1 Kings - Commentaries by Frederick George Patterson

Collected Writings, Forty Days: 4. Human Weakness and Divine Strength

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We have in this scripture an episode in the history of one of God's most remarkable servants. The place, too, where we find him had been the scene of several striking incidents, or at least that mountain range, of which this mount Horeb forms a part, in the history of Israel.

There was the scene of the burning bush, when Moses turned aside to see that great sight. There, too, Israel drank of the water from the rock at Rephidim; and discomfited Amalek and his hosts, with the edge of the sword. There Moses received the Law from Jehovah; and now we find the great prophet of the Lord fleeing in weakness to the same place, at the voice of a woman.

Elijah was a most remarkable man. He played, and will again play, a striking part in the history of Israel. He was one of those who were on the mount of transfiguration with Christ. He and Moses appeared with the Lord there. All had been, at different times and in different conditions, sustained for "forty days" without food. They, to be separate from nature and nature's support, to be with the Lord: He, to be tempted of the devil. And both of them "spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." They passed in review, and spake of things, which in their natural life here they had not known. Moses — buried long before by the Lord upon mount Nebo; and Elijah, caught up to heaven without dying at all: yet both in that interval, up to the scene of the transfiguration, do not seem to have lost intelligence as to what had passed on earth, and the interests of Christ. What Moses on Pisgah did not know; and Elijah on Horeb, or on the banks of Jordan, never heard of in their day; Moses and Elias on the "Holy Mount" conversed about familiarly to their Master — namely, "His decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." Where was Jerusalem when Moses lived on earth? In the hands of the Canaanites. He never had been there. Perhaps it had not even that name, but was the "Jebus" of the Jebusites. Had God yet told man He would give His Son; or that He should die? Nay: yet all was familiar to them as they discoursed with Him.

In the chapter before us we see a pitiful sight; we find this remarkable servant of God fleeing away at the word of a woman. It was a time of ruin and apostasy in Israel. Solomon's servant had rent the kingdom from Solomon's son, and God had preserved two tribes to David's house, in accordance with His promise to him. And now, under the seventh king of Israel — Ahab — when apostasy and ruin were complete, the Prophet of Fire was raised up; Elijah, the Tishbite, comes on the scene.

What do you suppose made him great? Was it the great deeds that made him famous in the eyes of men? Nay, when we turn to the New Testament we find the answer, in the divine comment on these things. God takes up the spring of everything: He passes by without comment all those actions that made him great in the eyes of the world. He says, "Elias was a man subject to like passion as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again and the heaven gave forth her fruit." Here was the spring of inward communion with God that He owned. It was not the great outward acts of service; it was the secret exercises of heart in dependence on God, which felt for His honor and for Israel's sin, expressed by his earnest prayers. James would say of this, "He prayed in prayer." This, beloved readers, was what made him great in the sight of the Lord.

Let us see somewhat of what this man's service was. We do not find anything of those secret exercises of soul in the seventeenth chapter of first Kings. It is the history of the care of God for His servant, whom He was training in secret for His great outward work in Israel. "And Elijah, the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, 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." How true it is that perfect exercises of soul before God, lead to perfect calmness before men! What simple power was expressed in those words: yet not a power of man, but of God, in which the complete sense of God's mind and God's power had so absorbed the prophet's thoughts that self, and all the wisdom of man, were absolutely forgotten. His inward springs of life were in communion with the Lord God of Israel; and he could stand forth at this terrible moment of apostasy, braving all the terrors of an apostate age, and speak thus.

Israel was worshiping Baal. Ahab, the son of Omri, had done evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. He had made a grove, and reared up an altar for Baal, in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. In his days Jericho, the city of the curse (Josh. 6:26), was rebuilt; and all was complete apostasy. In the face of all this, Elijah dares to stand forth for Jehovah, and speak those words to Ahab. Then he retires for fresh lessons for his own soul. The brook Cherith sustains his thirst for a time, and the ravens feed him there morning and evening. After a while the brook dries up, and God sends him to the widow of Zarephath. There he is sustained for a whole year: the widow's cruse failed not; nor did the barrel of meal waste, until the time of judgment was past, and God sent rain upon the earth.

Thus was he trained in secret, and thus did he slowly but surely advance in the school of God, until greater things still were to be shown in Israel. These we find in chapter eighteen, when the apostasy of Israel is exposed.

Picture to yourselves this scene of solemn grandeur: On the one side Baal's prophets — four hundred and fifty men; on the other side one solitary man standing for the true God of Israel. Elijah waits until all the incantations of Baal's prophets had failed to bring forth a reply. Satan had beguiled his votaries into their delusions, and then forsook them — mocking them, as it were, in their extremity. Then God's prophet raises his voice: "How long halt ye between two opinions? if Jehovah be God follow him, but if Baal follow him." He had proposed that the God who would answer by fire would prove himself to be the true God. Baal's prophets had cried aloud, and cut themselves with knives until the blood came; but Baal answered not. Elijah lifts up his dependent and prayerful voice to the Lord, and at the time of the evening sacrifice, the answer comes. The Lord sends the fire from heaven and consumes the sacrifice, the people fall on their faces when they behold, and answer, "Jehovah, he is the God; Jehovah, he is the God!" Israel confess Jehovah once more; Baal's power is destroyed (for the time). Final judgment is executed on his worshipers and three years of judgment have passed away. Again Elijah is on his knees before God. He gets him to the top of Carmel to prayer; while Ahab gets him to eat and to drink. Elijah casts himself to the earth with his face between his knees in prayer. The

answer, at first a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, comes, but soon the fruitful rains (type of the "latter rain "when Israel is restored) fall, proving the goodness of the Lord.

This was great outward service — "turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the Just," as it were; yet with all this there was much to be corrected in the heart of Elijah. His outward service of power had taken him away from his inward communion with God. So when Israel returns to his apostasy and Ahab to his sin, he finds all in failure again, and instead of standing before the Lord God of Israel he flees away from his work, which had exalted him in the eyes of men, at the threat of the wicked Jezebel.

This is what we have constantly to discover in our own history. A man is never nearer failure than when he has done well! This is to be observed much, and guarded against. We must learn, too, that if we serve outwardly before men, we must preserve the inner life of communion with God, or all will be but failure and shame.

Now, at the very moment when Elijah ought to have been most particularly at his post, and have trusted the same God that had been his strength in times gone by, in the flood of evil, he flees in cowardice from his duty; he murmurs against God, and said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers!" In his misanthropic spirit and wounded pride, he abandoned even his fellow-men — leaving his servant at Beer-sheba. And in bitterness of soul, more bitter than the juniper tree that overshadowed him, he lays him down, and requested for himself (mark, for himself) to die! Because he cannot be all he wished to be, and retain his importance in the eyes of men; because self was uppermost, even in this devoted servant's mind.

Elijah; God can do without you; but you cannot do without God! And God must teach you this, as He will teach us all!

Mark his word — "I am not better than my fathers!' Do you believe a man who says this? I do not! When a man stands up and says this, I believe he thinks that he is a great deal better than others, but that he is not appreciated as he should be! Even God does not appreciate him enough is the thought of his heart, though he might not express it in so many words.

Elijah is overpowered by the poor effort of nature in fleeing away: he sleeps under the bitter shrub; and what do we find? A loving God watching over His servant while he sleeps; preparing food for his wearied body; carrying a cruse of water to slake his thirst; and then awaking him by the angel's touch, saying, "Arise and eat!" Still filled with self, he does what he is told, and lies down again. Again, the second time, the angel of the Lord came and touched him, saying tenderly, "Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee." Surely it was! though it was but "a day's journey" (compare verse 4), taken without dependence on God!

Was there ever a moment he deserved this tender care less than now? and yet it was now God Himself directly — not even by a raven, or by a widow's cruse — who now cared for him. This is touchingly lovely. Have I, have you, my reader, if you are His servant, ever experienced this? Have you found that at moments when you only deserved to be cast out, as man would do; or even your brethren might do; then God's care, God's ministry both to soul and body were the more conspicuous? Blessed, ever blessed God! He alone is worthy.

But God had his soul in view, and He was about to convince him of his sin, of his human weakness and frailty; but before He does this, He will convince him of His own unchanging love.

God never gives a man up! Let him be a successful man, and he will command the respect of others: others will crowd after him. The moment he fails — even in measure, his fellows will give him up; they will search and find, if possible, ten thousand things against him that never would have been questioned before. Not so God. He will rebuke, and chastise, and train His servants, and use them too; but He never gives them up. Aye, He will use them too, sooner or later, to do the very things they assayed to do in their own strength, and in which they failed. But first they must learn that power is of God, and that it only works in their weakness.

Look at this man at another day, on the mount of transfiguration with Christ, and hear the prophet Malachi as to the service he will yet accomplish before the end: "Behold I will send Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord (Mal. 4)." He will accomplish yet what he assayed to do in the day of Ahab, but which was but a type of the end!

Elijah was thus in the desert solitude in the bitterness of his soul. One day's journey had been too much for him, as taken in his own strength, and he laid himself down, and wished for death, to end his misery. He wakens to his sorrow, to find a gracious and loving God seeking to break his heart by His perfect goodness. But his heart is not yet reached. Like many, he took God's tender care as a matter of course. Alas, how many do this! How many murmur at the least sorrow or cross that comes, and never dream of counting up the ten thousand mercies of each day and hour! Alas! there are others, too, who are spoiled by blessings, or what they deem such; their hearts are taken away from God by the very blessing His hand bestows. Blessings are always a hindrance when they do not lead the heart to the Blesser Himself. How much more frequently a sorrow does this, rather than a blessing! In the sorrow the soul is softened, and turns to God. "At the second time he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb, the mount of God." At length, when these "forty days" are over, he is found in the cave lodged there. God's eye had been on him in his wanderings in the desert for those forty days, and now His eye is on him in the cave at Horeb. His object is to break that proud and petulant spirit, to destroy that self, which so hindered His servant — yea took him away from his work. He is about to send him back to other work, but He must deal with Elijah first; so He sustains him in that "forty days and forty nights" by the meat of His own providing, to bring him to His own true "end," which is "very pitiful, and of tender mercy."

Elijah had but little confidence in the virtues of other people. This is a had sign; it is a worse sign even when you find people lose confidence, too, in God about His people. It has been well said, "Confidence in the virtues of another is no slight proof of your own!" How much more when confidence in God about His own is there! Now Elijah had not a bit of confidence in Israel, and, as a consequence, he had lost confidence in God about His people too. The word of the Lord reaches him in the cave: "What doest thou here, Elijah?" There were two things in that question: first, reproof from God; and, secondly, a recall to his duties which had been forsaken. Elijah answers in what the Spirit of God calls his "intercession against Israel" (Rom. 11:2). "I have been jealous for the Lord God of Hosts." Now this is striking indeed. When he was in the flush of faith and nearness to God, at the opening of his career, he could turn to the wicked Ahab, and say, "As the Lord, God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand." But this was now forgotten. "The Lord God of sabaoth" is substituted in his mind and soul for "the Lord God of Israel." This is most instructive. "I [oh, that selfish "I"] have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down shine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

He is commanded to go forth, and to stand upon the mount before the Lord; and we find those manifestations of power, with which Elijah was so familiar, pass by him: first, the “strong wind”; then the “earthquake”; then the “fire”; but the Lord was in none of these. These manifestations were not God Himself. It was this the prophet wanted (needed) — to be brought into His presence. His conscience and God needed to be brought together.

At last a “still small voice” is heard by him; his soul is touched; God and his conscience are now face to face, and Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle. At the cave’s mouth again, with his face hidden in his robe, the voice came to him the second time: “What doest thou here, Elijah?” This question must be answered ere all is accomplished in his soul’s present lesson. He replies, as before, “I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts; because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down shine altars, and slain thy prophets [had it ever crossed his mind that he had just been throwing down altars, and slaying prophets, himself?] with the sword; and I, even I, only am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” Thus far to justify himself at the expense of others.

Now the Lord replies — taking no notice of that self-justifying spirit, but sending him back to his work again — in the words, “Go, return”; he was to anoint Hazael, and Jehu, and Elisha, the son of Shaphet, of Abel-meholah. But now come the lovely, upbraiding, instructive, corrective words of the Lord — “Yet have I reserved to myself seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.” How worthy of God is all this! First, sending him back to do further work in Israel; and then, disclosing what his heart had never discovered, the true godly ones of that day, who had refrained from evil when all others had been carried away. Yes, even those whom God owned, who had no outward appearance before others, but characterized by the “not” of that solemn day of evil; whom God noticed and valued, when Elijah knew them not.

How sweet is all this! to find that in a day of deep declension God owns and values the abstention of those who, though not outwardly witnesses for Him as Elijah was, had, in separation of soul and heart to Him, not done what others had done against His name. They had, so to say, “kept his word, and not denied his name,” and God would say of them, “I know their works,” though others know them not.

Elijah had never discovered those faithful souls; too much occupied with self and great acts of power, his heart and spirit had got away from the Lord until now. Now self was reached, and, without a rebuking word, he is sent back to his duty, and the blessed news told him that God had His remnant then, and they had loved His name, and not denied it, in a day of total apostasy and ruin: Elijah had never known of them till now.

Broken to pieces, he learned now what human weakness is, and what divine strength can accomplish working in the weakness of man. To this he yielded himself without a faltering spirit, until the day when he was rapt to heaven in the chariot of fire — a suited exit for a servant such as he. From heaven he returned to stand before the gaze of Peter, James, and John, with his Lord and Moses His servant, in the holy mount; and he will return, ere His people are restored, to “turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers; before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord (Mal. 4:5, 6).” John the Baptist came “in the spirit and power of Elias,” when the Lord first came to Israel. Israel refused her Messiah, but for faith John was he: “If ye will receive it, this is Elias which was for to come.” He was such for the faith of the few who attached themselves to Christ. But Elias himself will come, and do what he could not do before. The Lord will then “take away the names of Baalim out of Israel’s mouth, and they shall be no more remembered by their name (Hos. 2).” May we learn, then, some lessons of our own weakness, and of the strength of God, from the glance we have taken of the history of that remarkable man, and of his “forty days” journey from Beersheba to Horeb, the mount of God.

Words of Faith, 1882, pp. 269-278.

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