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"LORD, INCREASE OUR FAITH."

– *MAY 3. – Luke 17:5-19. –*

OUR Lord's teachings were so contrary to the spirit of this world and so adverse to its policy that his disciples felt that to adopt his methods and principles and discard their own really involved a revolution of their former ideas. And in yielding themselves, as true disciples, they felt the need of a stronger, firmer faith than they had yet been called upon to exercise. They were quite persuaded from the purity and nobility of his character, and from his miracles and his teachings, that he was indeed a teacher sent from God; yet remembering the requirement of discipleship, – "Whoso forsaketh not all that he hath [all his own ideas and will and possessions and earthly prospects], he cannot be my disciple," – they felt that to continue in this attitude of acceptable discipleship would require a growing faith which would rise to every emergency of his requirements. Hence their request, "Lord, increase our faith."

And they were quite right in their reasoning; for the Lord also clearly shows that the true disciples make progress in the school of Christ toward the full overcoming of the spirit of the world. And this progress can be achieved by faith only – by such full, implicit confidence in his teaching and training as will keep them continually as earnest, diligent pupils under his guidance and instruction. "This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." (1 John 5:4.) This, by the way, is very suggestive of what it signifies to be an "overcomer," to whom pertain all the exceeding great and precious promises of the gospel of Christ. It is simply this – that day by day we attentively heed and patiently carry out the instructions of our infallible Teacher and Guide in full, unquestioning faith in his wisdom and love; no matter how heavy will be the daily cross or how severe the discipline. It is indeed a tedious, life-long process, but the end will be glorious; and even the daily discipline, patiently and meekly borne, will bring the present rewards of conscious progress in the great work of overcoming and of a nearer

approach to the goal of a ripened Christian character. All of this is implied in the beautiful words, so expressive of the faith and fervent devotion of true discipleship, –

"Nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee,
E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me."

We observe that the Lord made no direct answer to this request of his disciples, but that he dwelt upon the power and desirability of faith. He showed that even a weak, but genuine, faith could so lay hold upon the power of God as to instantly root up and replant a tree, and on another occasion he said it could remove mountains into the midst of the sea. Is the suggestion preposterous? No, not to faith; for, bear in mind, faith is not imagination, nor self-will, nor ignorance, but it is a reasonable thing founded upon good and substantial evidence: so that our Lord's teaching here implied what on another occasion he clearly stated; *viz.*, that the request be made according to the will of God. (John 15:7.) Thus, for instance, if the least disciple were assured, on good evidence, that the removal of such a tree or mountain would be a part of the divine will, and that it was his duty to do the commanding, he should have equally strong faith in the results. Thus it was when the Lord caused the barren fig tree to wither. This, observe, was not to satisfy mere idle curiosity, but like all of his miracles, which God wrought by him (Acts 2:22), it was for a definite and wise purpose, to teach an important lesson, and also to convince his disciples of his divine recognition and authority.

But since there is no basis of evidence for faith that the will of God is to remove literal trees or mountains in answer to any idle or self-willed or ignorant commands of men to do so, a genuine faith in his willingness to do it now is an impossibility. But regarding the tree and mountains as symbols of difficulties and obstructions in our individual Christian course, or in the general course of God's work, we know that "miracles" are wrought for those who exercise faith; and they going forward in the strength of the Lord, are thus permitted to overcome difficulties and to work righteousness otherwise impossible.

While the Lord made no direct answer to this request for an increase of faith, his whole subsequent course with the disciples was a fulfilment of it. And so it will be with us if in a similarly true spirit of discipleship we pray, "Lord, increase our faith." The increase of faith will come, not by a miraculous infusion, but in the natural process of the Lord's leading and training. In the school of experience, in following his leading and in the blessed results of each [R1967 : page 87] step of the way, faith develops and grows.

Verses 7-10 show that it is in the Lord's service we are to look for the rewards of faith, the special manifestations of divine favor, in the removal of obstacles and difficulties found to be in the way of our progress in his service by cultivating Christian character in ourselves and others, and in ministering generally to the furtherance of the divine plans. We may not expect these rewards of divine favor except as we prosecute the service. And when they are received we are not to regard them as evidences that we have done any more than it was our duty to do. As servants of God we owe him the full measure of our ability; hence we may not feel that we have merited or earned the great blessings of heavenly inheritance and joint-heirship with Christ. We have merely done our duty; but God, with exceeding riches of grace has prepared, for those who lovingly serve him, rewards far beyond what they could have asked or hoped for. We can do no works of supererogation; even at our best our service is marred by many imperfections, and could never find acceptance with God except as supplemented by the perfect and finished work of Christ.

Verses 11-16 show how the rewards of faith, which are of God's free grace and by no means earned by our faith, should be gratefully received. The samples given illustrate the fact that the rewards of faith are not always gratefully received. Here were ten lepers cleansed, and only one returned to give thanks and worship. So also of the many who receive justification by faith, the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God through Christ, how few return to present themselves living sacrifices, thank-offerings, to God, their reasonable service!
