

ELIJAH SHOWS HIMSELF

I Kings 18:1-16

Unto a man filled with such zeal for the Lord and love for His people as was Elijah, the prolonged inactivity to which he was subjected must have proved a severe trial to the prophet. So energetic and courageous a prophet would naturally be anxious to take advantage of the distress of his countrymen. He would desire to awaken them to a sense of their grievous sins and urge them to return unto the Lord. Because God's ways are so different from man's ways, Elijah was required to remain in complete seclusion month after month. Nevertheless, God had a wise and gracious purpose in this trying discipline of His servant.

The years which Elijah spent at Zarephath were far from being wasted, for, during his stay in the widow's home, he obtained confirmation of his divine call by the remarkable seal which was there given to his ministry. Thereby, he approved himself to the conscience of his hostess. She said, "Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth."

For three years God had done nothing drastic to alter the religious and political situation in Israel. Elijah, the man prepared to meet and master the situation, had been hidden by the Lord and kept in silence and inactivity. He must have wondered why God waited so long. However, Elijah did not utter any complaints or venture out of the retirement into which God had sent him. He waited patiently for the Lord to direct him, to set him at liberty and to enlarge his sphere of usefulness. Meanwhile, by fervent intercession, he was made a great blessing unto those in the home. Even though three of the best years of his life were spent in inaction, it was enough for him to know that it was part of the divine plan. He believed that he was glorifying God, just because he was occupying his assigned and appointed place for the time, as much in that humble habitation as he did on the heights of Carmel or anywhere else.

Let us note this expression of the Holy Spirit in I Kings 18:1, "And it came to pass after many days." It is not "after three years" (as was indeed the case), but "after many days." There is here an important lesson for our hearts if we will heed it: we should live a day at a time and count our lives by days. Let us endeavor to live each day as though we knew it were our last.

The predetermined counsel of Jehovah was actualized for we read, "And it came to pass." The fulfillment of the divine purpose can neither be retarded nor forced by us. God will not be hurried by our petulance. We have to wait His appointed hour, and, when it strikes, He acts--it comes to pass just as He has foreordained.

"It came to pass after many days," that is, over a thousand since the drought had commenced, "that the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth." God had not forgotten His servant. The Lord never forgets any of His people. In the beginning of the years of drought the Lord had said to Elijah, "Get thee hence, and hide thyself"; now His word is, "Go, shew 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." Such changes are the common

lot of all true servants of the Lord. This grace, which knows when to come forward and when to withdraw, finds its most perfect expression in the life of our Lord Himself. 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. He patiently awaited the revelation of the divine will regarding his departure.

So that we may better understand the tremendous test of Elijah's courage which this command involved, let us seek to obtain some idea of what must have been the state of Ahab's mind. During the lengthy interval, how had things been going with the wicked king, his court and his subjects? Dreadful indeed must have been the state of things on earth when the heavens had been shut up and no moisture had been given for more than three years. During all that time the land had been pining under the most fearful of judgments. No dewdrops had spangled the flowers or trees with refreshing crystal jewels. The flowers had died and the trees had dried up at the roots. No rain had answered the inarticulate cry of the gasping earth. All day long, as the sun discharged waves of scorching heat, nature lay prostrate and helpless under the withering curse. "There was a sore famine in Samaria."

Elijah's long rest at Zarephath was ended by a call from God to show himself to Ahab, because rain was about to be sent upon the earth. This command had to be obeyed first.

Matters were about to be brought to an issue. God was about to display His power to the confusion of Ahab and his idolatrous prophets. However, this command, "Go, shew thyself unto Ahab," placed a great demand upon Elijah's faith. It seemed like running into a terrible danger. Elijah was not a man who would foolishly seek martyrdom, but a command from the God whom he served was enough. To hear was to obey. When God said, "Go," Elijah went. Upon doing so, he left sorrowful hearts behind him. He had been a resident in the widow's house so long that he had become a part of the household. The farewells were spoken and Elijah passed out through the gate of the city, where he had first observed the troubled woman gathering sticks. What a change had taken place in her life since then!

Could not God bring rain upon the earth without exposing His servant to the wrath of the king? Doubtless He could have done so, but that would not have met 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 fallen 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 as an answer to their supplications.

"Elijah went to show himself unto Ahab." Alone he went forth to challenge in the name of God the powers of evil that were so triumphant, so strongly entrenched in the life of Israel and so apparently unconquerable. Let us not underestimate the courage of this man as he went forth to show himself to Ahab. The king had sent his men to scour the land for Elijah. Ahab had sworn repeatedly to bring about the death of the prophet. To his way of thinking, Elijah was responsible for the extended drought and famine which had ruined his kingdom and spoiled his planned economy.

With eagerness Elijah crossed into the valleys of Samaria. There he saw a land smitten with famine. There were no green pastures, no still waters, no fruitful fields or no abundant vineyards. The sickles hung rusting on doors of granaries swept clean of every bit of grain. Yet, as he passed on through the parched fields and lanes of the country districts and through the dusty villages and small cities crowded by well-nigh famished people, with hungry and weary eyes looking for relief, he did not hear any word of repentance or of turning to God in their deepest extremity. The worship of Baal was still going on, with the priests in action and Jezebel in authority over them. Yet, the prophet was depending on God to provide the wisdom and strength which would enable him to do His will every step of the way.

Ahab was more concerned about saving his horses and mules than his starving people. He decided to search the whole land thoroughly and see if there might be some moist spot where a little grass might be found. Apparently Ahab only had one man whom he could trust on this search, for he divided the country between himself and Obadiah, the governor or chamberlain of the royal household. In pursuance of this plan the king went one way and his servant the other.

This weak, self-indulgent king, controlled by a strong-willed and idolatrous woman, had become the leader in apostasy, and the avowed enemy of the man of God. Unmoved by the terrible visitation of the drought and 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 Ahab, while he was seeking grass instead of God. What an humbling picture of God's favored people, to behold their king going forth to seek grass, if perchance he could find a little somewhere so that the lives of those beasts which remained might be preserved! What a contrast from the abundance and glory of Solomon's days! But God had been grossly dishonored and His truth had been rejected. Fountains, brooks and grass were all that occupied Ahab's thoughts; relief from the divine affliction was all he cared about. It is ever thus with the reprobate.

In the pursuit of this humiliating business Obadiah, the governor or prime minister of Ahab's house, met Elijah. We are called to witness in him another wondrous instance of God's sovereign grace. A miracle and a monument of divine mercy was Obadiah in the court of the wicked and licentious king of Israel. The Holy Spirit said, "Now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly." This word "greatly" indicates that God always notes degrees in the piety or activity of His children.

That the timid Obadiah was treated with perfect confidence by his royal master would prove that he was a faithful keeper of the charge committed to him. Both in sacred and secular history there are numerous instances of persons in authority, who had themselves refused religious obligations, but who gladly accepted and highly valued the services of dependable, godly men, when in the secret of their hearts they either feared or despised them. Thus Pharaoh prized Joseph, Saul regarded David, Nebuchadnezzar valued Daniel and Nero trusted the saints in his household.

Obadiah was an honorable and upright man. There was much in him that was excellent. When an attempt was made to destroy all of the prophets of Jehovah, and thus stamp out all divine testimony in the dominion, instead

of bowing his knee to Baal, Obadiah was instrumental in saving the lives of many of God's servants. He took a hundred of them and "hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water." While he sympathized with these hunted prophets, he failed to identify himself with them in their sufferings. There is nothing wrong in a child of God holding a position of influence, if he can do so without the sacrifice of principle. On the contrary, it may enable him to render valuable service to the cause of God.

It is noteworthy that when the prophet presented himself in the presence of this exalted government official, he did not utter any word of reproach. Obadiah trembled before him and bowed to him with Oriental reverence, saying, "Art thou that my lord Elijah?" His answer was brief and emphatic, "I am, go, tell thy lord, Behold, Elijah is here." Thus you see that the prophet's courage did not fail him. He had received orders from God to "show himself unto Ahab," so he did not make any attempt to conceal his identity when interrogated by the governor. In like manner, we should never hesitate to declare our Christian discipleship when challenged by those who meet us.

It was only natural that Obadiah should desire to be excused from so perilous an errand. He was afraid that if he told Ahab that he had met Elijah, the king might think that he had been responsible for hiding the prophet during the past three years and might kill him in anger. In any case the news that Elijah had reappeared would be unwelcome information to Ahab, and there was the possibility that he might kill Obadiah as the bearer of it. Obadiah asked Elijah wherein he had offended the Lord or His prophet that he should be asked to be the messenger of such distasteful tidings to the king, indicating that even then his own conscience was clear. He was afraid to bear the message to the king, lest Elijah might disappear in some mysterious fashion ere Ahab arrived at the spot, whereupon the king would be so furious that he would take the life of his servant. Thus Obadiah shrank from a mission in which he saw danger and possible death.

After listening in patience to all that the frightened Obadiah had to say, Elijah calmed his fears by a solemn oath, "As the Lord of hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely shew myself unto him today. So Obadiah went to meet Ahab, and told him: and Ahab went to meet Elijah." Reassured by this positive declaration of Elijah, that he would that very day meet the king, the trembling servant went to meet his master and tell him the startling news. When he had delivered Elijah's message to the king, Obadiah dropped out of the story. Soon thereafter, Elijah showed himself to Ahab, as God had commanded him to do. What a scene when the prophet of God and the champion of Baal met face to face! Smitten with powerlessness, the king could do nothing but listen to the man of God whom he had been trying for years to arrest.