

## A SEVERE TESTING

I Kings 17:8-24

At the brook Cherith, Elijah learned some very important lessons. There God taught him that, whatever his future circumstances might be, he would enjoy the Father's protection; that, if a man is going to witness for God, he must keep himself out of sight; that, to enjoy God's provision, it was necessary for him to be in the place of His appointment; and that implicit obedience to the word of the Lord is the only pathway of blessing. To be in the place of God's appointment, to be acting in obedience to His express command, and, yet, suddenly to be called to face the complete failure of the provision that God had made for his daily need was a real test of his faith in the living God. Nevertheless, Elijah stood the test admirably.

Let us endeavor to visualize Elijah's situation and ponder the trial which confronted him. Day by day the water in the brook steadily diminished. Did his hopes do likewise? There is nothing in the Bible to indicate that they did. God keeps in perfect peace the person whose mind is stayed upon Him.

Do we trust the Lord in trying circumstances, or are we merely "fair-weather Christians"? It is probable that, if we had been there by the drying brook, our minds would have been distracted, and, instead of waiting patiently upon the Lord, we would have fretted and schemed, wondering what we had better do next.

One morning Elijah awoke to find the brook dried up altogether and his supply of sustenance cut off completely. What then should he do? Must he remain there and perish? Certainly he could not expect to live long without something to drink. Must he not take matters into his own hands and do the best he can for himself? Would it not be better to retrace his steps and risk the vengeance of Ahab than remain where he was and die of thirst? Doubtless Satan plied him with such temptations in his hour of testing.

Let it be duly noted, however, that before God's word came afresh to Elijah both his faith and his patience had been put to a severe test. In going to Cherith the prophet had acted under God's orders, so he was under the Father's special care. Could he, then, come to any real harm under such guardianship? He must, therefore, remain where he is until God directs him to leave the place. If Elijah had left the brook on his own accord, he could not have counted on the Lord being with him and providing for his wants and protecting him from his enemies. The same applies to us with equal force today. When it is clear that God has placed us where we are, there we must abide, no matter how unpleasant the conditions may be, until He directs us to move on.

Before suffering came to Elijah, God ordered him to move across the land of Israel and live for a season at Zarephath, a small city that belonged to Zidon in Phoenicia, near the home from which the wicked Jezebel had come. Zarephath appears to have gotten its name from the furnaces built there for the smelting of metals. The word means a "crucible for the melting and refining of metals."

The experience which confronted Elijah was a very trying one, for in order to reach his destination he had to make a journey of nearly a hundred miles across the blighted and famine-stricken land of Israel. The trip subjected him to danger in the midst of people to whom his name was hateful and terrible, for they identified him with their sufferings. Because Jezebel's father held sway in Zidon, Elijah must have dreaded the very thought of making Zarephath his hiding place. It was like going into a lion's den.

Equally striking is it to observe the particular person whom God selected to entertain Elijah upon his arrival in that foreign land. It was not a rich merchant or one of the

chief men of Zidon, but a poor widow who had a dependent son. God made her both willing and able to minister to the needs of the prophet. As He so often does, God made use of and placed honor upon the weak. Had God commanded the prophet to sustain the widow we might not have been surprised, but His plan was that the widow should sustain the prophet.

Man's extremity is God's opportunity. When Cherith was dried up, Zarephath was opened. How this should teach us to refrain from care about the future! "Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness" (Isaiah 41:10).

This was indeed a severe testing of Elijah. He was told to take a long journey and then to enter into an experience which was entirely opposed to his natural feelings, his religious training and his spiritual inclinations. In being made to become dependent upon a Gentile in a heathen city he was put to a severe test. He was required to leave the land of his fathers and sojourn at the headquarters of Baal worship. God's plan for the prophet demanded from him unquestioning obedience. When God calls any of His children to go to a place, they may rest assured that He has fully provided for them in His fore-determined purpose. God secretly disposed this widow to receive and sustain His servant. Not only was the faith and obedience of Elijah tested by God's call, but his humility was put to the test also. He was called to receive charity at the hands of a desolate widow. How humbling to pride to be made dependent upon one of the poorest of the poor! Since God had bidden him to go, it was right for him to comply, and, therefore, he could count upon the divine protection.

Moved by faith, and without asking a single question, the prophet obeyed the Lord and made his solitary way to the distant city. When he arrived at the gate of the city, he met a woman who was gathering sticks. Weary from his toilsome journey and thinking that perhaps she was the one to whom he had been sent, Elijah asked her to bring him a drink of water. At the request of this stranger, the woman was moved with compassion by the prophet's appeal and stopped gathering sticks for herself and started quickly to bring a drink of water. Let us learn to imitate her in this respect and always be ready to perform an act of kindness toward our fellow creatures, if at all possible.

As the woman was going for the water, the prophet called to her saying, "Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand." In response to this request, the woman revealed the desperateness of her condition. She informed the prophet that she had been reduced to the last extremity, with nothing but a painful death staring her and her son in the face. She had reached the end of her resources. With only a handful of meal in the barrel and a little olive oil in the cruse, she was gathering a few sticks to prepare one last meal for herself and her son and then to wait for death to end their sufferings. Her confidence lay in the barrel and the cruse, and beyond them she saw no hope. How prone we are to lean on something just as paltry as a barrel of meal!

Let it be noted that this woman did not fail to discharge her responsibility. Up to the very end she was industrious, making use of the means at hand. Instead of giving way to utter despair, sitting down and wringing her hands, she was busily engaged in gathering sticks for what she fully believed would be her last meal. This is not an unimportant detail, but it is one which we need to take to heart. To give way to dejection never accomplishes any good. Do your duty to the very end.

Elijah said to the woman, "Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and thy son." If the prophet had said no more than this, his words would have sounded selfish and heartless. Elijah stood before her as the representative of God, so his request really meant that she was to put God first, even in this great crisis. God must stand first with every one of us, and, where He has His rightful place in the affections and lives of His children, blessing is sure. Elijah told her that she need not hesitate to grant his request, "For

thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth." She promptly complied with the request of God's servant and gave him the best that she had. For her kindness to His prophet, God rewarded her by caring for her and her household through the period of famine. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things (temporal necessities) shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). He who puts God first will find Him with him always.

God, who sent His prophet to dwell in the house of this woman, paid well for his board by providing her family with food while her neighbors were starving and by granting her the company and instruction of His servant. Who can tell what blessing came to her from the edifying conversation of Elijah and from the efficacy of his prayers? Even though she was nameless and insignificant, God had a great work for her to do, and she did it. We are prone to be discouraged because we think that God needs capable people for His service and we consider ourselves so weak that we wonder how we can be of any use to Him. But, the miracle is that God can use the weak to minister to the strong. How happy any home, be it a widow's cottage or the house in which any of us may dwell, that is fed by the provision of grace, directed by the teaching of grace and cheered by the hope of grace!

After some time, a dark cloud gathered over the home in Zarephath where God's goodness was experienced daily, where His Word was honored and where the voice of prayer was heard regularly. The only child of the woman became ill. His sickness terminated in death, which is something that no human love or power can shut out. The loss of her child was a great shock and a heavy blow to this poor woman. It would have been so in the case of any mother, but it was especially severe on her because she had previously been reduced to widowhood, and there would now be none left to support and comfort her in her declining years. In him, all of her affections had been centered, and, with his death, all of her hopes were destroyed. She reasoned like this, the one whom I have had to live for is gone, and what is life worth to me now?

This poor distressed mother considered the death of her son as a judgment inflicted upon her. In her first outburst of grief, she revealed that she felt that it was the man of God who was responsible for bringing this judgment to her home. Naturally, Elijah's heart was touched deeply. He had learned to love the lad, and, too, the grief of the boy's mother was piteous to behold. Then, the petulant outburst of this bereaved woman in attributing her loss to the influence of the prophet cut him sorely. It grieved him to know that she thought he was responsible for her loss. However, he did not make any harsh or angry reply to her inconsiderate and unkind remark. His response in this case teaches us that, if one speaks to us unadvisedly, we are not justified in descending to his or her level.

Observe that Elijah did not autocratically lay hands upon the corpse, but courteously requested the mother to turn the body over to him. Taking the dead boy in his arms, he went up the stairway to his own room, where he placed the body of the lad on his own couch. With implicit faith and real earnestness, he appealed to God for tender mercy. He said, "Let this child's soul come into him again." His prayer proves that the soul is distinct from the body, that it does not die with the body, that it exists in a separate state after the death of the body, and that none but God can restore it to its original habitat. Elijah's prayer was heard and his request was granted. God proved Himself to be the source of life, the sustainer of life and the restorer of life.

What joy must have filled the heart of the man of God as he witnessed the miraculous answer to his intercessory prayer! What fervent ejaculations of praise must have issued from his lips unto God for this additional manifestation of His goodness and mercy in delivering him from his grief! But, it was no time for delay. Elijah very promptly took the child downstairs and presented him alive to his mother. Who can imagine her delight as she saw

her precious child restored to life again? Her prompt confession, "By this I know thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth," has a wonderful personal testimony to the reality and power of a holy life.