

ELIJAH'S RETURN

I Kings 19:9-21

Having refreshed His servant with sleep and food, the Lord said unto Elijah, "the journey is too great for thee." The courage demanded, the faith required, the opposition to be encountered and the privations to be endured were too great for a man of like passions with ourselves. If Elijah lost sight of the living God, or if he failed to walk in daily dependence upon God, he immediately discovered that the journey was "too great" for him. But, if the journey was too great for Elijah, it was not too great for God. In tender love God provided for the need of His servant. In the strength of the food that God had provided for him Elijah went on his journey of forty days and forty nights unto Horeb, the mount of God.

Perhaps no spot is more closely associated with the manifested presence of God than Mount Horeb. There the bush burned with fire but was not consumed; there the law was given to Israel; there Moses spent forty days and nights alone in communion with God.

At last Elijah was contented with the distance he had put between himself and Jezebel. He found shelter and took refuge in a mountain cave. In all probability he sat there and mused upon his troubles. Previously he had heard the kind words of an angel, but for some time he had been out of touch with the Lord. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Word of the Lord came to him with the searching and challenging question, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" The prophet had fled at the threat of a woman from the place of public testimony and active service. He had left the path of service with its opposition, persecution and suffering and sought a place of safety in wilderness solitudes and mountain caves.

The prophet had turned aside from the path of duty and the Lord knew it. God always knows where His servants are, what they are doing and what they are not doing. None can escape His omniscient gaze, for His eyes are in every place. Great stirrings were taking place in the land of Israel, and Elijah might have been very useful as a worker and instructor among the masses at such a time. But, here he is far away from the habitations of men and sheltering in the quietness of a cave. He was an absentee from an important post of duty at one of the most critical moments in his nation's history.

God's question, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" was a rebuke to him. Since we do not know which particular word the Lord accentuated, let us emphasize each one separately. "What doest thou?" Is it good or evil? for man cannot be totally inactive. "What doest thou?" Art thou employing thy time for the glory of God and the good of His people, or is it being wasted in peevish repinings? "What doest thou?" Thou who art the servant of the Most High, who hast been so highly honored, who hast received such signal proofs of God's power, couldst not thou have committed thy cause unto Him and depended on the Almighty for protection? "What doest thou here?"-- away from the land of Israel, away from the work of reformation.

Elijah gave a threefold reason for fleeing to the cave. First, he said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts." That statement implied that he considered his zeal for the Lord to have been in vain, and hence he had given up all public testimony. Second, he complained about the people of God. He said, "The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the

sword." Thus he implied that the hopeless condition of the people of God made it useless for him to continue laboring in their midst. Third, he said, "I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." Elijah declared that he was left alone and that 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. Thus the disgruntled prophet spoke well of himself and ill of God's people and virtually called upon God to judge them. It is easy to discern the wounded pride and the embittered spirit that lurked behind his words and led the prophet to speak well of himself and nothing but evil of God's people.

God spoke to Elijah, saying, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." Great manifestations of divine power followed. Elijah witnessed the very remarkable and awe-inspiring display of God's power. The mighty mass of the mountains was torn apart, and the rocks were upheaved and broken by the force of the tempestuous hurricane. Next came the earthquake, and then the mountain range was lighted up by fire from heaven, but still the Lord was not there. Finally, "a still small voice" spoke quietly and gently to his soul, calming and soothing his ruffled spirit. This voice evidenced afresh the kindness and tenderness of the Lord, who could assuage Elijah's disappointment and cheer his heart. When the soul is reassured of his Master's love, the servant is nerved to face fresh dangers and oppositions for His sake and to tackle any task He may assign him.

So far as we can gather from the inspired record, Elijah stood unmoved from the varied displays of God's power, fearless as they were to behold. But, when the still small voice sounded, he was affected immediately. The Lord addressed His servant with gentleness and tenderness to show him how compassionate and gracious God was, and his heart was touched deeply. This soft gentle voice drew Elijah to the entrance of the cave with his face wrapped in a mantle. Away from the Lord Elijah talked about himself, but in His presence he hid himself. The wrapping of his face in his mantle signified two things--his reverence for the divine majesty and a sense of his own unworthiness.

Like Elijah of old, it is possible for us to get discouraged if the work of God in our hands does not move in striking ways. Persons of energetic disposition, such as the prophet certainly was, are more likely than others to feel thus. Where there are no visible manifestations, some are prone to conclude that nothing is doing at all. This scene on Horeb certainly contains a timely message for ministers of God's Word. Many a preacher has become thoroughly discouraged, though with far less provocation than Elijah. They have been untiring in their labors, zealous for the Lord, faithful in preaching His Word; yet, there is no public response, and they conclude that it is all in vain. They need to lay hold afresh on the grand truth that the purpose of the Lord shall not fail, and that purpose includes tomorrow as well as today. God is not confined to one agent. Elijah thought that the whole work was to be accomplished through his instrumentality, but he was taught that he was only one factor among several. It is our business to do our duties where God has placed us, and somebody will do the reaping in God's own good time.

Elijah was bemoaning the failure of his efforts to glorify God and the obstinate determination of his people to continue in their apostasy. It was thus he spent his time in the cave at Horeb, brooding over his disappointment and lashing himself by reflecting upon the conduct of the people. The

only hope for people in such circumstances is to come out from their lonely haunts and become actively engaged in some useful work. This is the best cure for melancholy. To this end God replied to Elijah's complaint, "Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus." This is the course God takes when He restores the soul of one of His erring children, causing him to retrace his steps and return to the place of duty. Every false step with any of us must be retraced. The prophet said nothing in response to the solemn words of the Lord. What could he say?

Had Elijah complained of the evil of the people of God? Now it shall be his sorrowful mission to appoint Hazael king over Syria, as an instrument to chastise the people of God. Had Elijah fled because of the threat of the wicked Jezebel? Then he must appoint Jehu to be the future king over Israel, as an 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 stead. God had a long-term plan of action involving each of these three. Each had his part to play in the events that would ultimately lead to the ruin of the house of Ahab. 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 was the only man through whom God could work? Then he has to learn that God has seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Moreover, the realization that there was work to do and that he could still be of use no doubt helped Elijah to recover from his breakdown. Being given a task to do can help to steady a man's faith and deliver him from gloom.

After leaving Horeb and journeying northward to Abelmeholah with the words of the Lord ringing in his ears, an additional favor was bestowed upon Elijah, and that was that he should have almost the unique honor of ordaining his successor. How his heart must have been comforted by the divine assurance that another was appointed to carry on the mission which he had prosecuted so zealously! Hitherto there had not been anybody to help him, but in the hour of his despondency God had provided him with a suitable companion and successor. It has ever been a great consolation to godly ministers and their people to think that God will never lack instruments to conduct His work, that when they are removed others will be brought forward to carry on for the Lord.

It was a peaceful scene at Abel-meholah. The rain for which Elijah had prayed had done its work, and the land was ready for plowing. The man to whom Elijah was sent, along with eleven others, was thus engaged. Elisha was following the others. Suddenly they recognized Elijah striding across the fields. He paused as he approached in order to look around for his man, and then he went straight to Elisha. He took off his mantle and laid it on the shoulders of the young man, Elisha, while he was plowing. Nothing was said, for the act of Elijah carried its own and obvious significance. Elisha and the onlookers knew what it meant. It was a call to leave everything and follow Elijah so that he could succeed him when his work was finished. It was a call to prepare himself from then on to step into Elijah's office when God took him away, to take up where Elijah left off the struggle against the evils that threatened the nation. It was a call to follow then and to submit himself to training for the task. He must become the companion of the man whom he was to succeed in order that he might become more fitted to be his successor. So pressing and urgent was that call that it was necessary for Elisha to decide then and there.

Elisha's problem was whether he should return home to kiss his father and mother farewell. He knew that this call of God must be put before the claim of family affection, but he wondered whether he should allow human affection to have any claim at all on him now. Dare he linger on the home farm while Elijah was striding on before him in the direction of the hills? He knew that Elijah was a man without a home, without personal friend and without much time for domestic trivialities and polite talk. Did this call mean that from then on he had to become a man like Elijah and deny much of what had been most human in his nature? He felt that he was bound to ask Elijah to decide for him. So "he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee. And he said unto him, Go back again: for what have I done to thee?" It was an appeal to Elisha to be moderate and sensible and human in his judgment about what God was requiring of him at that moment in his service for God. There was no need for him to imagine that God meant for him to be so foolish as to try to deny the expression of his natural affection at that great moment in his life.