1 Kings - Commentaries by Hamilton Smith

Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord, Horeb: the Mount of God

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Arrived at Horeb, the Mount of God, the prophet seeks a hiding place in a mountain cave. Again the word of the Lord comes to him with the searching question, " What doest thou here, Elijah?" The prophet had fled from the place of public testimony and active service—fled at the threat of a woman, fled for his life. He had left the path of service with its suffering, opposition, and persecution, and sought a place of safety amidst wilderness solitudes and mountain caves. Now conscience must be probed and account rendered to the Lord for his actions. One has well said, " At Horeb, the Mount of God, all things are naked and open; and Elijah has to do with God, and with God alone."

How hard it is to continue in the path of service when all apparently ends in failure. When there are no immediate results from our labors, when ministry is neglected, the servant slighted and even opposed, then it is we are ready to flee from our brethren, give up active service, and seek rest under some juniper tree, or retirement in some lonely hiding-place. But the Lord loves us too well to let us rest in quiet places of our own choosing. He raises the question in our conscience, " What doest thou here?"

No such question was raised in the solitudes of Cherith, or in the home at Zarephath. The prophet was led to the lonely brook and the widow's home at the word of the Lord; he had fled to the cave at Horeb at the threat of a woman.

Elijah gives a threefold reason for fleeing to the cave. First, he says, " I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts." He implies that his zeal for the Lord was all in vain, and hence he had given up all public testimony. Occupation with our own zeal will ever lead to disappointment and discontent with the danger of giving up the path of service.

Then he complains of the people of God. They have forsaken God's covenants, thrown down His altar, and slain His prophets. This implies that the hopeless condition of the people of God made it useless to continue laboring in their midst.

Lastly, he says, " I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away." The prophet pleads that he is left alone and the very people before whom he had given such a mighty testimony had turned against him. Hence he had turned his back on them and sought rest and shelter in the lonely cave.

The Lord's question brings to light the true condition of the prophet's soul, but the prophet has yet to learn the real motive for his flight. It was not at all because his zeal had failed to effect any change; nor was it because of the terrible condition of God's people, nor yet because they sought his life.

Never was zeal like the zeal of the Lord. He could say, " The zeal of Thine house hath eaten Me up," and yet He had to say, " I have labored in vain, I have spent My strength for naught and in vain." Never, too, was the condition of Israel more terrible than when the Lord labored in their midst. Again, how truly the Lord could say in the day of His humiliation, " They seek My life to take it away." But in spite of His zeal and His labor being in vain, in spite of the condition of the people, and though again and again they sought to take His life, yet He never for an instant swerved from the path of perfect obedience to the Father. He never sought the safe retreat of some lonely cave. He held on His perfect way in the path of obedience to the Father, and unselfish service to men. Do we wish to know the secret of that lovely life? We learn it when we hear Him say, " I have set the Lord always before me: because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved " (Psa. 16:8). Moreover He looked not at the rough ways He had to tread, but at the glorious end of the journey. " My flesh also shall rest in hope... Thou wilt show Me the path of life; in Thy presence is fullness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."

Elijah had fled, therefore, just because he had failed to keep the Lord always before him; and he looked at the roughness of the way rather than to the glorious end to which it was leading. The failure of his devoted life to effect any change, the evil condition of the people, and the persecution to which he was subjected, would never have moved him from the path of service had he kept the Lord before him. And what matter the roughness of the journey if it ends in being rapt to heaven in a chariot of glory!

So the Lord again speaks to Elijah, " Go forth, and stand upon the Mount before the Lord." These words disclose the secret of his failure. Elijah may give many plausible reasons for fleeing to the cave, but the true reason is that he had failed to keep the Lord before him. The secret of the bold witness before Ahab, his power to raise the widow's son, the power to bring down fire from heaven and command the rain, was simply that he moved and acted in faith before the living God. The secret of his flight, on the other hand, was that he acted in fear before a dying woman. When addressing the apostate king he can say, " The Lord before whom I stand "; when he contemplates the wicked queen it is rather, Jezebel before whom I flee.

Elijah has to learn another lesson if he is to be consciously brought into the presence of the Lord. He had seen the fire descend on Carmel, he had seen the heavens " black with clouds and wind " at the coming of the rain, and Elijah had connected the presence of the Lord with these terrifying manifestations of nature. He had thought that, as a result of these mighty displays of the power of God, the whole nation would turn to God in deep repentance, and for the moment, indeed, they did fall upon their faces and own, " The Lord, He is the God."

But no real revival had taken place. Elijah has to learn that wind and earthquake and fire may indeed be God's servants to awaken men, but unless the " still small voice " is heard, no man is really won for God. The thunder of Sinai must be followed by the still small voice of grace, if the heart of man is to be reached and won. God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the still small voice.

" And it was so when Elijah heard the still small voice he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entering of the cave." Elijah is in the presence of the Lord, with the immediate result " he wrapped his face in his mantle." Away from the Lord he talks about himself, in the presence of the Lord he hides himself. But there is still pride, bitterness, and anger in his heart, so again the Lord searches him

with the question, " What doest thou here, Elijah?" God will have everything laid bare in His presence. Elijah again unburdens his spirit. All that he says is true as to fact, but the spirit in which it is said is wholly wrong. It is easy to discern the wounded pride, the embittered spirit, that lurk behind his words and lead the prophet to speak well of himself and nothing but evil of God's people.

The prophet, having repeated his complaint and shown what is in his heart, has to hear God's solemn judgment.

First the Lord says, " Go, return on thy way." The prophet must retrace his steps. Then he is to appoint other instruments to carry on the work of the Lord. Had Elijah complained of the evil of the people of God? Now it shall be his sorrowful mission to appoint Hazael king over Syria—an instrument to chastise the people of God. Had Elijah fled from before the threat of the wicked Jezebel? Then he must appoint Jehu to be king over Israel—the instrument to execute judgment upon Jezebel. Had Elijah spoken well of himself, and thought that he only remained? Then he must appoint Elisha to be prophet in his room. Had the prophet, in his complaint, so forgotten God, and all that God was doing in Israel, that he thought he alone was left and that he was the only man by whom God could work? Then he has to learn that God had seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Elijah had indeed been very jealous for God, but he had not been able to discover God's seven thousand hidden ones. He could see the evil of the mass, he could see what God was doing in judgment, but he was unable to discern what God was doing in grace.

In the presence of this solemn message the prophet is reduced to silence. He no longer has a word to say for himself. On Carmel he had said before the king and all Israel, " I, even I only, remain a prophet of the Lord "; on Mount Horeb he had twice said in the presence of the Lord, " I, even I only, am left." But at last he has to learn the wholesome lesson that he is only one amongst seven thousand.

Finally we may notice another touching feature in this incident, and that is the considerateness of God's dealings, even at the moment of rebuke.

Another has said, " God acted towards Elijah as towards a beloved and faithful servant, even at the moment in which He made him sensible of his failure in the energy of faith; for He did not make others aware of it, although He has communicated it to us for our instruction."

Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord, Jezebel: the Flight Into the Wilderness

Elijah had witnessed the good confession before 1-,the wicked king, the false prophets and the idolatrous nation; now he is called to face the opposition of a very different character, that of the wicked Jezebel. The king was selfish and indolent, seeking only the gratification of his lusts and pleasures and quite indifferent to religion. Jezebel, on the contrary, was a woman of intense energy, a religious fanatic, pursuing idolatry with untiring zeal, protecting the priests of Baal, and persecuting the servants of the Lord. In order to attain her religious ends she sought to wield the secular and regal power of her weak husband.

For this reason Jezebel is used by the Spirit of God as the impersonation of a corrupt religious system, energized by Satan, pursuing its way with intense and persistent zeal, always persecuting or endeavoring to seduce the servants of God, and seeking to wield the secular power for its own ends. And just as Jezebel sought to gratify the whims and lusts of Ahab in order to bring him completely under her power, so the papal system, for which Jezebel stands, has sought throughout the centuries to gratify the lusts of kings and statesmen, as well as the mass of men, pandering to their avarice, vanity, and pride, in order to bring both States and individuals under its power. Just as the alliance of Ahab with this wicked woman wrought such trouble in Israel, so, too, the union of Church and State has wrought ruin in that which professes to be the Church of God on earth today (Rev. 2:20-23).

It was the persecuting zeal of this terrible woman, that Elijah had now to meet. His courage failed before the threat of her vengeance, and he fled for his life. Passing through the land of Judah he came to Beersheba, in the extreme south, on the edge of the wilderness. Hitherto he had moved at the word of the Lord, as indeed he could say on Mount Carmel, " I have done all these things at Thy word." On this journey, however, he was moved by no directing word from the Lord, but rather by a threatening word from a woman. For the moment Elijah had allowed the wicked and powerful Jezebel to come between himself and God. Thus it comes to pass that the man who had stood for God before the king, the false prophet and all Israel, now flees before the threat of a woman. Truly James may say he was a man of like passions with ourselves. In all this Elijah is not thinking of God, or the people of God, but simply of himself. God had led Elijah into the place of public testimony, but for the moment his faith quailed before the opposition that the place entailed. He abandons the path of faith and walks by sight. We read, " When he saw that, he arose, and went for his life." Hitherto Elijah had been sustained in the great dramas in which he had taken part, by faith's clear vision of the living God, but under this fresh trial his failing faith loses sight of the living God and he sees only a violent woman. In the presence of her murderous threat, the God that had led and preserved him, the meal that never wasted, the oil that never failed, the power of God that had raised the dead, that brought down the fire from heaven, and that sent the rain, entirely pass from his mind. All is in a moment forgotten, and the prophet can only see an enraged woman and the immediate prospect of a violent death. " And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life." Peter in his day, " when he saw the wind boisterous, was afraid," and began to sink. Walking by sight the greatest of the apostles sinks, and the greatest of prophets flees. Looking at things seen, the man of God is weaker than the man of the world. Only as we walk by faith that sees Him that is invisible, shall we endure amidst the increasing difficulties and the terrifying circumstances of the day in which we live.

" He went for his life." It was not for his God, or for the people of God, or for the testimony of God-but for his life he went. Having only himself in view he fled as far as possible from the place of testimony. He leaves the land of promise, turns his back on the people of God, and flees to Beersheba.

Alas! in the presence of a trial, how quickly we, too, can forget all that the Lord has been for us in the past. The way He has led us, the grace that has preserved us, the heart that has loved us, the hand that has held us, the word that has directed us, all are forgotten in the presence of a trial that is so very real to sight and sense. We see the trial, we lose sight of God. Instead of standing before the living God we flee before some passing trial. We seek to escape the trial, rather than seek the grace of God to sustain in the trial, and to learn God's mind through it.

Arrived at Beersheba, Elijah left his servant and went a day's journey into the wilderness. In this solitary place he betakes himself to prayer. But how different this prayer from his former requests. Before, he had prayed for the glory of God and the blessing of the nation; now " he

requested for himself." And what a request! He cries out, " It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." He has only himself before his eyes. His flight from Jezebel, and his prayer in the wilderness, are full of self. It is " his life " for which he fled, it is " himself " for whom he prays.

All this speaks of the intense despondency of the prophet. He had seen the magnificent display of the power of Jehovah on Mount Carmel, he had seen the people with their faces bowed to the earth owning " the Lord, He is the God." He had executed judgment on the prophets of Baal, he had seen the coming of the rain in answer to his prayer, and doubtless he had expected a great revival of the worship of Jehovah and blessing to Israel, through his ministry. Apparently it had all come to nothing. Elijah was not prepared for this. He had thought that he was better than his fathers, and that under his powerful ministry there would be a true and widespread turning to the Lord, but such was not the case. The years of famine, the destruction of the prophets of Baal, the rain from heaven, all appear to be in vain; so much in vain, indeed, that Elijah—the man that has stood for God—has to flee for his life. Poor Elijah, he could face the king, the prophets of Baal, and all Israel, but he was not prepared to face the failure of his mission. His supreme effort to recall the people to God had been in vain. There was nothing further to be done, his life was a failure. The happiest thing, therefore, would be to die. Thus might he find some rest from fruitless toil and hopeless conflict.

How good to turn from the servant to the perfect Master, and to see His infinite perfection shining out in the day of His rejection. After all His miracles of grace, His words of love, His acts of power, He is despised and rejected, called a gluttonous man and a winebibber, and counsel taken to kill Him. In that moment of utter rejection and the apparent failure of all His ministry, He turns to the Father and can say, " I thank thee, O Father... even so, Father: for so it seemed good in Thy sight."

Elijah did not die, and never has died. God had another plan for His beloved servant. It was no part of that plan to let His servant pass from this world a disappointed man, under a cloud of depression, dying in some lonely desert. His passage to heaven shall be very different. God's chariot is waiting God's due time to carry him to heaven with glory and honor. In the meantime he is the object of God's tender care. He giveth his beloved sleep; angels shall wait upon him; food shall be provided for him, and his thirst shall be quenched.

In the day of faith, the ravens can feed him, and the widow sustain him; in the day of his depression angels wait upon him and God Himself shall feed him. What a God we have to care for us. " His compassions fail not." " Though He cause grief, yet will He have compassion according to the multitude of His mercies " (Lam. 3:22,32). And this was Elijah's experience; awakened by the angel " he looked and behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head." Moreover, Jehovah of Elijah's day is Jesus of the gospel day, and in like circumstances the wandering disciples may turn aside to fish all night and catch nothing, only to find in the morning the Lord of glory waiting on the needs of His failing servants with the fire of coals, and fish laid thereon, and bread, and a loving invitation to " come and dine."

Thus, too, it is with ourselves. Our faith may grow dim; we may be downcast by reason of the apparent failure of all our service, and in our moments of depression and disappointment we may lose heart and think bitter thoughts, pray unadvisedly, and even murmur at our hard lot, yet God's tender care never ceases; His mercies never fail. Well may we sing:

Having refreshed His servant with sleep and food, the Lord gives him fresh directions. He learns that he is on a journey, but, says the Lord, " the journey is too great for thee." What a journey was Elijah's through this world. Cherith, Zarephath, Carmel, Horeb, mark the stages of his journey, and the chariot of fire is ready to end it in power and glory, but every stage was " too great " for Elijah. The power displayed, the courage demanded, the faith required, the opposition to be encountered, the privations to be endured—all were too great for a man of like passions with ourselves. If for one moment Elijah loses sight of the living God; if he fails to walk in daily dependence upon God, immediately he will find that he is no better than his fathers and that the journey is " too great " for him.

It is good for us, as Christians, when we see that our rest is not here. We, too, are on a journey that ends in glory, but a journey in which there are trials to meet, difficulties to overcome, testimony to be borne, and opposition to be faced. For ourselves, also, we may say the journey is " too great " and we are too small for the journey.

But if the journey was too great for Elijah, it was not too great for Elijah's God. In tender love God provides for the need of His servant; and " in the strength of that meat "—the meat that God had provided—he went on his journey of forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God.

With God all things are possible. As we view the greatness of the journey and our own littleness, we may well cry out, " Who is sufficient for these things?" But at once the answer comes, " My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." And so, if all the grace and power of the risen Christ are at our disposal we may well press on " STRONG IN THE GRACE THAT IS IN CHRIST JESUS " (2 Tim. 2:1).

Elisha: The Man of God, Call of Elisha, The

Elisha is first brought to our notice in the Lord's charge to Elijah, in the day of the prophet's despondency. Disappointed at the failure of his mission, embittered against the professing people of God, and occupied with himself, Elijah had, with a wounded spirit, spoken well of himself and nothing but evil of God's people. He imagined that he alone was standing for God, and that the entire nation was against him, seeking his life to take it away.

Elijah has to learn that the Lord has other instruments to carry out His government; other servants to maintain a witness for Himself; and, amongst the people of God, seven thousand that have not bowed the knee to Baal. Thus it comes to pass that Elijah has to retrace his steps from Horeb and anoint Elisha, the son of Shaphat, as prophet in his room.

How often in our own day, with its increasing corruption, we, with our limited outlook, may be led to imagine that the work of God depends upon one or two devoted and faithful servants of the Lord, and that with their removal all testimony for the Lord will cease. We have to learn that though servants pass God remains, and that God has other servants in preparation for His service, and, unknown to us, God has His hidden ones who have not bowed down to prevailing evils.

In obedience to the Lord's word, Elijah departs from Horeb to seek Elisha. The one chosen to take the place of the prophet is not found amongst the great men of the earth. God is no respecter of persons, and in choosing His servants God is not restricted to the great and noble. He may indeed employ the rich and the learned, kings and priests, as He sees fit. But at times He pours contempt on all our pride by taking up a man from the humblest walks of life to perform the highest spiritual service. He can use a little maid to bless a great man; He can take a lad from the sheepfolds to be the leader of His people Israel; He can use the betrothed of a carpenter to bring into this scene the Savior of the world; and having brought the Savior into the world, He can use some lowly fishermen to turn the world upside down. Thus it comes to pass, in the days of Elijah, He calls a simple husbandman from following the plow to be the prophet of his age.

Moreover, those that God calls to His service, are not the idle and ease-loving men of the world. Elisha is patiently pursuing his calling " plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth," when the call comes. So David, in an earlier day, was keeping the sheep when called to be the king. And the disciples of a later day were casting their nets into the sea, or mending nets, when called to follow the King of kings.

It is upon this busy man that Elijah casts his mantle, an act that may signify that Elisha is called to take the place, exhibit the character, and act in the spirit of its owner. And thus the spiritual instincts of Elisha would appear to interpret the act, for we read, " He left the oxen and ran after Elijah." If, however, there is a divinely given readiness to follow Elijah, there is a natural reluctance to leave his loved ones. So he can say, " Let, me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee." Elijah's answer throws the responsibility of responding to God's call entirely upon Elisha. Go back again," he says, " for what have I done to thee?" He will use neither force nor command. No pressure shall be put on Elisha: he is left to discern the import of Elijah's action, and he is free to " go back " to his loved ones, or go forward with the rejected and persecuted prophet.

If Elisha's actions betray some looking back to the things that are behind, they also prove him to be an overcomer that celebrates his surrender of his things by providing a feast for others. In his day and measure, as one has remarked, he sold what he had and gave to the poor. Having thus finished with his earthly calling, " he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him." The man that had hitherto patiently pursued the daily round, toiling in the field, is now to be prepared to set forth the wonders of God's grace by following Elijah as his servant and companion.

Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord, Carmel: the Coming of the Rain

Judgment prepares the way for blessing, and thus the fire from heaven is followed by the rain from heaven. The opened ear of Elijah catches " a sound of abundance of rain." A going in the tops of the trees, trouble on the waters—the low moaning of earth—told the listening ear of Elijah that at last the day was at hand when the Lord would send rain upon the earth.

If by a closer walk with God our ears were more attuned to catch His faintest whispers, and our minds were more enlightened to interpret them aright, should we not often, in the low sad moans that rise from this troubled world, hear His voice telling of coming blessing? In the sigh from some sick bed, or the wail of a bereaved one, or the cry of a disappointed heart, should we not discern the sound of coming blessing for the grief-stricken soul?

No such sounds reached the ear of King Ahab. Absorbed with his own selfish pleasures, his heart was waxed gross, and his ears dull of hearing. Only faith can read the signs of the times and enter into the secret of the Lord. When all seems dead among the people of God, when there is no apparent result from the preaching of the Gospel, when there are few conversions among sinners, and little growth among saints, it needs indeed a close walk with God to see His hand at work.

However, when God's voice is heard and His hand seen, it produces immediate results. Is the rain coming? then Ahab will go up to eat and drink, while Elijah—the man with the opened ear -will go up to the top of Carmel to pray.

For three and a half years the rain has been withheld and the famine has been sore in the land. Now the rain is coming, the famine is over. Surely Ahab will turn to God with thanksgiving. He has seen the vanity of idols, the exposure of the false prophets, the fire from heaven, and the awful judgment of the prophets of Baal. Alas, no impression is made on the king; God is not in all his thoughts. Little he cares for Jehovah or Baal, for the prophet of the living God or the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. His one thought is: " This tiresome famine is over, the rain is coming; I can now enjoy myself without hindrance." So he goes up to eat and drink, celebrating the occasion with a feast. It is ever thus with the world. God lays His hand upon men in government and, for a time, they are afflicted with war, or famine and pestilence. No sooner is relief afforded than they return with renewed zest to their feasting, drinking, and pleasure, and God is forgotten.

How different is the effect upon the man of God. He hears the sound of coming rain and he knows it is no time for feasting with the world, but for drawing apart from men—to get alone with God at the top of the hill. When the world goes up to feast it is the time for God's people to go up to prayer. Nature might say, if there is the sound of abundance of rain there is no need to pray, but for the spiritual man it is a divine summons to prayer.

For prayer to be effectual, however, there are certain conditions with which we must comply. These come before us in this great scene. First, effectual prayer demands that we withdraw from the hurry and press of this world into holy retirement with God. Like Elijah we must go up to the top of the hill. As the Lord Himself instructs us, " When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father " (Matt. 6:6). How often our prayers are unavailing for the lack of the " shut door." To be consciously in the presence of God we need to compose our spirits, call in our wandering thoughts, and shut the door on the world. Holy separation and retirement is the first great requisite for effectual prayer.

Then, again, we must take our true place in the dust before God, and this we see strikingly set forth in the prophet. Arrived at the top of the hill he goes down into the valley of humiliation. " He cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees." A few short hours before he had stood for God in the presence of the king, the false prophets and all the people of Israel, and the people had fallen upon their faces. Now, the false prophets are dead, the crowds have dispersed, and Elijah is left alone with God. At once he casts himself down upon the earth and hides his face. Before all Israel God will support and honor His servant, but, alone with God, he must learn his own nothingness in

the presence of God's greatness. Then, he was witnessing for God before sinners, commanding king, prophets and people; now he is alone waiting upon God as a suppliant, and, as such, he, too, must remember that he is but dust, entirely dependent upon the mercy of God. " Behold, now," says Abraham, " I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes " (Gen. 18:27). An old divine has said, " The lower the heart descends the higher the prayer ascends. God accepts broken expressions when they come from broken hearts."

The story discloses to us another of the secrets of effectual fervent prayer. We must not only pray but " watch and pray." As the apostle exhorts us, " Persevere in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving " (Col. 4:2). Again we read, " Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance " (Eph. 6:18). In Elijah's prayer we see this watching, for he said to his servant, " Go up now look toward the sea." And he went up and looked and said, " There is nothing." He watched, but at first he saw nothing. He heard the sound that summoned him to prayer, and he prayed, and he watched, but at first he sees nothing. How often it is thus with God's people today. They pray and watch thereunto, but for a time God sees fit to keep them waiting. God has lessons to teach us, and so for a while He may keep us waiting at His door. We watch to see God's hand at work, and lo, we see nothing. Is it not to teach us that nothing of God is seen because something of self fills our vision? We must learn our own nothingness before we see God at work. We think God will hear us because of the urgency of the case, the fervency of our prayers, the justness of our cause. But God keeps us waiting until we are conscious that, though before men we may indeed have a just cause, before God we are unworthy supplicants, having nothing to claim, but only God's grace to plead. Moreover, God will teach us that prayer is not some secret charm that we can use at any moment and forthwith obtain our requests, but that the power of prayer lies in the One to whom we pray.

But apart from cause of delay in ourselves, God has His time and His way of answering prayers. If then we pray and watch, and yet have to own with Elijah's servant, " There is nothing," what more can we do? This question receives a very definite answer from Elijah. He says, " Go again seven times." In other words, we must persevere. Not only does the apostle exhort us to pray, but to watch thereunto " with all perseverance." We cannot hurry God. We think of what is agreeable to ourselves; God thinks of what is for His glory and our profit.

In the light of this scene we may well challenge our hearts as to whether we are near enough to God to hear His summons to prayer, though all the world may be feasting? And are we prepared for the holy separation for prayer, for humiliation in prayer, and for watching thereunto with all perseverance?

These conditions complied with, may we not count upon an answer to prayer, even though to sight there is little or no sign of the coming blessing? It was thus with Elijah; his perseverance was rewarded. He knew his prayer was about to be answered, though to sight there was but " a little cloud " and that no bigger than " a man's hand." But behind the likeness of a man's hand faith could discern the hand of God. With the greatest confidence Elijah at once sends a message to Ahab saying, " Prepare thy chariot and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not." To natural sight there was no sign of rain: the sky was perfectly clear save for a little cloud no bigger than a man's hand. But faith knew that God was behind the cloud, and when God is working a little goes a long way. A handful of meal and a little oil with God, can feed a household for a full year. Five barley loaves and two small fishes with God can feed five thousand people, and a little cloud with God behind it can cover the whole heavens. So it came to pass that while Ahab was preparing his chariot " the heavens were black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain."

" And Ahab rode and went to Jezreel." But " the hand of the Lord was on Elijah." The hand

of the Lord was with the man who had been with God on the top of the hill. And when the hand of the Lord is upon a man, he will do all things rightly and at the right time. Guided by the Lord, Elijah had stood before the king to rebuke him for his idolatry, and now, still guided by the Lord, the prophet runs before the king to honor and maintain the authority of the king in the eyes of the people. Elijah is instructed to maintain what is due to God while showing the proper respect to man. In season he will manifest his fear of God, and in season he will honor the king.

Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord, Carmel: the Fire From Heaven

Obadiah having delivered his message, King Ahab went to meet the prophet and at once charges him with being the troubler of Israel. The land may be filled with idols and idol temples; idol groves and idolatrous altars, served by idolatrous priests, may stand on every side; the people may have forsaken the Lord and followed Baalim; the king may be the leader in apostasy, and his wife a heathen murderess; these accumulated evils are no trouble to the king. But is there a drought in the land, and a famine in Samaria which interferes with his pleasures and endangers his stud?—then indeed it is a grievous trouble, and the man at whose words the heavens are shut is, in the sight of the king, a troubler. In touch with the power of the living God, Elijah may raise the dead and command the rain; but does he denounce sin and warn the sinner?—then forthwith he is a troubler.

The presence of the man who lays sin upon the conscience and brings the sinner into the presence of God, is ever troublesome in this world. At the coming of Christ Himself into the world, Herod " was troubled and all Jerusalem with him." And in a still later day, Paul and his companions were looked upon as troublers, for the enraged citizens of Philippi could say, " These men... do exceedingly trouble our city."

The worldly Christian will not be viewed as a troubler, even as Obadiah, in his day, so far from being a troubler, was looked upon as an extremely useful member of society and accordingly made governor of the king's household. It is the man of God as he stands apart from the course of this world—while witnessing to its evil and warning of coming judgment—who will ever be a troubler, even though he proclaims grace and points the way of blessing.

With great boldness and plainness of speech the prophet throws the charge back upon the king, " I have not troubled Israel, but thou and thy father's house." In faithfulness he explains how they have done so, and brings home Ahab's personal sin: " Ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim."

Having charged him with his sins, he shows the king there is but one possible way to end the famine and reach the day when the Lord will send rain upon the earth. The sin that has brought the judgment must be dealt with in judgment. To this end Ahab is told to gather all Israel to Carmel, together with the prophets of Baal four hundred and fifty, and the prophets of the groves four hundred, which eat at Jezebel's table.

All that have been concerned in this great sin must be present. The leaders and the led are to gather to Carmel. No privileges that any may enjoy, no position, however exalted, they may fill, will be allowed as a plea for absence. Those who feast at the royal table, and those who minister to Baal, must be present with all the people.

Even the abandoned king realizes the desperate condition of the land, and hence, without further remonstrance, he carries out Elijah's demand. All Israel and all the idolatrous prophets are gathered to Carmel.

This great host having assembled, Elijah came forth and addresses himself " unto all the people." He makes three distinct' appeals. First he seeks to arouse the conscience of the people. He says, " How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him."

The audience in whose hearing Elijah makes this powerful appeal was composed of a degraded king, a corrupt company of prophets, and a fashionable crowd of undecided triflers. Passing by the king and prophets, Elijah speaks directly to the people. The king was the leader in apostasy, and already had been charged with his sins. The prophets of Baal were the avowed opponents of God, and were about to be exposed and judged. But the vast mass of the people were undecided, halting between two opinions. By profession they were the people of Jehovah, by practice they were the worshippers of Baal. Appealing to their conscience, he says, " How long halt ye between two opinions?"

Today we are faced with the representatives of these three classes. There are the leaders in apostasy; men who have made an outward profession of Christianity, but who deny the Lord that bought them, and have turned back to their wallowing in the mire. Then there are an increasing number in Christendom who make no profession of Christianity, who zealously propagate their false religious systems, and are the avowed enemies of God the Father and God the Son. But there is another class, the vast mass of nominal Christians who "halt between two opinions." Alas, they have no personal faith in Christ, nothing but "opinions." With them, God and His word, Christ and His cross, time and eternity, heaven and hell, are merely matters of opinion—opinions that result in no settled convictions, for in regard to these solemn realities they have "TWO opinions." They would not oppose Christ, but they will not confess Christ. They have no wish to fall out with God, but they would fain keep in with the world. They would like to escape the judgment of sin, but they are bent upon enjoying the pleasures of sin. They would like to die as saints, but they prefer to live as sinners. At times they will talk of morality, discuss social and religious problems, or join in theological controversies. But they carefully evade all personal dealing with God, decision for Christ, and confession of His Name. They halt, they hesitate, they procrastinate, they practically say, " Some day we will turn to Christ, but not yet; some day we will be saved, but not yet; some day we will face our sins, but not yet."

Let such pay heed to Elijah's conscience-reaching question, " How long?" How long will sinners leave unsettled the great question of their soul's eternal destiny? How long will they waste their lives, play with sin, neglect salvation, and trifle with God? Let such remember that God has an answer to this question as well as men, and that God's disposals are usually very different to man's proposals. The rich man of the Gospel story proposed to answer this question according to his thoughts, and God called him a fool for his pains. " How long shall I live?" said he. And for answer he promised himself " many years." But very different was God's answer, " This night thy soul shall be required of thee."

This solemn question " How long?" brooks no delay. True the grace of God is without limit, but the day of grace wears to its end. For long centuries the sunlight of grace has shone upon this guilty world; now the shadows lengthen and the night draws on. The sun of grace is setting amidst the gathering clouds of judgment. Let triflers beware lest when God says " How long?" men halt too long, only to hear at last those terrible words, " Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out My hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at naught all My counsel, and would none of My reproof; I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon Me, but I will not answer; they shall seek Me early, but they shall not find Me " (Prov. 1:24-28).

In Elijah's day men were silenced by this appeal. They " answered him not a word." Every mouth was stopped. They stood before the prophet a silent, conscience-stricken, self-condemned people.

Having convicted the people of their sin, the prophet makes his second appeal. He reminds the nation that he alone is the prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. How evil the time when there is but one true prophet to stand against four hundred and fifty false ones. There were indeed seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal, nevertheless there was only one man left to witness for the Lord. It is good to refuse to acknowledge Baal, but there is a vast difference between not bowing down in worship to Baal and standing up to witness for the Lord. Obadiah may fear the Lord greatly, but his unhallowed association has closed his mouth. We hear no word of him on Carmel. The fear of God may lead seven thousand to mourn before God in secret, but the fear of man withholds them from witnessing for God in public. In all that great company the prophet stood alone. And let us not forget that with all his holy boldness, he was a man of like passions with ourselves. The living God before whom he stood was the source of his power.

Alone though he be, Elijah does not hesitate to challenge the crowd of false prophets. He has rebuked the king; he has convicted the nation of trifling indecision; he will now expose the folly of these false prophets and the vanity of their gods. Who is the God of Israel? is the momentous question. Elijah boldly proposes that this great question shall be submitted to the trial by fire. " The God that answereth by fire, let him be God." The appeal is to God. The decision shall not rest with the solitary prophet of the Lord or the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal. It shall be no question of man's reasonings or of the opinion of one man against four hundred and fifty. God shall decide. The prophets of Baal shall prepare one altar, Elijah shall rebuild the altar of the Lord, and the God that answereth by fire shall be God.

This appeal to reason meets with the immediate and unanimous approval of Israel: " All the people answered and said, It is well spoken." The prophets of Baal are silent, but in the face of the people's approval they cannot evade the issue. They prepare their altar, dress their bullock, and call upon their god. From morning until noon they cry to Baal. It was in vain, there was no voice nor any that answered. Until mid-day Elijah is a silent witness of their futile efforts; then at length, for the first and only time, he speaks to these false prophets, and now it is only to mock them. Lashed by the scorn of Elijah they redouble their efforts. For three hours longer—from noon until the time of the evening sacrifice—they cry aloud and cut themselves with knives until the blood gushed out. Still it is all in vain, " There was neither voice nor any to answer, nor any that regarded."

The discomfiture of the false prophets being complete, Elijah makes his third appeal to the people. He has spoken to their conscience, he has appealed to their reason, now he will speak to their hearts. He gathers them around him with the gracious invitation, " Come near unto me."

In response " all the people come near unto him." In silence they watch the prophet as he repairs the altar of the Lord. Having thrown down the altar of Baal, he sets up the altar of the Lord. It is not enough to expose the false; the truth must be upheld.

To maintain the truth he builds his altar with twelve stones. In spite of the divided state of the nation, faith recognizes the unity of the twelve tribes. Every tribe must be represented in the altar of the Lord. Faith sees that the day is coming when idolatry will be judged and the nation will be one, with God in the midst. Such is the word of the Lord by Ezekiel: " Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation upon the mountains of Israel; and one King shall be king to them all: and they shall no more be two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all: neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols... but I will save them... and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people and I will be their God " (Ezek. 37:21-23).

The altar erected, the victim laid thereon, all being thrice drenched with water, and the time of the evening sacrifice being come, the prophet turns to God in prayer. In his prayer, Elijah makes nothing of himself but everything of God. He seeks no place for himself; he has no desire to exalt himself before the people; he would be known only as a servant carrying out the commands of the Lord. His one desire is that God may be glorified. To this end he would have all the people know that Jehovah is God; that Jehovah is doing " all these things "; that Jehovah is speaking to their heart to turn the people back to himself.

The prayer of Elijah receives an immediate answer: " The fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice." How wonderful is this scene. A holy God who must deal with all evil by the consuming fire of judgment, and a guilty nation steeped in the evil which the holy God must judge. Surely the fire of the Lord must fall, and equally surely, the nation must be consumed. How can they escape? How are their hearts to be turned back to the Lord? Here is an issue that no fervent prayer of a righteous man can meet. If the guilty nation is to be spared, then the altar must be built, and a sacrifice provided that will represent the guilty nation under the eye of God and on which the judgment they have merited can fall. And thus it came to pass, for we read, " The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice." The judgment falls upon the victim, the nation goes free.

"And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces, and they said, " The Lord He is the God; the Lord He is the God." In the marvelous provision of the sacrifice, the righteousness of God finds a way whereby justice is satisfied, judgment is borne, and the heart of the nation is won.

Who can fail to trace in this scene a bright foreshadowing of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, when, by the eternal Spirit, He offered Himself without spot to God? Yet, withal, it has its striking contrasts, for while on Carmel the fire of judgment consumed the burnt sacrifice, at Calvary, may we not say, the sacrifice consumed the fire of judgment. Similarly, the Jewish sacrifices were oft repeated and could never take away sins. In their case the judgment was always greater than the sacrifice, but at Calvary One is found Who, as the Sacrifice, is greater than the judgment. There the storm of judgment that was over our heads burst on His head, and was spent; the judgment He bore He exhausted. Resurrection is the everlasting proof of this. He was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification.

But what will all this avail unless by faith we see it? " When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces " and worshipped. In our case, too, faith's sight of the dead and risen Christ will bow our hearts in worship. The very sacrifice by which God has cleared His people from all judgment has so manifested His love that He has won our hearts. " The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us." Truly we may say of God's people today, He has " turned their heart back again," and, like Israel, there is nothing left for His people but to fall on their faces in adoring worship.

Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord, Obadiah: the Governor of the King's House

At last the years of famine draw to their close, and again the word of the Lord comes to Elijah saying, " Go, show thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth." In the beginning of the years of drought the Lord had said to Elijah, " Get thee hence, and hide thyself "; now the word is, " Go, show thyself." There is a time to hide ourselves and a time to show ourselves; a time to proclaim the word of the Lord from the housetops, and a time to draw " apart into a desert place and rest a while." A time to pass through the land " as unknown," and a time to mingle with the crowd as well known " (2 Cor. 6:9). Such changes are the common lot of all true servants of the Lord. The Baptist, in his day, was in the desert " as unknown " till the day of his showing to Israel " as well known "; only to withdraw again from the public gaze in the presence of One of whom he could say, " He must increase, but I must decrease." This grace, which knows when to come forward and when to withdraw, finds its most perfect expression in the Lord's own path. He can gather all the city at the door of His lodging as One that is " well known," and rising a great while before day, He can depart into a solitary place " as unknown."

But such changes in the path of the servant, if they are to meet with a ready obedience, demand low thoughts of self and great confidence in God. This high quality of faith was not wanting in Elijah. Without raising a single objection he " went to show himself unto Ahab." His secret training had fitted him for the demands of the occasion. In the eyes of the king, Elijah was an outlawed man, a troubler of Israel, and to show himself to the monarch would be simple madness in the light of human reason. Could not God bring rain upon the earth without exposing His servant to the wrath of the king? Doubtless He could, but this would by no means meet the circumstances of the case. The rain had been withheld at the word of Elijah in the presence of the king, and the coming of the rain must also depend upon the intervention of God's prophet in the presence of the king. Had the rain returned apart from the public testimony of Elijah, he would at once have been set down as a false prophet and a boaster, and still worse, the deliverance would have been attributed by the prophets of Baal to their idol.

We are not left in any doubt as to the moral condition of the king. While Elijah journeys from Zarephath at the word of the Lord and for the glory of the Lord, the king takes a journey prompted by pure selfishness and with no higher object than the preservation of his stud. For three and a half years neither rain nor dew has fallen—the famine is sore in the land—king and people are proving that it is " an evil thing and bitter " to forsake the Lord God and worship idols. But what of the king? Has this sore calamity softened his heart, and wrought repentance before the Lord? Is he journeying through his kingdom seeking to alleviate the distress of his starving people and calling upon all to cry to God? Alas! his thoughts are occupied with his horses and mules rather than his starving people; and so far from seeking God he is merely seeking grass.

A weak, self-centered, self-indulgent man, controlled by a strong-minded idolatrous woman, he has become the leader in apostasy, and the avowed enemy of the man of God. And now, unmoved by the terrible visitation of the drought and the famine, the universal misery finds him still pursuing his selfish and frivolous life, alike indifferent to the sufferings of his people, and to the claims of God. Such is the picture of human depravity presented by the king.

But at this point another and a very different character passes before us. Obadiah was one who feared the Lord greatly, and who, in times past, had wrought a very. signal service for the prophets of the Lord, and yet, strangely enough, he is the governor of the king's house. What an anomaly that one who fears the Lord greatly should be found in intimate association with the apostate king. " It was not," as one has said, " that he was betrayed at times merely, nor was it that his way was stained at times, but his whole life evinces a man of mixed principles."

Both Elijah and Obadiah were saints of God, but their meeting is marked by reserve rather than by the communion of saints. Obadiah is deferential and conciliatory, Elijah cold and distant. What fellowship can there be between God's stranger and Ahab's minister? Another has truly remarked, " We cannot serve the world, and go on in the course of it behind each other's backs, and then assume we can meet as saints and enjoy sweet communion."

Obadiah tries to escape from a mission which in his sight is fraught with danger. " What," he exclaims, " have I sinned, that I should be sent to the king?" But Elijah had said nothing about sinning. Then Obadiah pleads his good deeds. Had not Elijah heard of his kindness in times past to the prophets of the Lord? However, it was no question of bad deeds or good deeds; the source of all Obadiah's trouble was the false position he was in. He was a man of the unequal yoke.

The Spirit of God takes occasion by this scene to depict the solemn results of the unequal yoke between righteousness and unrighteousness, light and darkness, Christ and Belial, he that believeth, and an infidel (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

1. Obadiah takes his orders from the apostate king. Elijah takes his directions from the Lord and moves and acts according to the commands of the Lord. Obadiah, though indeed he may fear the Lord, is not used in the service of the Lord, and gets no directions from the Lord. Ahab is his master, Ahab he has to serve, and from Ahab he takes his directions. Thus in this time of natural calamity he fritters his time away in the trivial work of seeking grass for his master's beasts.

2. He lives at a low spiritual level. Being in the way on his master's errands, " Behold Elijah met him." In the presence of the prophet, Obadiah falls on his face addressing him as " My lord Elijah," indicating that he is conscious of the lower level on which he lives. Obadiah may dwell in the palaces of kings; Elijah in the lonely places of the earth, companion of the widow and the fatherless; nevertheless Obadiah knows full well that Elijah is the greater man. The high positions of this world may carry with them earthly honors, but cannot impart spiritual dignities. Elijah will not even recognize that Obadiah is a servant of the Lord. To him he is only a servant of the wicked king, for he says, " Go, tell thy lord, behold Elijah is here."

3. Obadiah's sad reply clearly reveals that he lives in craven fear of the king. The servant of a selfish autocrat, he shrinks from a mission which may incur his wrath and summary vengeance.

4. Not only does this unhallowed association keep Obadiah living in fear of the king, but it destroys his confidence in God. He recognizes that the Spirit of the Lord will protect Elijah from the king's vengeance, but, for himself, he has no faith to count upon the protection of God. A false position and an uneasy conscience have robbed him of all confidence in the Lord.

5. Lacking confidence in the Lord, he is not ready to be used by the Lord. He shrinks from a mission in which he can see danger and possibly death. Three times he repeats that Ahab will slay him. He seeks to be excused the mission, pleading the wickedness of the king on the one hand, and his own goodness on the other.

How different the attitude of Elijah. Walking in separation from evil, he is filled with holy boldness. Not, however, that his confidence was in himself, or his separate walk, but in the living God. He can say to Obadiah, " As the Lord of Hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto him today." How solemn, that Elijah is compelled to address a saint of God in the very terms in which he had addressed the apostate king (1 Kings 17:1; 18:15). Obadiah, standing before the king; is filled with the fear of death; Elijah, standing before the living God, is filled with calm and holy confidence. In faith in the living God he had warned the king, of the coming drought; in faith in the living God he had been sustained in secret during the years of drought; in faith in the living God he can once more face the king, saying without a trace of fear, " I will surely show myself unto him today."

Obadiah had passed through no such training. His had been the path of ease rather than the path of faith. He had moved in the crowded scenes of the city as the head official in the court of the king, and not in the solitary places of the earth as the faithful servant of the Lord. His sphere has been the king's royal palace rather than the widow's humble home.

In the eyes of the natural man, how desirable the position of Obadiah with its ease, and wealth, and exalted station, and how distressing the lowly path of Elijah with its poverty and privations. But faith esteems the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt. Elijah found greater riches amidst the poverty of the widow's home than Obadiah enjoyed amidst the splendors of the king's palace. May we not say that, at Zarephath, there were unfolded before the prophet's vision " the unsearchable riches of Christ," the meal that never wasted, the oil that never failed, and the God who raised the dead? No such blessings fell to the lot of Obadiah. Truly he escaped the reproach of Christ, but he missed the unsearchable riches of Christ. He escaped the trial of faith and lost the rewards of faith.

Of Moses, in a yet earlier day, it could be said, " By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king, for he endured, as seeing Him who is invisible." So here we may surely say of Elijah, he turned his back on the world of his day, not fearing the wrath of the king, and, with his vision of the living God, he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. All this was wanting in Obadiah. He may have feared God in secret, but he feared the king in public. He never broke with the world, and he had no vision of the living God.

Apart from the world, in holy separation to God, the prophet Elijah is in touch with heaven, and sees unfolded before his eyes the wonders of grace and the power of God. To these heavenly wonders Obadiah is a complete stranger: identified with the world and associated with the apostate king, he can only mind earthly things, and thus, while Elijah is seeking the glory of God and the blessing of Israel, Obadiah is seeking grass for horses and mules.

Having delivered Elijah's message, Obadiah drops out of the story, while Elijah passes on to fresh honors as a witness of the living God, to receive at last a passage to glory in a chariot of fire.

Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord, Zarephath: the Widow's Home

The brook had failed, but the Lord remained. His servant was not forgotten. He knew his need and had seen the drying of the brook. But no word of warning came, and no fresh direction, until the brook had dried. The love of the Lord will meet the need of His saints, but the way His wisdom takes will keep them in the path of faith.

Moreover, the plan the Lord unfolds is so remarkable, so contrary to all that the prophet could have conceived, so opposed to his religious training, his natural thoughts and spiritual instincts, that had the plan been unfolded to the prophet before the drying of the brook, possibly he would not have yielded so ready an obedience. Like the prophet of a later day, when sent to another Gentile city, he might have fled in an opposite direction. Elijah was a man of like passions with ourselves, and it may be, even as we, he needed the pressure of circumstances to make him willing to obey, and take a path so distasteful to him as a natural man.

For, strange as it may seem, the prophet is told to arise and go to Zarephath and dwell there. He is to leave the promised land and go to a city of the Gentiles, and of all cities, a city that belonged to Zidon—the home of Baal, whose worship had brought ruin on the land—the home, too, of the wicked Jezebel, who had introduced the worship of Baal and murdered the prophets of the Lord. And, stranger still, arrived in that foreign land, the great prophet was to be dependent upon a widow woman for his daily sustenance. For, said the Lord, " Behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee." Had the Lord commanded the prophet to sustain the widow woman we might think it more fitting. But no, God's plan is that the widow woman is to sustain the prophet. There were other cities and other lands that surrounded Israel far less guilty than Zidon. There were " many widows " in Israel in as sad a plight, but they will not suit God's plan. As ever, God has Christ in view. A thousand years thence, in the city of Nazareth, the Lord would require an illustration of sovereign grace, and therefore to a needy widow in the thrice guilty land of Zidon the prophet Elijah must go. God has a purpose in every detail of the path He plans for His servants, though a thousand years may pass before that purpose is disclosed.

The faith of the prophet yields unquestioning obedience to the word of the Lord. " He arose and went to Zarephath." Moved by faith, urged possibly by the untoward circumstances, he obeys the Lord and takes his solitary way to the distant city of Zidon, across -

A barren thirsty ground

With thorns and briars overspread,

Where foes and snares abound.

Arrived at the city gate the prophet is confronted by the widow, To natural sight and human reason it seems impossible that this can be the widow by whom he is to be sustained. In absolute poverty, this desolate and starving woman has reached the end of her resources. With only a handful of meal and a little oil in a cruse, she is gathering a few sticks to prepare one last meal for herself and her son, and then to wait for death to end their sufferings. With only sufficient for one more meal, how can she sustain the prophet? The widow speaks indeed of the living God, but it is Elijah's God, for she says "thy God," not " my God." She had no personal faith in the living God: her hopes were connected with the barrel of meal and the cruse of oil, and, as they are failing, there is nothing before her but the gates of death. God, however, has another way than death for the widow. His sovereign grace has purposed that life—resurrection life—shall fill her home with blessing. As for Elijah, in God's due time he shall pass into the glory, not through the gates of death but by a chariot of fire and horses of fire. Meanwhile he must dwell for a time at Zarephath. Now Zarephath signifies the place of the smelting furnace. The prophet has passed the test of the failing brook at Cherith, he must now face the furnace of trial at Zarephath. But this is God's road to Carmel. Is he to call down fire from heaven? Then indeed he must pass through the fire on earth. Is he going to stand for the living God before all Israel? Then first he must learn in secret the sustaining power of God in the furnace of trial. The failing brook at Cherith, and the refining fire at Zarephath, are steps in the journey to Carmel and the chariot of fire.

Yet how humbling to pride to be sustained by a widow woman; how withering to all self-confidence the distressing circumstances. But the desolate widow, the handful of meal, the cruse of oil, and death hovering over all, only serve to unfold the resources of the living God. And, the utter weakness and hopelessness of the circumstances being revealed, God is free to unfold the resources of grace. Elijah's request for " a little water " and " a morsel of bread " bring to light the condition of the widow woman. And truth being maintained, grace can be displayed. How rich the grace that filled the widow's home! All fear was banished, for the first words of grace were " Fear not."

Then follows the provision of grace. " The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail." Their needs are met and death is driven from the door.

Further, in this fine scene we have the teaching of grace, for not only does grace bring salvation to the needy, but it teaches us how to live. The life given by grace is a dependent life. It was not a barrel of meal or a cruse of oil that was promised. The supplies of grace are indeed unlimited, but grace gives no store in hand such as nature delights to possess. The promise was that the handful of meal should not waste nor the oil in the cruse grow less. There would be sufficient for each day but no store for the morrow. Grace teaches us to live in dependence on the Giver of the grace.

Lastly, there is the hope of grace, for grace holds out a blessed prospect. " The day," the great day, the happy day, was coming, when the Lord would send rain upon the earth. How happy the home, be it but a widow's cottage, that is fed by the provision of grace, directed by the teaching of grace, and cheered by the hope of grace.

In far greater fullness this same grace has been revealed in this the day of grace. In the widow's home we move amongst the shadows, but now we have the substance, since the One has come who is full of grace and truth. Throughout all the days of our pilgrim journey in this world of need we, too, have the barrel of meal that shall not waste, and the cruse of oil that never fails. Does not the meal -the fine flour—speak to

us of Christ, of whom it is said, " THOU REMAINEST," and " THOU ART THE SAME "? (Heb. 1:11, 12). Others may fail us, but He remains. Others may change, but He is the same. And does not the oil speak of that other Comforter—the Holy Spirit—who has come to abide with us forever? (John 14:16). Earthly streams run dry, but with the living Christ in the glory, and the indwelling Spirit on earth, the Christian possesses never-failing resources.

Moreover, the grace that has brought salvation to us, teaches us to live " soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world." Such a life can only be lived by daily dependence upon Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the grace that has brought salvation, and teaches us how to live, has set before us that blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. The appearing of grace leads on to the appearing of glory (Titus 2:11, 13). Then indeed the needs of the saints will be met, their trials forever past, and earth's famine forever ended. Well may we sing:-

He shall come down like showers

Upon the new-mown grass,

And joy, and hope, like flowers,

Spring up where He doth pass:

Before Him on the mountains,

Shall peace the herald go;

And righteousness, in fountains,

From hill to valley flow.

But further revelations of the glory of the living God await the household at Zarephath. God has other lessons for Elijah, and deeper exercises for the widow. God would reveal Himself not only as the Sustainer of life, but as the Giver of life. To be equipped for the great day of Carmel, Elijah must know God as the God of resurrection. To be established in peaceful relations with God, the widow must know God as the God of truth as well as the God of grace, and for this conscience must be awakened, her sin recalled, and her sin judged.

With these high ends in view the shadow of death is allowed to fall upon the widow's home. Her only son falls sick and dies. For a full year the widow has enjoyed in simple faith the mercies that God has provided, but at length in the presence of death her conscience is awakened and she remembers her sin, for death is the wages of sin. As long as life flows quietly and our daily needs are met, we may live with little exercise as to much that, in God's sight, calls for self-judgment. But under the exercise of some special trial, conscience becomes active, the vision is cleared, and much that may have been wrong in the past in thoughts, words, habits and ways, is seen, dealt with, and judged, in God's presence.

Elijah, too, has lessons to learn in this great trial. It becomes a fresh occasion for the exercise of his faith in the living God. Very beautifully he looks beyond the disease and the power of death, and sees in the evil that has come upon them the hand of the living God. In his view it is not disease that has killed the child, not death that has struck him down, it is God that has slain the widow's son. If it is the work of disease and death there is no hope, for they could take the child away but they cannot bring him back. But if God has slain the child, then God can recall the child to life.

The faith of Elijah keeps God between himself and the sorrowful circumstances. But Elijah recognizes that in himself he has no power. This may be signified by the act of stretching himself on the child, or, as the margin reads, he " measured " himself. He thoroughly identifies himself with the dead child; he takes his measure and realizes that, like the dead child, he has no strength. Elijah is powerless in the presence of death. But if the child is dead, God is living. If Elijah has no power, Elijah can pray. By the act of stretching he identifies himself with the powerlessness of the child; by the act of prayer he puts himself in touch with the mighty power of the living God.

The man of like passions with ourselves again draws down the power of God by prayer. " 0 Lord my God, I pray thee let this child's soul come into him again." As One with whom he is in conscious relationship, and well known and proved, he can say with great confidence, " My God." His faith recognizes that it is within the power of the living God to raise the dead child, and with yet greater faith he prays that it may come to pass. Did ever man, before or since, ask a greater request of God in language so simple and in a prayer so brief. Very evident is it that the effectual fervent prayer is neither elaborate nor lengthy.

The prayer is heard and the request is granted. God reveals Himself as the God of resurrection. Not only is God the living God; not only is He the Source of life, and the Sustainer of life; but He can impart life to the dead. He breaks the power of death and robs the grave of victory by the mighty power of resurrection.

Elijah laying no claim to the risen child delivers him back to the mother. The woman at once discerns that he is a " Man of God." We know also that Elijah was a " Man of like passions." And the man of like passions was transformed into a man of God by the fact that he was a " Man of prayer."

Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord, Cherith: the Brook That Dried Up

THE prophet has been alone with God in the secret place of prayer. Then for a brief moment he witnesses the good confession in the presence of the apostate king. The future, however, holds a far greater service for Elijah; the day will come when he will not only witness for God in the presence of the king, but he will discomfit the assembled hosts of Baal, and turn the nation of Israel to the living God. But the time is not yet ripe for Carmel. The prophet is not ready to speak, the nation not ready to hear. Israel must suffer the years of famine ere they will listen to the Word of God; Elijah must be trained in secret before he can speak for God. The prophet must take the lonely way of Cherith and dwell in

distant Zarephath before he stands on the Mount of Carmel.

The first step that leads to Carmel in the west, must be taken in another direction. " Get thee hence and turn thee eastward," is the word of the Lord. In God's due time He will bring His servant to the very spot where He is going to use him, but He will bring him there in a right condition to be used. To become a vessel fit for the Master's use, he must dwell for a time in solitary places and travel by rough ways, therein to learn his own weakness and the mighty power of God.

Every servant of God has his Cherith before he reaches his Carmel. Joseph, on the road to universal dominion, must have his Cherith. He must pass by way of the pit and the prison to reach the throne. Moses must have his Cherith at the backside of the desert before he becomes the leader of God's people through the wilderness. And was not the Lord Himself alone in the wilderness forty days tempted of Satan, and with the wild beasts, before He came forth in public ministry before men? Not indeed, as with ourselves, to discover our weakness and be stripped of our self-sufficiency, but rather to reveal His infinite perfections, and discover to us His perfect suitability for the work which none but Himself could accomplish. The testing circumstances that were used to reveal the perfections of Christ, are needed in our case to bring to light our imperfections, that all may be judged in the presence of God, and we may thus become vessels fitted for His use.

This indeed was the first lesson that Elijah had to learn at Cherith—the lesson of the empty vessel. " Get thee hence," said the Lord, " and hide thyself." The man who is going to witness for God must learn to keep himself out of sight. In order to be preserved from making something of himself before men, he must learn his own nothingness before God. Elijah must spend three and a half years in hidden seclusion with God before he spends one day in prominence before men.

But God has other lessons for Elijah. Is he to exercise faith in the living God before Israel? Then he must first learn to live by faith from day to day in secret before God. The brook and the ravens are provided by God to meet His servant's needs, but the confidence of Elijah must be in the unseen and living God, and not in things seen—in brooks and ravens. " I have commanded," said the Lord, and faith rests in the word of the Lord.

Moreover, to enjoy God's provision the prophet must be in the place of God's appointment. The word to Elijah is, " I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there." It was not left to Elijah to choose his hiding place, he must submit to God's choice. There only would he enjoy the blessings from God.

Moreover, implicit obedience to the word of the Lord is the only path of blessing. And Elijah took this path, for we read, " He went and did according to the word of the Lord." He went where the Lord told him to go, he did what the Lord told him to do. When the Lord says, " Go and do," as to the lawyer in the Gospel, unquestioning and immediate obedience is the only path of blessing.

But the brook Cherith had a yet harder and deeper lesson for the prophet—the lesson of the brook that dried up. The Lord had said, " Thou shalt drink of the brook;" in obedience to the word " he drank of the brook;" and then we read, words which at first sound so passing strange, " the brook dried up." The very brook that the Lord had provided, of which He had bid the prophet drink, runs dry. What can it mean? Has Elijah after all taken a wrong step, and is he in a false position? Impossible! God had said, " I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there." Was he doing the wrong thing? Far from it; had not God said, " Thou shalt drink of the brook "? Beyond all question he was in the right place, he was doing the right thing. He was in the place of God's appointment; he was obeying the word of the Lord—and yet the brook dried up.

How painful this experience, how mysterious this providence. To be in the place of God's appointment, to be acting in obedience to His express commands, and yet suddenly to be called to face the complete failure of the provision that God has made for the daily need. How testing for faith. Had not Elijah boldly said before the king that he stood before the living God? Now he is confronted with the drying brook to test the reality of his faith in the living God. Will his faith in the living God stand firm when earthly streams run dry? If God lives, what matter if the brook dries? God is greater than all the mercies He bestows. Mercies may be withdrawn, but God remains. The prophet must learn to trust in God rather than in the gifts that He gives. That the Giver is greater than His gifts is the deep lesson of the brook that dried up.

Is not the story of the brook that dried up told in a different setting when, at a later day, sickness and death invaded the quiet home life at Bethany?

Two sisters bereft of their only brother came face to face with the brook that dried up. But their trial turned to the " glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby." That which brings glory to the Son, carries blessing to the saints. If Lazarus was taken, Jesus the Son of God remained, taking occasion by the failure of earthly streams to reveal a fountain of love that never fails, and a source of power that has no limit So, too, in the prophet's day, the brook that dried up became the occasion of unfolding greater glories of Jehovah, and richer blessings for Elijah. It was but an incident used by God to take the prophet on his journey from Cherith—the place of the failing brook—to the home at Zarephath, there to discover the meal that never failed, the oil that did not waste, and the God that raised the dead. If God allows the brook to dry up, it is because He has some better, brighter portion for His beloved servant.

Nor it is otherwise with the people of God today. We all like to have some earthly resource to draw upon; yet how often, in the ways of a Father that knoweth we have need of these things, we have to face the brook that dries up. In different forms it crosses our path: perhaps by bereavement, or by the breakdown of health, or by the sudden failure of some source of supply, we find ourselves beside the brook that has dried up. It is well if, in such moments—rising above the ruin of our earthly hopes, the failure of human props—we can by faith in the living God accept all from Him. The very trial we shall then find to be the means God is using to unfold to us the vast resources of His heart of love, and lead our souls into deeper, richer blessing than we have ever known.

Elijah: A Prophet of the Lord, Ahab: the Message From God

It was the darkest day in Israel's history when 'Elijah—the prophet of the living God -entered upon his public ministry. The special work of the prophet is to arouse the consciences, and comfort the hearts of God's people in a day of ruin. First to awaken the failing people of God to their responsibilities by applying the word of God to their consciences, and second, to encourage the faithful by lifting their thoughts above the ruin in which they find themselves, and comforting their hearts with the glories yet to come.

It must be manifest that such ministry is eminently suited to a day of ruin. When all is in order amongst God's people there is neither need nor scope for the prophetic gift. It has been pointed out that in the day of Solomon's glory there was no occasion for the prophet. All was in order; the king administered justice from the throne; the priests and Levites waited upon their service, and the people dwelt in peace. But when, through the failure and disobedience of God's people, all has fallen into disorder, then, in the mercy of God, the prophet is brought upon the scene. The evil of God's people must call forth His judgment, for God will be true to Himself and vindicate the glory of His name. But, as another has said, " Whatever their iniquity may be, God does not smite a people who have forsaken His ways, until He has sent them a testimony. He may chastise them previously, but will not definitely execute His judgment upon them." Hence it is the very mercy of God that raises up the prophet in a day of ruin.

Nor is it otherwise in the ways of God today. In the minds of many, the prophetic gift has been limited to foretelling future events, and thus it has been concluded that the gift of prophecy has been withdrawn. It is true that the revelation of God is complete, and apart from the Word of God, none but an impostor would profess to unfold the future with a " Thus saith the Lord," but it is very far from true that the prophetic gift has ceased. It is evident from the New Testament that this gift holds a very high place in the estimation of God. In 1 Cor. 14 we read: " Follow after love and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy," for " he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation and comfort." What more important in this day of ruin, of weakness and of failure, among the people of God, than to arouse the consciences of believers to their low spiritual condition, to comfort their hearts by unfolding the coming glories, and to engage their affections with the coming One. He will be a true prophet who can thus speak " unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort."

Elijah in his day was a true prophet of the Lord. Never before had the condition of God's people sunk to such depths of degradation. Fifty-eight years had passed since the kingdom had been rent in twain upon the death of King Solomon. During this period seven kings had reigned, all, without exception, wicked men. Jeroboam had made Israel to sin with the golden calves. Nadab, his son, " did evil in the sight of the Lord and walked in the way of his father." Baasha was a murderer; Elah his son was a drunkard, Zimri was a traitor and murderer. Omri was a military adventurer who seized the throne and did worse than all that were before him. Ahab, his son, did worse than his father: he married the vile and idolatrous Jezebel and became the leader in apostasy. In his day all trace of the public worship of Jehovah vanished from the land. Idolatry was universal. The golden calves were worshipped at Bethel and Dan; the house of Baal was in Samaria; groves of Baal were on every side, and prophets of Baal publicly conducted their idolatrous rites. Apparently Baal lived and Jehovah had ceased to be.

In the midst of this scene of darkness and moral degradation, there appears upon the scene, with dramatic suddenness, a solitary but striking witness to the living God. Elijah the Tishbite publicly confronts the king with a message of coming judgment: " As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." The first words of the prophet inform the king that he has to do with the living God, and moreover he is faced by a man who has no fear of him, king though he be. Elijah is called to deliver a most obnoxious message to the most powerful man in the land. Standing consciously before the living God, he is delivered from all fear when standing before the apostate king.

Long years before Jehovah had said to Israel by the mouth of Moses, " Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside and serve other gods, and worship them, and then the Lord's wrath be kindled against you, and He shut up the heavens, that there be no rain" (Deut. 2:16,17). This solemn warning was unheeded. Idolatry had been almost continuous from the time of Moses, now at length it had become universal. God had borne long, but at last the idolatry of the land provoked " the Lord God of Israel to anger." (1 Kings 16:33), and the judgment long foretold was about to fall. There should be no " dew nor rain " but according to the word of the prophet. God will thus vindicate His word, maintain His glory, bring idolatry into contempt, and honor the man who witnesses to Him.

We may well inquire, What was the secret of Elijah's boldness in the presence of the king—the assurance with which he foretells the coming judgment, and his confident assertion that all will take place according to his word?

First, to him Jehovah was the living God. On all hands the public recognition of God had entirely ceased. So far as appearances went, there was not a soul in the land that believed in the existence of Jehovah. But in this day of universal declension, Elijah stands boldly forward as one who believed, and publicly avowed, that God lived.

Moreover, he can say of Jehovah that he is One " before whom I stand." Not only he believed in the living God, but, in all that he said and did, he was conscious of being in the presence of God. In result he is delivered from the fear of man, he is kept in perfect calm in the midst of terrible circumstances, and he is conscious of the support of God.

Furthermore, in the New Testament we learn another truth concerning Elijah. James brings the prophet forward as an illustration of the mighty things that can be accomplished by the earnest prayer of one righteous man. Prayer in private was another great secret of his power in public. He could stand before the wicked king because he had knelt before the living God. And his was no mere formal prayer that avails nothing, but an earnest prayer that availeth much. A prayer that had the glory of God in view as well as the blessing of the people, and therefore, " he prayed earnestly that it might not rain." A terrible prayer to have to put up to the living God about the people of God! And yet as Elijah surveyed the condition of the people, and could see no recognition of God throughout the breadth and length of the land, he realized it was better for them to suffer the years of drought, if this would turn them to God, than to enjoy prosperity in defiance of God and pass on to a worse judgment. Zeal for God and love for the people were behind this solemn prayer.

Moreover James reminds us that Elijah was " subject to like passions as we are." Like ourselves he was encompassed with human weaknesses and human infirmities. What a comforting lesson this fact may teach us! We too, like him, can be men of power, if we, in spite of the evil around us, walk in the consciousness that God is the living God, if we seek more constantly to move and speak and act in His presence as standing before Him, and if we are more often found before Him in earnest Spirit-led prayer.

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