

## **In Use, In Health, In The Lord**

A Sermon by Rev. Grant H. Odhner

"...and after the fire a still small voice" I Kings 19:11-12.

What did the still small voice say to Elijah? Perhaps a few of you, who are very familiar with the story, or who have a very good memory, can answer this question. But I suspect that most of you cannot. There is a reason for this: the voice did not say anything that could match the drama of the build-up that preceded.

First the hushed voice repeated what the Lord had just said to Elijah before the cataclysmic events: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Then He said something very anticlimactic. He said something which seems an insufficient response to the intense concerns that had driven Elijah into the wilderness, and which had been consuming him for over forty days. He said, in sum:

"Go, return,... anoint Hazael king of Syria..." "Anoint Jehu king of Israel. And Elisha the son of Shaphat... you shall anoint as prophet in your place ...Whoever escapes the sword of Hazael, Jehu will kill; whoever escapes the sword of Jehu, Elisha will kill. Yet I have reserved seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him" I Kings 19:15-18.

Yes, the last part of this response does answer Elijah's feeling that He alone is left, that he is the last of the Lord's defenders. The Lord assures him that, in fact, there are 7000 others. But this is almost an afterthought! His first and main message is "Go, return, anoint..." In effect He says, "Return to your work!" The still small voice of the Lord directs him undramatically to his job, in all its ordinariness. And yet the Lord was "in" this quiet voice as He had not been in the dramatic things that came before.

The three forces that Elijah experienced from the cave all stand for the Lord's working in our lives to make us new people. But they stand for the Lord's working when there is as yet resistance from the natural part of us.

The "great and strong wind" that "tore into the mountain and broke the rocks in pieces" stands for the power of truth working to break up a false mind-set. "Wind" in the Word stands for the flow of thoughts—for reasoning. This mental "wind" can be good or bad, but here it pictures the kind of thinking that can lay bare our selfish delusions. The "mountain" into which the wind "tore" is the mountain of self-love, and its "rocks" are the mental blocks that our selfishness sets up. Honest, true thinking has the power to "break these in pieces." This kind of thinking is the first step in our spiritual liberation. But when our life is resisting the truth, it can be quite painful and violent. Next came the "earthquake." Earthquakes in the Word stand for spiritual change, for mental reorganization. True thinking is followed by life change. It brings changes in how we see, and it brings changes in how we feel and behave. This life change can be full of struggle, as we fluctuate between our old life and old way of seeing things, and our new life.

Finally a fire swept over the mountain. "Fire" stands for heavenly love. But a burning, purging fire stands for judgment, the judgment that takes place in the mind as heavenly loves drive away lesser loves, selfish loves.

It was the Lord who causes all three of these things: the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. They came as He "passed by" the mouth of Elijah's cave. And yet, we read, "the Lord was not in the wind," "...the Lord was not in the earthquake," "...the Lord was not in the fire." Now what could this mean? The Lord was clearly there, yet not there. The meaning seems to be that while the Lord is present in the true thinking that exposes our evils, while He is present in the mental changes that are brought about in our lives, while He is present in the love that drives out selfishness, yet He is not perceived by us as long as there is struggle going on. In other words, it's not in our spiritual struggles that we experience the chief gifts that He wishes to give us: peace, protection from evil, happy feelings of being connected with other people and being useful. When do we experience these? Mostly in the ordinary realm of our daily work. The Lord was not perceived to be in the three impressive experiences that Elijah had. The "still small voice" that he heard afterwards bore the Lord's presence, in part, because it directed him back to his life-work.

Think of it. In which aspect of our life does the Lord touch us most fully? People over the ages have thought that the Lord's greatest presence and blessing is to be found in moments of prayer, religious devotion, spiritual experience. It may seem to "fly in the face" of this common belief to say that the Lord's greatest presence is to be found in working. Yet this is what the angels told Swedenborg. Heaven's blessing—which is the Lord's presence felt by angels--comes chiefly in their "uses."

Angels define "use" as "do[ing] the work of one's function faithfully, sincerely, and diligently" (*Conjugal Love* 16.3). Again, when we look at our life, on what single aspect does our greatest happiness depend? On our recreational activities? On our devotions? On our occasional opportunities to bestow a kindness or do a good deed? Doesn't it depend more on our daily activities--on carrying out the primary responsibilities that make our life? It is the "uses" of angels that affect them with the greatest sense of fulfillment, purpose, joy in being alive.

Let's look more closely at "use." What does being useful do for us? What is its psychological and spiritual effect on us? Returning to our angel teacher, he says:

"The love of use and the resulting devotion to use holds the mind together, lest it flow away and wander about and draw in all the lusts with their allurements which flow in from the body and the world through the senses. [When lusts flow in] the truths of religion and the truths of morality with their goods are scattered to all the winds. But devoting the mind to use, retains these truths, and binds them together, and disposes the mind into a form that is capable of deriving wisdom from them. And then it banishes the mockeries and stage plays, both false and empty, from the sides [of the mind]." (*Conjugal Love* 16:3)

When we love being useful, and are working at it, our mind is "held Together;" we have a mental focus that keeps us from the distracting itch of lusts and cravings. Use holds our mind in a "moral state." Also, when we're involved in our own work, what we know is then miraculously at our disposal. More than at other times, we are able to utilize the information that we have--including truths from the Word. And our mind is disposed by use to gain wisdom from truths.

On the other hand, when we are lacking the love of use, or when we are idle too long, our mind wanders. We become very vulnerable to selfish lusts and fantasies. These things are called "mockeries" and "stage plays." Like entertainments they are initially engaging and promise us pleasure. But, in truth, they are false and empty lies. They bring a spectacle of delight to the imagination, but are not in fact real. And what happens when we indulge them? Our lusts soon turn to shame, self-loathing and contempt. Being actively in our uses saves us from that.

To sum up so far: we are at our best when involved in useful activities. Our mind is then most "together" and sharp. Use also gives us mental protection. False and empty allurements are pushed to the sides of our minds. And the love of use and its discipline eventually banish them even further.

Another thing that our uses do for us is to enable us to love our neighbor. It may seem that we can love our neighbor simply through nurturing friendly and positive thoughts toward others, and other direct efforts. Yet our real love for our neighbor can only grow and be sustained through our living a useful life. We are taught: "Only those who perceive delight in works [of usefulness] can be held in spiritual love (which is love for our neighbor)" (*Apocalypse Explained* 831:5). The discipline of working gives our minds an increasing capacity to function unselfishly, and therefore to love unselfishly! We cannot really love others unless we are in a love of use, and from this in an active life.

This is why we are taught that one of the causes of coldness in marriage (i.e. one of the causes of an absence of spiritual love) is the "lack of determination to any study or business." Let me read from this passage. (It reinforces much of what we've been saying.) A human being was created for use, because use is the containant of good and truth...." "While a person is in some study and business, ...his mind is given limits and is circumscribed as by a circle. Within this 'circle' the mind is brought into order (coordinated) step by step into a form truly human. From this as from a house he sees the various lusts as outside himself, and from the sanity of reason within banishes them and consequently [banishes] also the beastly

insanities of scortatory lust.... The contrary is the case with those who give themselves up to laziness and idleness. Their mind is unrestrained and unbounded, and the person then admits into his whole [mind] all manner of empty and frivolous things which flow in from the world and the body and carry him along into a love of them. That marriage love also is then cast into exile is evident. For from laziness and idleness the mind becomes stupid and the body dull, and the whole person becomes insensitive to every vital love--especially to marriage love, from which the activities and cheerful energies of life flow as from a fountain (*Conjugal Love* 249)."

Use orders our minds and makes us sensitive to every vital love. This passage refers to the "sanity of reason" which lies within a use oriented mind. We read elsewhere that "a human being is not sane unless use is his affection or occupation" (D Lov XV). Only when we are inwardly in a love of being useful are we sane. This passage goes on to point out that people in the world who don't love being useful appear sane--and are kept somewhat sane--by being involved in outer jobs, where they must get along with others and accomplish tasks in order to maintain or build their position in society. They are really insane on the inside. This can be seen only when they are alone and fully left to act out their own thoughts and desires. It especially appears after death when they become completely free to express who they are. And then, we read, many who had appeared good on earth.... think, speak, and act as insanely as crazy people in the world.... And, what is more, they love this state of their spirit;... they would rather think insanely (Ibid).

Interestingly, even evil people in the other life must work. They wouldn't choose to work, but otherwise they'd get no food, clothing, bed, or sexual delights (Ibid.; *Apocalypse Revealed* 153). There are a number of reasons for this. First, it's the only way they can receive any life! You see, in the spiritual world outer realities must reflect inner realities. And the truth is evil spirits need the Lord's life daily, each instant. Their innermost life as human beings (which lies far beyond their conscious control) is sustained by the Lord. And their outer, conscious life consists in the abuse of the Lord's life (His love and wisdom). This spiritual fact requires that evil spirits work for food and other necessities, because they "correspond" to the Lord's life on which they depend.

A second reason why evil spirits must work is that work enables them to enjoy the kind of life they love. The Lord does permit them to act evilly against each other. Hell would be no life for them if this weren't allowed. But what if there were no limits to their insane cruelty and violence? There could be absolutely no society in which everyone there could find a life. Being compelled to work mercifully helps to curb their insanities toward one another. It helps keep a basic order which even evil requires. Even the enjoyments of insanity depend on sanity! And sanity depends on being engaged in uses. The uses they perform are lowly ones, yet the Lord gives them work out of pure mercy. Every human being inclines toward insanity. We tend this way because we tend toward selfishness. In fact the Writings invite us to see that:

Even though a person has been regenerated, he is still nothing but evil and falsity.... No one has any good or any truth at all unless it derives from the Lord.... A man, a spirit too, and even an angel, if left in the smallest degree to himself, of himself rushes headlong towards hell. Angels acknowledge this... [and] perceive [it] clearly. (*Arcana Coelestia* 868)

What aspect of our life keeps us from being "left to ourself" more than our daily work? Returning to our story. The aloneness that Elijah felt in his state of temptation came in part from the fact that in temptation one is left to one's self, one is immersed in one's "proprium." To be sure, the issues involved in temptation-states are not resolved by plunging ourselves in our jobs, running into mindless business. On the other hand, they are not usually resolved by removing ourselves from our uses and responsibilities, except perhaps for a time. The still small voice of providence always tells us: "Go, return to your tasks." For in uses lie all protection, sanity, and ultimately peace and happiness.

So we can thank the Lord for uses! They bring us outside of ourselves, they make us a part of other's lives, they join people together! Uses bring out the best in us, they enable us to experience larger feelings and larger thoughts--feelings and thoughts that we could not experience "left to ourselves." And where do these larger feelings and thoughts come from? ... What it comes down to, really, is that uses draw us into the Lord!

Amen.

*Lessons: I Kings 19:1-19a; Luke 12:35-37,41-46; Conjugal Love 5.3-4*