

THE MAN WHO NEVER DIED

"Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" II Kings 2:11.

There is something strangely fascinating about the story of this Old Testament prophet. Unlike almost every other notable character portrayed in Bible narrative, he flashes suddenly upon the scene. His origin seems studiously enveloped in the most profound and mysterious obscurity. There is not a single hint given in Scripture of the parentage of this most remarkable prophet. We know nothing more of him than that he bore the name of Elijah, the Tishbite, and was an inhabitant of Gilead.

Elijah came upon the scene of action as suddenly as a meteor blazing forth from the heavens at midnight. He came from the rural section, a place from which God brings up many champions. He came from the mountains of Gilead where he had been accustomed to the solitary life of a herdsman. He was rugged and ready for sacrifice and service.

Elijah did not have an effeminate or "kid-glove" personality. His attire was the shaggy sheepskin mantle which had been his covering day and night. His flowing locks were such they had attracted the wondering gaze of shepherds and others as he had passed with rapid pace over the hills and along the solitary footpaths. The soul of Elijah was tutored for his prophetic mission amid the rushing streams, the awful solitudes, and the rough freebooter life of the most distant territory of the sacred tribes. The external influences of his solitary life amid wild natural surroundings tended to produce hardihood, heroism, sternness, and independence.

In the remote and rugged hills of Gilead, Elijah caught the spirit of his wild and solemn surroundings. There, in the solitudes of the mountain-sides and the winding valleys swept by rushing torrents, he made acquaintance with God. His communion with the unseen but ever-present God was so real and so precious that in the breast of the uncouth villager there was kindled a love so strong that he became "very jealous for the Lord God of hosts." And so it came to pass that when God had occasion to deal in stern and startling fashion with the wayward people, He had His servant ready at hand.

Perhaps Ahab and Jezebel were sitting in their palace of ivory at Jezreel, congratulating themselves on the skill which they had shown, when, sudden and terrible as a clap of thunder from a cloudless sky, there swept before them a weird-looking man, with long, flowing hair, a mantle of sheepskin around his shoulders, and a rugged staff in his hand. Before they could ask him who he was, or why he had come thither, with awful look and uplifted hand he flung the gage of defiance at their feet, and said, "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." I Kings 17:1. Having delivered his message, he passed unchallenged and unmolested, and vanished like an apparition, leaving the king paralyzed with astonishment. Elijah must have been a man of great faith to be willing to stake his very life upon the truthfulness of what he had spoken. At any rate, this emergence marked the beginning of an heroic ministry. And it certainly teaches us that the obscure may become the heroic.

When he delivered his message with stern brevity and clearness, at the command of God he went into the wilderness and made his abode by the brook, Cherith, which was one of the little tributaries of the Jordan River. On every side the mountains shut him in. There in that solitude he was left to find tongues in trees, sermons in stones, and books in the running brooks. God had told him that if he would go there, He would sustain him by food provisionally supplied and by the water from the brook. To Elijah the brook whispered of the care of God and of the provision made by a Father's love. When he drank from this brook, he did so in the firm conviction that God was

interested in him, was watching over him, and was standing ready to supply all his needs. Daily he ate his bread and drank of the stream. Each fresh flight of the ravens from the hills filled his heart with new joy and confidence, as he realized anew how he might trust implicitly the Word of his God.

Why should Elijah be secluded at an hour so critical? God was preserving him for usefulness farther on. While there Elijah had two firm friends, one of which was a good conscience, and the other was an acquiescent will, a readiness to mingle in the open conflict or to abide in solitude just as his Master pleased.

God also put him out of the way because he had too high an opinion of himself. He felt that he was the only faithful one left. The Lord sometimes turns his servants aside in order to teach them their proper place. No one is indispensable. All should learn that God was able to manage the affairs of this world before we came upon the scene, and will be able to get along when we have passed from it. God also wanted Elijah to learn the doctrine of special providence. God cares for His people and never ignores their temporal needs. In his solitude Elijah's needs were supplied in two ways, partly by natural means and partly by supernatural ones. But God supplied all his needs. When God guides, He provides.

Again Elijah confronted Ahab and presented a challenge. It was to this effect: Let the question of worship be settled once for all. If it is better for the nation to serve Baal than God, then let them do so immediately; but that there may be no possibility of mistake, let the new worship be tested side by side with the old, "and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God." Ahab was silent, but the people cried, "It is well spoken."

Elijah bade Ahab summon all Israel, as well as the prophets of Baal, and of the Groves, to Mt. Carmel.

There is no more thrilling scene in the whole range of Bible history than that presented on the slopes of Carmel. Poets, painters, and preachers have in their several ways tried to depict that memorable scene, but the world still waits for an adequate portrayal. A sullen and angry king, surrounded by his court, and attended by 850 prophets (450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Grove) and a host of fanatical priests, looks out upon an assembled nation as they crowd the slopes of Carmel. But he is far less concerned with his courtiers, priests, and people than with that one solitary figure standing apart, uncouth in manner, and clad in peasant's garb. A crisis has arrived in the history of the nation. The prestige of the king is at stake; Baal is to be challenged; and the God of Israel is to be put to the test.

Turning to the assembled multitude, Elijah utters his magnificent challenge: "How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him. But if Baal, then follow him." The test is applied; the bullock is slain; the prophets cry to Baal "from morning until noon", from mid-day until evening, but never an answer comes. In their despair and frenzy they leap upon the altar and, "cut themselves with knives and lancets", but all is in vain: Baal has failed them.

As the evening shadows begin to fall, Elijah beckons the people to come nearer that they may see what is to happen. Single-handed he rebuilds the broken altar and slays the bullock; the wood and the altar are saturated with water until the trench is filled. Then, turning his eyes heaven-ward, he calls upon his God to vindicate His name and power. And as he prays, the fire falls and consumes, not only the bullock, but the wood and stones and dust and licks up the water in the trench. Such an answer as that left no room for two opinions, and we little wonder that all the people cried: "the Lord, He is the God; the Lord, He is the God!"

The secret of Elijah's triumph is apparent:

- (1) He gave God the first place.

"Let it be known this day that Thou art God." That was a supreme burden upon his soul. He was very jealous for God's honor. Self had no place in his witness.

- (2) He was not ashamed to acknowledge God.

"Let it be known.....that I am Thy servant." In the presence of a wicked and powerful king, as well as these hundreds of false prophets, he dared to acknowledge his faith in God.

- (3) He longed to win the people to God.

"That they may know that Thou art the Lord, and that Thou hast turned their heart back again." He was grieved to see the people being led astray, and his prayer was for their return to the old paths.

After all of the prophets of Baal were slain with the sword and Ahab had reported to Jezebel what had taken place, she sent a threatening message to Elijah. She said, "So let the gods do to me and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." Her oath showed the intensity of her rage. Her threat totally upset Elijah's sense of victory and he concluded that he had not won after all. Seized with a fear to which he had hitherto been a stranger on account of the hatred of this deceitful and wicked woman, Elijah determined to take the case into his own hands and preserve his life. Under cover of the night, he ran through the driving storm, across the hills of Samaria into the drear expanse of the Arabian desert. Up to this time Elijah had seemed to be the very incarnation of courage and energy, but he was afraid of Jezebel. Haggard, weary, and unhappy, he prayed to the Lord to take his life. He was certainly in the depths of despondency. To him the world was no longer a desirable place in which to live.

What were the causes of his discouragement?

1. Physical exhaustion.

He had done too much. His strength was overtaxed. Now that the extreme tension was relaxed, it was only natural that he should suffer keenly from the reaction.

2. Apparent failure.

God had been acknowledged with one voice and false worship had been put down. Then, in a single day, all of this bright picture was annihilated. Although he had done his best, there came to Elijah a heartbreaking sense of personal failure in his work. In his disappointment, he concluded that his work had been in vain.

3. Spiritual loneliness.

Instead of waiting for divine guidance, he had deserted his post of responsibility. He was shocked by his loneliness. He said, "Even I only, am left." No doubt he was honest, but he was mistaken.

Although Elijah requested death, he did not express the real sentiment of his heart. It was not the real Elijah speaking. He was not at himself then. This goes to show that one should never make an important decision when he has a case of blues or is down in the dumps.

How did God cure Elijah's discouragement? He put him to sleep. Then He provided food for the nourishment of his exhausted body. Then, He permitted him to express his grief. What a great relief when one is permitted to express his grief to another in whom he has confidence! God also convinced him that he had sinned. Furthermore, He told him some good news, namely, that He had 7,000 others who were faithful to Him. Finally, God sent him back to work. When you are discouraged and blue, go out and help somebody who is discouraged also, and you will discover that you have helped your own soul.

After having come to know God, having known the power of prayer, having trusted God's Word, and having obeyed God's commands through many years, the time of Elijah's promotion arrived. He ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. This was a very fitting climax to a life which opened in startling suddenness, and was marked throughout by equally startling surprises.