

God's Gentle Power

A Sermon

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Delivered by

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"And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so. when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?"—[1 Kings 19:11-13.](#)

ELIJAH was a man of like passions with ourselves. We all know that when we have passed through any great excitement of high joy there almost always comes following, a corresponding reaction and depression. Elijah had gone to the top of Carmel and had pleaded his cause, and the rain floods had come in answer to his prayer He had taken the prophets of Baal, and had slain them, and gained a glorious victory for his God; and so full of excitement was he that he girded his loins as though he had been a young man, and ran before the chariot of Ahab, like the royal footmen. It was almost inevitable that after an excitement so high, and strong, that he should be desponding and depressed in spirits, and we find that he was so depressed. If the like should ever happen to any of you' my brethren and sisters, count it no strange thing, nor suppose that some extraordinary trial hath happened unto you. It is but a physical result from physical causes. The mind has operated upon the body. It has strung the bow too tightly, and now, unless the string be relaxed, there is a danger of its breaking altogether. Now as Elias was a man of like passions with us, we may conclude that the way in which God dealt with him is very much the way in which he would deal with us. With a similar case, and the same physician, we may look for the same treatment. As, therefore, the Lord spake to Elijah not by earthquake, nor wind, nor fire, but by the still small voice, so in all probability will he speak to us. It may be, it is just possible it may be, that here to-night there is some worker for God very much in the same condition as Elijah. You, my dear brother, have been working for God in a neighbourhood where you have met with little but opposition and disappointment, and you have almost resolved that you will go away from the place. "The soil is hard," you say, "and breaks the ploughshare. Shall oxen plough upon a rock?" "Tis in vain for you to continue your labour there, you. think, and you have come here to-night still with this thought uppermost—that you have laboured in vain,

and spent your strength for nought. Hear you the word of the Lord this night. He speaks not to you by any earthquake of judgment with which he means to visit you, neither by any fiery word of severe rebuke; but perhaps through me, this evening, he may speak with a still small voice that shall just meet your case and send you back to your labour. Brother, will you play the Jonahs Will you refuse to go to tile great city—to Nineveh? Remember there are worse places than Nineveh. He that goes out of the path that God marks for him may yet come to be at the bottom of the sea with Jonah, with the weeds wrapped about his head. You go at your own cost, remember, if you go away from the post of duty, however arduous. Don't attempt the risk. But thus saith the Lord unto thee, "It may be thou hast not laboured in vain as thou hast supposed." Elijah knew nothing of the seven thousand men that God had in reserve. You don't know what converts God has given you. There are scattered up and down the world—perhaps some precious ones who owe their salvation instrumentally to you, and could they all stand before you—you would blush with shame at the thought of leaving a harvest—field that has really been so prolific, though not in your sight. Go back again to thy work, for the Lord has blessed thee. Play not the fool by deserting the post where he will give thee honour yet.

But then the voice told Elijah also that God would punish the people who had treated him so ill; that he, would send Hazael with his sharp sword and Jehu, yet to mow the ground a second time. And oh! thou true servant of God, the Lord will not suffer thee to be rejected. If they have rejected thee, they have rejected thy God also. If thou hast been faithful to his truth, leave thou that matter to him—go thou back to thy work. And one other word there was to Elijah. He was to go back to anoint his successor. If Elijah flees, and if Elijah at length is taken up to heaven, yet Elisha shall succeed him. Perhaps there may be a brother here who is in the state I have described who does not know what God has in store for him. You are to call into the Christian ministry a brother that shall do greater than you have, you shall light as greater candle shall your own. Oh! what joy Elijah must have had when he felt there would be someone to take up his work! You have not, my dear brother, yet called out for your master the man the Lord means to call. What a happy man he must have been who was the means of the conversion of Whitefield or Jonathan Edwards, or some great missionary of the cross. You may be that, in that little village—in that back slum. Go thou back then. What doest thou hero Elijah? What doest thou here? With whom hast thou left those few sheep in the wilderness? The Master's voice speaks to thee. Go to thy closet, and get fresh strength from on high, and then go back to thy difficulties—go back to thy self-denials, go back to all thy service with a good heart and true."Fear not thou worm Jacob; I will help thee, saith the Lord." Arise, thou worm, and thresh the mountain, for "I will make thee a new sharp threshing instrument having teeth." I have delivered the message. It is to somebody, I know not to whom, in this place.

But now the drift, the great aim of the sermon at this time is to speak to the unconverted. With them I dealt also this morning. I feel persuaded God will bless it. Now, this evening, let us have another word with them. We will read the text again. "Behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake. but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice." Our first observation is that:—

I. POWERFUL MEANS MAY ALTOGETHER FAIL TO IMPRESS SOME MINDS

Let us think a while. *Terrible judgments appear as if they must convert sinners*; yet there may be those here, and there certainly are those in many places who have passed through a whole series of judgments, and are rather hardened than softened by them. You may have been, dear friend in a storm of sin; you may have been just barely washed upon a rock, and escaped as with the skin of your teeth. You have also passed through a time of cholera. You have been in a city smitten with the plague. You have lived in a house where others have sickened and died; and at those times you did pause a little, and you made some good resolutions, but they all ended in smoke; and here you are still, a proof that God is not in the earthquake, nor yet in the wind, nor yet in the fire. It may be you have suffered a great deal of personal sickness. Do I not know some here present who have been laid very low with fever—who have been the subjects of very frightful accidents, and brought to the borders of the grave? These things were loud voices to you, but you did not hear them. They were God's terrors, sent to fetch you to himself, but they failed to do it. You remained just where you were, perhaps worse instead of better; for when the sun shines on wax, it melts it, but if it shines on clay, it hardens it; and so God's judgments have had just that effect on you. You are hardened, instead of softened by them. Men are not converted by judgments. They may submit themselves in a false way, but power and displays of terror do not win the heart.

Again, *we naturally expect that men will be converted during the times of earnest religious excitement*. Some are brought in; but there are certain persons who do not seem to be affected by revivals. When others bow like the corn that waveth in the wind, they stand stiff and firm, and are altogether untouched. It is a solemn thing when a season of grace is not a season of grace to us. When we lie, like Gideon's fleece, all dry, while all around us is wet with the dew of heaven, yet with some it is just so—gracious excitements and spiritual revivals do not touch them. The Lord is not in the wind, and the Lord is not in the earthquake, and the Lord is not in the fire—at least to them. *The same is the case with powerful sermons*. I do not mean by this "eloquent sermons," so called. "Eloquent sermons" usually seem to me to be the least eloquent things in the world; for eloquence means speaking from the heart; and I cannot believe that the fine periods we sometimes hear read ever spring anywhere but from the head. But I mean when a sermon is full of gospel truth, when it is pertinently put, when it is pathetically urged, when the heart of the preacher is warmed, and his eyes o'erflow

with tears; when you see a congregation melted, you say to yourself, "Surely that must touch so-and-so's heart." And then there comes a passage in the sermon that seems so touching that the very rocks might weep, and the stones might break; but oh! when it is all over it is all over, and it is forgotten too; and to many a hearer the Lord is not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire. And so it is also in *the dealing out of the judgments of God in the ministry*. It is the duty of the Christian pastor, if he would make full proof of his ministry, to warn men of the results of sin—to tell them that there is a judgment—that for every idle word they speak they will have to account. We ought continually to declare that for every transgression there shall be a recompense of reward. But ah! dear hearer, though we have read books and heard sermons that were full of the terrors of the Lord, which we thought surely would move men, yet there are men who care nothing whatever about the wrath to come, nor the fire that is kindled for the wicked, nor the dreadful terrors of Divine Justice. The Lord is not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, so far as they are concerned. The means that appear to be powerful are powerless to them; and when you think they will surely turn and repent, they harden their necks and go on in their sin. This, abundant facts could prove.

But the next observation shall be that *sometimes a much gentler force effects what could not otherwise have been achieved*. Many have been converted to God by the still small voice whom no wind, though it rose to a hurricane, no earthquake, though it rent the world to its centre, and no fire, though it licked up the forests, could ever move. A gentle word has done it. Sometimes that still small voice has come to us by apparently very, very inadequate means. It is astonishing what little things God will use when he pleases to do so. He wanted to soften the heart of that rough prophet Jonah, and he sent a worm and a gourd, and they did it. He would bring Peter to repentance, and he bade a cock to crow. It was a strange preacher, but it was as good as a dean of a cathedral to the Apostle. Means may seem to be absolutely ridiculous, yet God maketh use of the things that are not, as though they were. I remember to have heard the story of a man, a blasphemer, profane, an atheist, who was converted singularly by a sinful action of his. He had written on a piece of paper, "God is nowhere," and bade his child read it, for he would make his child an atheist too. And the child spelt it, "God is n-o-w h-e-r-e-God is now here." It was a truth, instead of a lie, and the arrow pierced the man's own heart. I remember one who had lived a life of gross iniquity who stepped into Exeter Hall and found Christ there. It was not my sermon, however, that God blessed: it was only this. I read the hymn, "Jesus, lover of my soul." Just those words touched his heart. "Jesus, lover of my soul," he said to himself. "Did Jesus love my soul? Then how is it that I could have lived as I have done?"; and that word broke him down. God works great results by little things. A little hymn learnt at the Sunday School is sung at home by a little prattler, and the heart of the father is softened by it. One little sentence uttered by a friendly visitor reaches a mother's conscience and impresses her heart. Ay, and God can use the quiet

of the evening, or the stillness of the night, or a flash of lightning, or a peal of thunder, or a dewdrop, or a little flower—he can use anything he wills to bring his banished. home. Often cloth the Spirit speak thus with a still small voice.

But, brethren, beloved, *the Holy Ghost also speaks to men* without any means at all. With no outward agency whatever, the still small voice will come. Oh! how I wish it would come to-night to some sitting here listening to the preacher! I wish you could forget—forget the congregation, and forget everything except yourself and your God. We have known persons who have been walking in the fields, thoughtless and careless. All around has been still, and they have suddenly thought, and thought is often the avenue to prayer. We have known some passing through a country churchyard, and though no text upon the tomb how touched them, yet the very sight of those green hillocks has been a sermon to them. Aye, and men have walked through orchards, and the leaves have said to them, "We all do fade as a leaf." Or sitting in their chamber, or lying on their bed wakeful, the old times have come over again. The man that lives to be an old sinner recollects the little prayer he said at his mother's knee. The soldier that has been at battle recollects the teaching of the Sunday School, though he has passed now his fiftieth year; and he says, "I wish I could blot out all that which lies between my mother's kiss and this hour. It has been a dark, dark season." Only the thought has done it. God's Spirit did but touch the secret spring, and the soul was moved aright. The still small voice has done it. Oh! how satisfied I should be if the Lord would not give me a single soul in this place by my preaching, if he would but do it himself! What matters it so long as they are saved? He does put honour upon his preached word, and he brings in the most of men thereby; but so long as they are brought in, and he gets glory, what will it signify as to the means he uses? May he still speak to you by his still small voice. I commend to him in my earnest prayer some of you who are very familiar with my voice, and to whom it is as useless as familiar. You will never be brought to Christ by me. God will never give me your souls I fear. For these many years have I laboured for them, and they have not been given me. Well, good Master, call them by some other means, only bring them; and grant that this very night, conscience may be aroused by thoughts which thou thyself shalt suggest, and they may come to thee.

You see, then, the first two points, that the most powerful means will often fail, and that the least means may be successful. Ay, and the Holy Ghost may work without means altogether. And now once again:—

II. WHEN GOD SPEAKS TO MEN, HIS VOICE IS ALWAYS LINKED WITH PERSONAL ADDRESS.

Look at the text. What says the still small voice? "What doest thou here *Elijah*?" There was the man named. It was no general statement about prophets who proved faithless, or about believers who grew doubtful, or about men of courage that played the coward. Oh! no; it was, "What doest *thou* here, *Elijah*?" It is a mark of God's Spirit that when he speaks

to men *he speaks to them personally*. Just take a case or two. You remember Jesus Christ going through Jericho, preaching as he went. He meant to call that rich publican who had climbed the tree. In what way did the effectual voice of grace do it? He says, "Zaccheus" It was not a general observation about people up in trees that were to come down; but "Zaccheus"—that is the man. "Zaccheus, make haste and come down, for to-day I must abide in thy house." The personal call did it. And Mary, when she did not know her Master, and was in the garden, and thought he was the gardener—what was it that opened her eyes to know her Lord, and made her say, "Rabboni"? It was no word else except that he said unto her, "Mary." The tone in which he said it, and the name—the old familiar name, Mary—*that* did the work. And when the Saviour meant to break Simon Peter's heart, and yet to assure him that he was forgiven, how did he speak to him? Three times he said to him, "Simon, son of Jonas. Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" This is how God speaks to men. And when out of the open heavens Jesus spake to the maddened persecutor who was on the road to Damascus, but whom he meant to make his elect apostle to the Gentiles, how did he speak but thus? "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." Now here I cannot speak except to the crowd and the congregation, and though one labours hard to make a description apt and plain, and to fit the cap to all wearers' heads, yet men slip through in the crowd; they will not take it to themselves, nor can we make them. But when the Holy Ghost speaks with the still small voice, it is always, "*Thou art the man. Thou art the man. Thou art the sinner condemned. Thou art the sinner invited to mercy. Thou art the sinner that shall be received by grace.*" Believe *thou*, and *thou* shalt be saved, for he loves thee and gave himself for thee. May the Lord send us such personal work as this. I know every Christian here, if he could state his experience, would tell you that the word never came with power to his soul until it came right to him as though he were the only sinner, and the gospel were meant for him above all others. Oh! for an arrow from the great archer's bow to go right into you, that, like a stag that is smitten by the archer, you might retire into the glades of the forest, to weep alone and die alone, unless the hand that sent in the dart shall gently draw it out and heal the wound that it has made! Oh! for this personal conviction!—conviction of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment laid home to each man's heart. It must be so, or you cannot be saved. But now another truth is suggested by the text. It is this, that:—

III. WHEN GOD'S STILL SMALL VOICE SPEAKS TO MEN PERSONALLY, THE SUBJECT IS THEMSELVES AND THEIR ACTIONS.

"What doest thou here, Elijah?" This was the voice of God. May the same voice come to-night to some here about their actions. Let me take the text and use it to you. What are you doing? What doest thou? What have you been doing? You are getting on in life. What have you done? Mischievous I fear. What good have you done? You were made to glorify God, that was the end for which you were created. Have you glorified him? You have been fed

by him, clothed by him. Have you made him any return? What have you done? No good—much evil. What are you doing now? Sitting here and listening. Ay, but how are you treating the Word? Are you receiving it? Do you hear the voice of mercy, and do you reject it, or will you accept it? What are you going to do? What are you going to do to-night when you get out of this place? How will the last hours of the precious Sabbath be spent? And tomorrow, and the next day—what are you planning? Is there anything holy in it, anything noble in it, anything that will be glorifying to God? Do you never take stock? Spiritual trader, do you never take stock? Mariner upon the sea of life, cost thou never consult thy chart? Dost thou never heave the lead, or take thy bearings? Art thou so mad as to sail on in the fog, and not care what becomes of so goodly a vessel as thy soul? Oh! pause. What hast thou done? What art thou doing? What wilt thou do? Especially what wilt thou do in the swellings of Jordan? Unsaved, what will you do when the death-sweat stands upon your brow—when the cold beaded drops are there, and the marrow is frozen, and the strong man gathers up his feet in the bed for the last dread struggle—what will you do without a Saviour? What will you do when the trumpet rings through heaven and earth, and sea, and men live again, and you, with them, stand before the judgment-seat, and amidst the rolling thunder the book is opened and your sins stand there unforgiven? What will you do? What will you do? Oh! that you may never be brought to this, but be brought to Christ to-night! Do you notice how the word was put? It was not, "What are you doing?" only, but "What doest thou—thou, Elijah?" And there are some special persons whose sins receive an aggravation by the very fact that they are what they are. I know thee—what thou wast of old. What a sweet child. How his mother loved him, and loved to hear him sing, and pray, too, in his way. What happiness it was to the parents! Ah! they fell asleep and died, and 'tis a mercy they did, else perhaps your course would have brought them to the grave with grief. What doest thou, child of many prayers and many tears? What doest thou? Still to be an enemy to thy mother's God, and to blaspheme the name they father loved. You have been hearers of the gospel, some of you almost ever since you can recollect. Your mother carried you in her arms to God's house, and sometimes conscience has pricked you, and the word has gone through, and through, and through; but you have resisted it. What has led you, I pray you, to remain still what you are? What infernal power has helped you to steel your heart? In what fire has your soul been annealed to make it hard as adamant stone? O soul, soul, sinful soul, delaying, procrastinating soul! what doest thou in such a state after so much love and mercy? And I might speak to some that promised fair many times, and that have been almost persuaded to be Christians, and yet still are out of God, and out of Christ, and on the borders of destruction. What do you here? Perhaps there is someone who has come to London lately, that in the country was an observer of religion, apparently sincere, but oh! this wicked London! You have given up those good habits; you—have got into bad company, and oh! I shall not tell what you have done; but I hope you will confess it to God in your own secrecy.

But how dare you do it? How could you do it? Oh! how could you do it? How could you be a prodigal?—you, your fathers dearly beloved, taught so well, with so much light, with such a tender conscience—how could you sin? Why the very tramps of the street might be ashamed of you, for they never knew much better. Those that go into foulest sin might condemn you, for with their bad street training, educated perhaps in the kennel, who wonders that they are what they are? But for you, it is a wonder. The angel Lucifer, son of the morning, fell down to the deeps of hell. You have fallen from the side of the pulpit, fallen from a Christian parent's side, and almost from inside the Church of God, and fallen into sin. Perhaps I speak to some that have belied their baptism, have given up the profession that they made when they there were buried with Christ, who have belied the sacramental table where they once sat, and professed to eat his bread and drink of his cup, and to be partakers of his body and of his blood. You have crucified the Lord afresh, and put him to an open shame. "What doest thou here, Elijah?" My, and you used to preach too; you used to preach to others, and now what are you? You were once, as it were, a priest at the altar of God, and now you are a priest at the altars of Baal. God have mercy upon you, and may his still small voice now speak in your soul.

There was one point in the question which was asked, which was this: "What doest thou *here*?" Each man, when he is called to search himself by the Spirit of God, must recollect his surroundings. I thank God, my brethren and my sisters, that you are hearers—not to commend you that you may be Pharisees, because you happen to go to a place of worship. I do, nevertheless, praise God that you are here. When the sick lay round the Pool of Bethesda, there was some hope of their being healed. You are favoured in being where Christ is preached; but what *doest* thou *here*? Did you come to find a jest? Did you come to hear one who was much talked of in your hearing? Did you come from curiosity? Did you come from a worse motive? Well, never mind, but what are you doing *now*? Are you willing to listen to God's voice? Will you *now* yield? He round you now, as with the bands of a man, would cast the bands of his love, who was given for you, and to his altar bind you fast. 'Tis but to yield; and surely it must be hard to resist when it is divine mercy that plies you, and eternal love that persuades you. "Come unto me," says Jesus; "come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Will you not come? "Whosoever will, let him come and take the water of life freely." Will you not come? Oh! that your answer to the question, "What doest thou here?" might be to-night, "I am doing this here; I am laying my sins on Jesus; I am confessing the past; I am asking grace for the future; I am looking to the wounds of him that was cleft as a rock is cleft that I may shelter in him; I am saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.'" Thy God be praised if such is the case. But I must close with the last observation, and that is, that:—

IV. WHERE THE LORD DOES SPEAK WITH A STILL SMALL VOICE TO MEN PERSONALLY ABOUT THEIR CONDUCT AND THEIR SIN, IT IS ALWAYS EFFECTUAL.

You notice what Elijah did. He first wrapped his mantle about his face—he became subdued and awe-stricken—full of reverence. Oh! it is a great thing when a sinner is willing to wrap his face when he is confounded, and say, "I cannot defend my course; I am guilty." We know that if at our judgment-seat a man pleads guilty, he is punished; but at the judgment-seat of the gospel whoever pleads guilty is forgiven. Wrap your face. Oh! but you thought that you were better than most; you went to church, and you went to the meeting-house, the chapel, regularly, and were you not better than others? Ah! wrap your face. Your church-goings and your chapel-goings have only increased your responsibilities if you have rejected the Saviour. Take the mantle of self humiliation, and wrap it about your face now. Say, with the leper, "Unclean! Unclean!" Where you are in the Tabernacle, where you are, never mind where you stand or sit, I commend to you the publican's prayer. Say it now, and God help you, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Did you say it from your heart? Go home. You shall go home to your house justified, for he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

But you must notice that while Elijah thus wrapped his face in reverence, he stood still and listened. It was a still small voice, and the prophet was attending. No other sound was heard but this, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" But he stood. I doubt not that man of iron stood and wept, and seemed to say in his soul, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." "He that bath earn to hear, let him hear." Oh! be very attentive to the voice of God's Spirit! If you have only a half of a good thought, take care of it. It may be the beginning of another one. Oh! if you have only just got a little leaning, thank God for it. Remember Christ does not quench the smoking flax; don't quench it yourself. "Quench not the Spirit." Oh! I have known times when I would have given my whole life to have had one tear of repentance. Can you repent now? Can you long after God now? Oh! cherish that longing! Yield to the Spirit of God. Don't be like iron to the fire that needs to have the blast-furnace on it before it will melt; but oh! be like wax to the flame, like cork on the water that moves up and down with every influence. God make you so. It wants a strong wind to shake the oak; but the fern that grows under it waves its branches at every breath of the zephyr. May you be just as sensitive as that. Bow before the Spirit's influence. The Lord make you to do it for his name's sake.

And then, best of all and last of all, the prophet was not only reverent, humble, and attentive, but he was obedient. God told him to go and do this and that. He never questioned, but away he went and executed the divine commission, and until the time when he was taken up in the chariot of fire Elijah never quailed again. The still small voice had made him twice a man, and steeled him once again to bear all that he had to endure in his chequered life. He was obedient to the heavenly vision. Will you be obedient to-night?" If ye be willing

and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land." May God make you to be obedient. But you say, "What is his command then? What is the work of God—this great work that God commands? This is the one gospel precept, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved"; or take it in the shape in which the Master put it, "He that believeth and is baptized, shall be saved." To believe is to trust. To be baptized is to be immersed into Christ—immersed in water upon profession of faith, for so it is put, and I dare not give you half the gospel. So it is put, "He that with his heart believeth, and with his mouth maketh confession of him, shall be saved." Don't leave out any part of the divine command. Be obedient to the whole of it. "Believe and be baptized," or as the Apostle put it, "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you." May God grant that you may be obedient to this. The great command is, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Trust in him—in his substitutionary work for sinners. He bore their guilt, and was punished in their stead, and whosoever trusts in what he did—in a word, trusts in him, is saved. God grant you to do it. I leave it to his still small voice to work this blessed result. Amen.

* Light for those who sit in darkness. Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, 1,010.