

A Life on Fire



By

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FELLOWSHIP OF FAITH FOR THE MOSLEMS.



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Here and there in the Bible we catch sight of a life penetrated by a strange glow. Here and there too, in this nineteenth-century world, souls cross our path, in contact with whom we feel a kindling for which, perhaps, we can hardly account. They are those to whom Christ is not merely an example, but an inspiration. There is such a thing, thank God, as a life on fire!

Let us draw near three of these glowing lives, and see if some spark may not, through God's mercy, fall upon us. The first and second teach us their lesson in figure; the third in literal fact.

"Entreat me not to leave thee, or return from following after thee; for whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

"Surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also will thy servant be."

“There came a woman, having an alabaster box of ointment of spikenard, very precious, and she brake the box, and poured it on His head.”

A life fired into a passion of love, and loyalty, and surrender; that is the picture into which the three stories blend. Let us look first at

The Life of Love.

The story of Ruth and that of Ittai have the same outline. Both had reached a point to which duty alone had carried them, and now before each stood a choice. A new life lay stretched out, to be entered only by the narrow gate of loss; a choice, deliberate and final, must be made. To each came the generous pleading—“Stop, consider:” both persisted in their decision; and in both we watch the slow preparation of years break into a sudden flame, transforming them with a breath of glory. In Ruth’s case especially, it was *love* that gave the illuminating touch.

Is there a possible counterpart to this experience in our lives?

Yes, a path lies within our reach, making the ordinary Christian life look cold and colourless by its contrast—a path stretching even beyond that of consecration in its lower sense; for this latter may be very subjective in tone, may hold the way of obedience chiefly as a means of rest and victory. It is to many of us a distinctly fresh life when God’s Spirit leads us to the objective side, lifting our gaze from the road beneath our feet to the form of Him who goes before; rivetting it there by His radiant beauty.

" A homeless Stranger amongst us came
To this land of death and mourning,
He walked in a path of sorrow and shame,
Through insult and hate and scorning.

" A Man of sorrows, of toil and tears,
An outcast Man and a lonely;
But He looked on me and through endless years
Him must I love, Him only.

" Then from this sad and sorrowful land,—
From this land of tears, He departed;
But the light of His eyes, and the touch of His
hand,
Had left me broken-hearted.

" And I clave to Him as He turned His face
From the land that was mine no longer;
The land I had loved in the ancient days,
Ere I knew the love that was stronger.

" And I would hide where He abode,
And follow His steps for ever;
His people my people, His God my God,
In the land beyond the river.

" And where He died would I also die:
Far dearer a grave beside Him
Than a kingly place among living men,
The place which they denned Him."*

* By permission from "Service of Song in the House of the Lord" by Frances Bevan. (Hatcharda.)

Yes, "The love of Christ *constraineth* us." The word is the same as that translated "pressed" in Acts xviii. 5, "straitened" in Luke xii. 50. It gives the thought of a mighty stream hemmed in by banks too narrow for it. Is that true concerning the love of Christ in our hearts? Have we opened them to that love till it has become a flood too strong for their poor limits, and must force our lives hither and thither at its will, to find outlets?

If so, the measure of sunshine and shadow in our days will be simply in the shining or the veiling of His face; nothing on earth will make up for the slightest dimming of that light; nothing will really matter that leaves it untouched.

And therefore the new cry must arise, "Whither thou goest I will go." In the old days it was enough to say, "Come with me, Lord; leave me not, neither forsake me"; but to have His presence as a mere accompaniment of our lives will not satisfy us now. We must go His way with Him; it is the only path worth treading, when once our hearts have come under His irresistible sway.

And going with Him does not simply mean a fresh stage of obedience; it means a yielding up of our spirits to catch His spirit—a yielding up of our hearts to glow with His triumphs and joys, and to ache with whatever pains Him, to enter eagerly into fellowship with any phase of His life that He may in His love ask us to share.

And as we follow, our love will "abound in knowledge and in all perception" (Phil. i. 9, Alford's

translation). It will become impossible that He should tarry behind unnoticed, as in Jerusalem of old; our hearts will grow too sensitive to lose sight of Him unconsciously.

“Whither Thou goest I will go.” The external features of the path will matter little. It may be a life of plodding labour, or frittered away in ceaseless home claims, with all powers and talents seemingly buried, or worn down with ill-health, or broken by wave after wave of trouble; but it will be a life satisfied, rounded, hushed into absolute content, if it has reached this simple point, “To live is Christ.”

Turn now to Ittai's story; there is an element of fresh beauty here—the beauty of a soul kindled by the honour of standing by the king in his rejection. He comes before us as a picture of

The Life of Loyalty.

It is only in stormy times like his that this spirit can be developed. The loyalty called forth by a popular monarchy is but superficial; if we wish to see it on its ideal form we go to the days when it involved dishonour and contempt. We feel as we read the story of Charles the First, for instance, that the strength of his cause lay mainly in his instinct of chivalry, roused by the loss of his rightful place.

And our King stands uncrowned now, despised and rejected in His own world, and to us, for a little while, comes the chance of standing there by His side. “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.” “The world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not.”

Is it true? Is our loyalty distinct enough to make "the world" uncomfortable, so far as we cross its path? Or is our witness to Christ of such a negative kind as never to cause a misgiving as to what we may say? Are we fearless as He was fearless in rebuking sin; uncompromising as He was uncompromising, in asserting God's claims? Have we even come so far as to be able to speak of Him by name to our acquaintances and relations! Confessing *Christ* is something more definite than confessing to being religious.

Kedron, the brook which Ittai chose to cross with his king, signifies "obscurity"; and this points to the form that the offence of the Cross takes most commonly now. In this nineteenth century, Christ is not so much hated as ignored. Blessed with His own blessing, in the path when loyalty brings into actual persecution and loss; but for most of us there is no such honour. A few slights and sneers are all that it will probably involve: "a narrow-minded fool" is the worst epithet likely to be flung.

Be our fellowship in His rejection what it may, we will welcome it, rejoicing if we are even "counted worthy to suffer shame for His Name"; "esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt"; "going forth unto Him without the camp."

To some it may not be so much a departing from the camp of the openly hostile and indifferent. Their life may be cast among half-hearted, inconsistent servants of the King; but none the less would loyalty involve "bearing His reproach."

Oh, for an enthusiasm for Christ that will not endure to be popular when He is unpopular; that will be fired rather than quenched when His claims are unrecognised and His word is slighted; that will thrill us with joy if He allows us to share in any faint measure in His dishonour and loneliness; that will set every pulse throbbing with exultation as we "go forth unto Him!"

Come now to the last of these three burning lives—a spirit aglow with the passionate longing to *give*. In Mary of Bethany, with her broken box of ointment, we see shadowed forth—

The Life of Surrender.

One fancies that she went into the house of Simon meaning to loosen the stopper, and empty forth all that would pour naturally; but that when, face to face with the Master, she found the flow checked, the impulse to shatter the vessel and give all that *could* be given, came, and was obeyed.

So, in any case, it is with us. The lesson of giving, like all other lessons, is best learnt in His Presence. It is as we look into His Face that we grow dissatisfied with offering as we thought to offer, and rejoice in a breaking of will and spirit that sets free all restraint in the surrender.

It may be in some outward act of obedience costing dear, that the breaking will begin; but it will be best perfected, at any rate, by accepting, instantly and wholly, the hourly disappointments, losses, jars, and burdens of common experience, till a practical readiness to be offered is developed.

“ Measure thy life by loss, and not by gain,
Not by the wine drunk, but by the wine poured
forth;
For love’s strength standeth in love’s sacrifice,
And he who suffers most has most to give.”

Let our one aim in the matter be to find what still remains kept back; let our ideal of life be no longer a fair unbroken whole but a handful of shattered, empty fragments from which all that could be given has been lavished upon Christ. Is He not worthy?

Have we learnt so to give? Have we learnt to *give* at all? It can hardly be called “giving” when God must plead and wait, and at last must loosen forcibly our clinging grasp from the treasure. Have we even learnt the preliminary lesson of an instant *blindfold* “Yes, Lord,” when the Spirit points out a fresh act of sacrifice?

It is only as we go on in a life of surrender that the blessed joy of pouring forth upon Him our costly things dawns on us. The giving sets free, as has been well said, a spring of conscious love, and the love, in its turn, inspires to fresh giving; and though the pain involved is still pain, such a strange sweetness becomes interwoven with it that we wonder whether heaven can be perfect without the possibility of suffering loss for Him.

“To what purpose is this waste?” Oh, that the lives of His people called forth more often that accusation! There is small fear of it while the giving is weighed and measured carefully, seldom reaching

(even in such elementary matters as time and money) to more than a yielding of that which will never be missed. When shall we let the world see, not merely in outward symbol, Sunday by Sunday, but in literal daily practice, that it is a broken, poured-out life, wherein "by faith, with thanksgiving," we are partakers?

We have seen something of the possibilities that lie before us; something of the transfiguration that may come into our days if the glory of the Lord has risen upon us, kindling at last these slow, dull hearts.

To some of us they are no mere possibilities, thank God, but in some measure realities; though we need continually the breath of the Spirit and the fuel of fresh surrender, that the command may be fulfilled—"The fire shall be ever burning upon the altar; it shall never go out."

To others the glimpse of a life that has found its centre in Christ comes as the Father's answer to a hunger and thirst that have been deepening for long; their souls have been following hard after Him already, and they have only to open them to the Comforter who reveals Him.

But some of us feel perhaps that all is misty and vague, and that some very definite change is needed, if it is to grow from dreamy sentiment into sober and literal fact.

Shall we turn to one more story that seems to picture this condition and the way of escape?

Come in thought to the Sea of Galilee and stand with St. Peter in the stern of his boat. He is in no dreamland: his surroundings—slippery planks, creaking oars, showers of spray—are tangible enough; but he is straining his eyes on a spot where a dim and beautiful vision dawns out of the twilight. Is it real, or is it a phantom? It is contrary to all experience, but the Form and Voice draw out his heart irresistibly, and he cries, "Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come unto Thee on the water."

You can get so far as an echo of that cry, can you not? "Lord, if it be Thou"—this dim vision is really some fresh revelation of Thyself, unknown to me as yet—"bid me come unto Thee." And back across all the storm, His voice will ring, "Come."

"And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water to go to Jesus."

He stepped out, that is, into a path of uncertainties. So long as he stayed in the ship, he had solid planks under his feet; more than that, he could steer his own way. But as he swung himself overboard one uncertain foothold could only be left for another as uncertain. Each step took him further from the place where he could walk by sight, and committed him more helplessly to a walk by faith.

Is it not, perhaps, a consciousness of something of the kind involved in the Master's word, "Come," that makes you hesitate, though your heart begins to cry out for Him and will not be silenced?

The old life has been a hard "toiling in rowing,"

but you knew what you were about, and could after a fashion hold the helm: but this life of uncertainties, can it be ventured upon? If only you could foresee and measure the future of a life of absolute surrender and faith, you could brace yourself to it; but to yield yourself blindly to an unknown, untried issue, this is another matter. It is a binding the sacrifice to the horns of the altar, not knowing where or when the knife may strike.

But this stepping out at all risks, with the element of uncertainty contained in it, is just where the truth of our surrender is tested, and therefore it must be faced thoroughly. So long as we reserve to ourselves the power of withdrawing to the old life if an emergency arises, there is no real progress possible. Do not, therefore, make the effort in a tentative spirit, feeling for a footing on the water before you loosen your grasp on the boat's side; you will never find the surface grow firm under you till you *let go*. "When Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water to go to Jesus" Leave hold of the old life of self-will and self-dependence, heedless of consequences: drop down on the wave below as an irrevocable act, leaving no other resource than the one simple aim "to go to Jesus," "to win Christ," chance what may. The responsibility lies with Him who has said "Come"; we need a little more *recklessness* in our faith and obedience.

We must not stay to trace the story in detail--the failure and the rescue, and the return to the ship. But let us notice this one point: that to all the dis-

inciples came finally that immediate personal Presence of Christ, which Peter had recognized afar off, and gone forth to welcome at all hazards. To him too, therefore, the Lord would have come in time, if he had waited in the boat; but he would have missed one of the greatest experiences of his life.

And to us also in the end, the King in His beauty will be revealed; but shall it be only at the last, when He comes to our ship to bid the storm cease and to bring us into the desired haven? Shall it be only when the chance of going to Him on the water is over for ever? In all the stories at which we have glanced we see the same lesson. An hour of delay on Ruth's part, and Naomi would have gone on her journey, leaving her to return to the old life. A few weeks of hesitation, and Ittai would have seen David welcomed back by his people: the honour of holding by him in his banishment would have been missed for ever. Six days more, and Mary would have beheld the Son of Man betrayed and slain, with the sense that her opportunity for ministry had slid into the irretrievable past.

So now, for each of us, a few years (far less than that, it may be) will see the last chance over—the last chance of following Him in His lonely path, of standing by Him in His rejection, of pouring all that we hold precious at His feet. They lie before us now, the few remaining possibilities, counted out already in His mind and heart for us. And He stands there, watching sadly as one by one we let them slip.

It is not lightly, on a mere strip of the emotional part of our being, that He would have us commit

ourselves to this life of devotedness; He will not take advantage of any surface impulse; He will challenge us, as Ruth and Ittai were challenged, asking "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Tenderly He will look into our faces as He waits for the answer—an answer to be given with our *wills*, in all self-distrust and brokenness of spirit, but quietly and fearlessly in His strength. "We are able." Shall He wait in vain?

* * * * *

"Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee."

"What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord; for Whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ"



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