministry all over again on a different level, from a different standpoint, with a different idea. What a different ministry!

We use ministry as an illustration of what we mean in the application of this law. When we get into the hands of the Lord we recognize that He has a starting place, and He never leaves His position or His ground to come to find us where we are and to take us up for His service at that point, but we always have to come back to His starting place. It is one tremendous act, one deep act with God, one acceptance, perhaps in an agony - for it may well be we would never come to the point of acceptance save through an agony, the agony, maybe, of despair over our own spiritual lives, or despair as to our own present service, work, ministry - and we come to the place where there is an end, and where a new beginning has to be. We are confronted with the challenge as to whether we are going to let the Lord order everything according to His mind, and as we accept God's starting-point in one full-orbed acceptance, though we may have been in things for many years, all kinds of changes now begin to come about: changes of ideas, changes of conceptions, changes of mind, changes of manner, changes of activity. Things are changed, but they are changed from limitation to fullness, from earthly bondage to heavenly liberty. We have found God's starting place to heavenly fullness.

Let us remember, then, that God has a starting place. He will not leave it to come to any self-chosen point of ours, but He will require that we come to His, and that we accept by faith all that that means, and then allow Him to work the principle out and yield ourselves to it as it works out progressively.

The Divine Treasure in the Earthen Vessel

Now we are able to come to Elijah as representing God's starting-point for heavenly fullness, and we will consider for a moment or two the man himself. Read through the life of Elijah again. It is one of the fullest lives, yet so far as narratives are concerned packed into the shortest compass. You are surprised, when you remember the significance of Elijah, the tremendous place that he occupies, how quickly his story is told. You are through the story in almost a few verses. Yet what a life! As you read it through, one thing that should impress you is the amount there is in it that speaks of human weakness and dependence. That is rather changing the point of view, for when we think of Elijah we always think of power, of wrath, of something terrific. We almost feel that we are in the presence of an earthquake. Yet if you read the story again you will be impressed with how much there is that indicates weakness and dependence.

Take the name of this man - Elijah. It means: Jehovah my strength. That brings you at once to an utter position. Jehovah my strength! You can almost hear an echo of the words in the case of the apostle Paul when he said: "...I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God..." Jehovah my strength!

Then as you touch his life at different points, you see hallmarks of weakness and dependence. Go with him to the brook Cherith. "Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there." What a position for a mighty man of God, a position of weakness, of dependence. The very fact that God commanded ravens to feed him showed how dependent he was upon God, because ravens are not given to feeding other people, it is not their disposition. It requires some sovereign act of God to make a raven look after

someone else. If there is one outstanding characteristic about a raven it is "myself first!" So the very power of God was necessary there to transcend this course of nature, and it was doubly so in that any creature should be the means of sustaining this prophet, this man of God.

Then the Lord let the brook dry up, and on its drying up He said: "Arise, get thee to Zarephath... I have commanded a widow there to sustain thee." A widow woman! And when Elijah arrived at Zarephath what a state of things he found. The woman was on her last morsel, in a state of weakness, and her resources exhausted. What dependence upon God! What a state of weakness in himself!

Or pass on to that later point in his career, to the incident at Horeb, in which there occur the words for which we have such a liking, "...a still small voice" (the sound of gentle stillness). Elijah came to Horeb and entered into a cave. The Lord passed by, and there was a mighty earthquake, thunder and lightning, and a whirlwind, so that the very mount must have rocked and the rocks well-nigh split. There was a terrific sense of power, force, energy, and might. But God was not in the earthquake, God was not in the whirlwind. There followed a sound of gentle stillness, a still small voice, and God was in that. There was tumult in Elijah, resultant from Jezebel's threat and Elijah's fear. That tumult in Elijah seemed to be shouting for some mighty manifestation of power which should defeat Jezebel, cheat Jezebel of her object and save the Lord's servant from her clutches. He was seeking escape from the clutches of Jezebel, from her threat, and what he needed, he felt, was some mighty exercise of power to deliver him. But the Lord was not in the earthquake, the Lord was not in the whirlwind, He was in the still small voice, the sound of gentle stillness. But what came out of the sound of gentle stillness? "Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, thou shalt anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room." What was the outcome? Ahab was overthrown and Jezebel was destroyed. All that came out of a sound of gentle stillness. The weakness of God is greater than men. Very eloquently God was saying, This whole thing is in My hand. Who is Jezebel? Who is Ahab? My little finger is more than their combined might! A sound of gentle stillness can produce something that will bring Ahab's career to a very speedy end and Jezebel to a very humiliating one.

It is a mighty lesson. It does not require God to come in an earthquake and a whirlwind to deal with a situation like that. Elijah, what are you doing here? Have you forgotten what your name is? Have you forgotten that in your weakness I have again and again made My strength perfect? My weakness is greater than all the combined force of the enemy. Elijah's life is gathered up from the standpoint of the man himself in one great reality, namely, that it is God, not the man. God's weakness associated with a man is more than all the strength of men against that man.

We have perhaps in measure been in the place of Elijah, conscious of the tremendous forces against us, human and diabolical, and have felt the need of some putting forth of mighty power, of God to rise up in an earthquake, in a whirlwind for our deliverance. We have looked for that, and, not seeing it, we have been discouraged, and have thought that the Lord had failed us, and we have begun to tell the Lord all about our devotion and our faithfulness - "I have been very jealous for the Lord..." The Lord has never come to us in a whirlwind, nor in an earthquake. I doubt whether anybody has ever been delivered by an earthquake or whirlwind coming from the Lord, but we have been delivered, we have been set on high, we have been brought out of that tempest of satanic antagonism again and again, and the Lord has done it in such a quiet way. The Lord has not seen the need for an earthquake to deliver us. His weakness is greater than all other strength. He would teach us that, while we are what we are in ourselves, weak, in dependence upon God, we can be set over all the power of the enemy. It is so good that the Lord put it in the way of Elijah to go and do the things which were going to bring both Ahab and Jezebel to their ignominious end. It was as though the Lord said, All right, Elijah, just go along and anoint Elisha and anoint Jehu, and that is the end of Ahab and Jezebel, and you have no more to fear than that: "... him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay." You see how the Lord is master of the situation, and how He brings His feeble, weak, consciously dependent servant into fellowship with Himself to bring an end to the enemy. There is a lot of history in that.

The Power is of God, and not of Men

The Lord never covered up the weaknesses of His servants. The Lord has not drawn a veil over that paragraph in the life of Elijah, His beloved servant to whom He refers many times, whom He brings into view at the most critical times, not only in ancient Israel but also in New Testament times. John the Baptist came in the power of Elijah. Then Moses and Elijah appear on the Mount of Transfiguration in connection with that other great crisis, the exodus which the Lord Jesus was about to accomplish at Jerusalem, the greatest crisis in the history of this world. No wonder the people, when they heard what the Lord Jesus was doing, somehow or other mixed up John the Baptist with Elijah in their minds. Herod himself said that John was risen from the dead. That implied

something rather bad for him in his consciousness, for he was much in the same place as Ahab.

However, the Lord has not covered up the weaknesses of His servants, or drawn a veil over such incidents as that where Elijah is seeking for a juniper tree and casting himself down, and complaining to the Lord, and asking for his life to be taken away. It is a painful scene, and yet the Lord brings it out in full, clear relief.

Why does the Lord not hide from others our weaknesses? Why does He not hide those wounds which shame would hide, those things about us that we would like to be kept covered up for pride's sake? Why does the Lord let them come out? It is because if the Lord uses a man or a woman He is going to take good care that it is always known that the power working through them is not of themselves but of Him, and that if they for a moment get out of touch with Him it is very clearly revealed what they are, and that stands over against what He is. It is shown that these servants of His are not something in themselves, but that He is their strength.

You and I will never get to the place where the Lord will allow us to be something in ourselves. If ever you and I are in danger of getting there the Lord will very soon let us know that our usefulness to Him is altogether a matter of our dependence upon Him. Usefulness to God in a true way is always arrested when we lose the sense of dependence upon Him.

If Elijah stands out as one of the great peaks of usefulness to God, one that you can never miss as you scan the skyline, there is alongside of that this that we read of him, and you cannot shut your eyes to the fact. You feel you have somehow or other come down from great heights to great deeps when you read this passage about the breakdown of Elijah. Surely, in view of his faithfulness to the Lord, it would have been kind of the Lord to have covered that up and not inspired the recording of it! No! Elijah's name means: "Jehovah my strength." The incident under the juniper tree proclaims what Elijah is in himself. What is to be seen of value and effect in the life of Elijah is to be ascribed to the Lord in Elijah. So it is with Moses, and so with David, and so with all the others. The Lord has allowed the dark passages in their lives to be recorded just to show that men greatly used of God are only so used because of their dependence upon Him; and such records as these are necessary to us.

So then we are beginning to see the starting place of heavenly fullness. That is the first thing. Perhaps it is going a long way round, and saying a lot to indicate just one thing, but how important that thing is! The starting place of heavenly fullness is our emptiness, our dependence, our weakness. The Lord may have to take us right back there. If we have started at any point beyond dependence, beyond emptiness, beyond weakness it is a painful way back to God's starting-point. But it is not all a backward march, for that very process of emptying is the way to the fullness. It is only making real to us what is already so clear to Him. It is, in a word, that we are brought to the place where we know that all the fullness is in HIM. Our fullness is in Him, but we never appreciate it, never enjoy it, never profit by it, never really enter into it in a living way, until that has been done in us which has made us conscious that it is so, and apart from this it is a bad lookout for us.

It is so easy to say that all the fullness is in Him, to view it in an objective way, and to sing about it, but, oh, to come to the place where, knowing in a deep and terrible way how utterly futile we are in ourselves, we suddenly realize, in the presence of that deep poignant consciousness of our weakness, that that is only one side of things, and that the fullness is in Him for us. We need not stop because of our emptiness and weakness, we need not remain at the end, but that rather can be the place of beginning, and we can go on from there. The very emptiness and weakness is the ground upon which to move into a discovery that will ever keep us in a place of worship and wonder.

The Lord speak that word to our hearts.