

A MAN OF GOD

I Kings 17:1-7

We are in danger of regarding the worthies of former centuries in a false light. This is true especially of those whose records are found in the Bible. To the average person today, these characters seem to have walked upon heights inaccessible to us. After looking with awe at Abraham, Moses, Elijah and Paul, most of us conclude that we can never walk as they walked and serve as they served.

Fifty-eight years had passed since the kingdom had been rent in twain following the death of Solomon. During that period, seven kings had reigned over the ten tribes of Israel, and all of them without exception were wicked men. Painful indeed is it to trace their sad course and still more tragic to behold how there has been a repetition of the same in the intervening centuries. From Solomon to Ahab, Israel had been in a state of decline.

One of Ahab's many sins was his marriage with idolatrous Jezebel. The Israelites were strictly forbidden to inter-marry with the Canaanites. God had said, "Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son" (Deuteronomy 7:3). The inevitable consequences of doing so was stated in the very next verse: "For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly."

In marrying Jezebel, the princess of Tyre, Ahab had chosen a wife with a religion entirely different from his own. Perhaps Ahab expected her to give up her religion for his when she came to Israel, but instead of this Jezebel made him mix his own religion with an overwhelming proportion of hers. She brought with her from Tyre hundreds of priests of the religion of Baal, the bull-god. Even though Baal worship had already been going on in Israel for years before Jezebel appeared on the scene, she made it alarmingly popular. Her priests taught the young people to call upon the name of Baal just as their fathers had called upon the name of Jehovah. These priests acknowledged that Jehovah had demonstrated His greatness in bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt, but they boldly declared that He was just the God of their past. They taught that Baal was the god who had so much to do with their everyday lives. They proclaimed him as the god of fertility, presiding over the productive and reproductive processes of nature in their homes and in their fields. They said he was the god who filled their cradles and their sheepfolds and their cattlesheds with young. They were told that Baal could control the rain and give them good crops.

Ahab was not concerned to any great extent with this struggle since it did not make much difference to him which one of these deities was being worshipped, loved and served. Personally, he would most likely have voted for Jehovah, but it certainly would not have disturbed or hurt him had Baal won the election. When the masses were told that Baal was the one who gave them fertility, rain, crops, luxury and good times, they took it seriously. Even though they did not want to forsake the religion of Jehovah altogether, they thought it would be a good thing for them to keep on the right side of Baal.

In her determination to spread the religion of Baal throughout the land, the strong and energetic Jezebel took ruthless political action. Her method of breaking down opposition was either to murder or to force into hiding the priests of the Lord who dared to resist the change in the religion of their land. But, at first, there was not much resistance. Few seemed to care very much about the preservation either of liberty or of truth. Although their freedom was being threatened as well as their religion, most people showed no sign of any alarm. Trade was good. Money was flowing into their country from Tyre, the land of Baal. Goods were plentiful and cheap. The people thought they had economic security. There was no unemployment. What did it matter to the people if their government showed sinister tendencies toward totalitarianism? What did it matter whether or not they adhered strictly to the religious teachings and practices of their fathers? They were quite willing

to keep Ahab and Jezebel in power as long as bread and corn were plentiful and wine was flowing cheaply. Never before had the favored nation sunk so low.

But, as has often been the case, the darkest hour was followed by the dawn. In the midst of that tragic scene of darkness and moral degradation, there appeared with dramatic suddenness a solitary but powerful witness to and for the living God. This man of God was one of the most striking figures in the Old Testament. His name was Elijah, meaning, "My God is Jehovah," which was most appropriate indeed. His appearance on the scene proved that God was not willing to surrender.

God raised up a powerful witness for Himself in the person of Elijah the prophet. He brought him on the scene to arouse the slumbering consciences of the public, to rebuke evil-doers, to denounce iniquity, and to call upon the people to forsake their wicked ways and return unto the Lord. God has never left Himself without witnesses on the earth. In the darkest periods of human history He has always maintained a testimony for Himself. Neither corruption nor persecution could destroy it.

As to the history of Elijah there are no antecedents. Nothing is recorded about his ancestry, his home, his parentage, his education, his associates, his friends or his manner of life prior to his first public appearance. The people in those hills from whence he came reflected the nature of their environment. Hardened by an open-air life, dressed in a cloak of camel's hair, accustomed to spending most of his time in solitude, possessed of sinewy strength which enabled him to endure great physical strain, Elijah presented a marked contrast from those who dwelt in the lowlands, and he was distinguished especially from the pampered courtiers of the palace. Tawny from the hot suns of Palestine, his soul burning with the fire of God, Elijah is the strangest and grandest character Israel ever produced. He entered upon the stage of action fully panoplied in the colossal manhood and maturity of his being.

When the hour for the execution of his stern task had arrived, Elijah left his home in Gilead to deliver unto Ahab, God's message of judgment. As Ahab, Jezebel and the luxury-loving crowd were lounging in their comfortable palace, they were rudely startled by this rugged, courageous and earnest prophet who abruptly and boldly walked into their presence to deliver a mysterious pronouncement about a coming judgment. Conscious that God was with him, this messenger of Jehovah and herald of judgment did not flinch from such a task. For an untutored rustic of the hills to appear unannounced, unattended and uninvited before a king who defied God was sufficient to quell the bravest. This was all the more so in view of the fact that his heathen consort did not shrink from slaying any of God's servants who opposed her will. When Elijah confronted Ahab, the king was convinced that he was being faced by one who had no fear of him.

Aware of the fact that God was with him, Elijah confronted the wicked Ahab and informed the degenerate monarch that he had to do with the living God. He pronounced divine judgment on his kingdom in these words: "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." God had simply delegated to him the control of the elements of nature. He was the grandest man of the Old Testament because of his solitary and heroic stand against the iniquity of his day, the organized religion of his day and practically the whole population of the kingdom. He had God's glory at heart, and the honor of His name meant more to the prophet than anything else.

After delivering his message to the most powerful man in the land, Elijah turned away from the palace with a heavy heart and went into retirement. His appearance, garb, sincerity, earnestness, message and demeanor had thrown consternation into the gathering.

What had been the secret of Elijah's boldness and power in the presence of the king? To him, Jehovah was the living God. So far as appearances went, the public recognition of God had ceased. Not only did Elijah believe in the living God, but, in all that he said and did, he was conscious of being in the presence of God. It is not surprising, therefore, that he had been delivered from the fear of man, that he had been kept in perfect calm in the midst of terrible circumstances, and that he had been and was conscious of the support of God. God knows the type of man required for each situation in life and He seeks to match His men with the tasks that are to be done. He will not send us forth to any task without enabling us to face the challenge of our surroundings.

Ahab was apparently stunned by the boldness of the messenger and the terribleness of his message, for he did not attempt anything against Elijah at that moment although he did not have any scruples against shedding innocent blood.

Normally Palestine experienced a dry season of several months duration. Though rain did not fall then, heavy dews descended at night which greatly refreshed the vegetation. But, for neither rain nor dew to fall, and that for a period of years, was a terrible judgment indeed. And when God withholds rain, none can create it. Although Elijah was a man, God gave him the power to close heaven's windows and dry up earth's streams. Not a drop of moisture was permitted to come to the thirsty earth until the word was spoken by the prophet of God. There fell upon Israel a withering rebuke. Drought and famine overtook them when they forsook their altars to seek favor with this "god of fertility."

Soon after Elijah had announced so dramatically God's judgment on Israel, he was told to go into seclusion. "And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith." On first thoughts we wonder why God told Elijah to hide himself. We find it hard to understand this command, for from one point of view it does not seem very brave or noble conduct on Elijah's part to pronounce judgment and then flee. It looks as if he wanted to avoid the effects of the Word he proclaimed. However, when we think it over in the light of what followed, we can see a real purpose in God's call to Elijah to hide himself. As we follow him to Cherith and watch him there, we can learn some important lessons.

At Cherith, Elijah was protected with complete security from the enemies who were hunting him throughout the length and breadth of the land. By calling him to be His prophet, God had thrust Elijah out into public life and had made him a target for the intense hatred of Jezebel and Ahab and multitudes of starving people who in the wilderness of their grief would no doubt blame him for their sorry plight. Elijah's experience at Cherith lasted long enough to teach him in a most concrete way a lesson he must never forget. Whatever his future circumstances might be, he could now be assured that he would enjoy God's protection.

While at Cherith, Elijah learned the lesson of the empty vessel. The man who is going to witness for God must learn to keep himself out of sight. In order to be preserved from making something of himself before men, he must hide himself and learn his own nothingness before God. He must spend some three and a half years in seclusion with God before he spends one day in prominence before men.

Is Elijah to exercise faith in the living God before Israel? Then he must first learn to live by faith from day to day in secret before God. The brook and the ravens are provided by God to meet His servant's needs, but the confidence of Elijah must be in the unseen and living God and not in things seen, such as brooks and ravens.

Moreover, to enjoy God's provision it was necessary for Elijah to be in the place of God's appointment. The word to the prophet was, "I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there." It was not left to Elijah to choose his hiding place, but he was required to submit to God's choice. There only would he enjoy the blessings from God.

Furthermore, implicit obedience to the word of the Lord is the only path of blessing. Elijah took this path, for we read, "He went and did according to the word of the Lord." He went where the Lord told him to go and did what the Lord told him to do. When God says, "Go and do," unquestioning and immediate obedience is the only pathway of blessing.

There was yet a harder and deeper lesson for Elijah--the lesson of the brook that dried up. The Lord had said, "Thou shalt drink of the brook." In obedience to the word "he drank of the brook." Then we read words which at first sound strange, "the brook dried up." The very brook that the Lord had provided ran dry. Beyond all question he was in the right place and was doing the right thing. He was in the place of God's appointment; he was obeying the word of the Lord; and, yet, the brook dried up.

How painful this experience! How mysterious this providence! To be in the place of God's appointment, to be acting in obedience to His express commands, 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. Will his faith in God stand firm when earthly streams run dry? If God lives, what does it matter if the brook dries? God is greater than all the mercies He bestows. Mercies may be withdrawn, but God remains. The prophet must learn to trust in God rather than in the gifts which He bestows. That the Giver is greater than His gifts is the deep lesson of the brook that dried up. If God allows the brook to run dry, it is because He has some better and brighter portion for His beloved servant.

Nor is it otherwise with the people of God today. We all like to have some earthly resource to draw upon; yet, how often, in the ways of a Father that knoweth we have need of these things, we have to face the brook that dries up. In different forms it crosses our path; perhaps by bereavement, or by the breakdown of health, or by the sudden failure of some source of supply, we find ourselves beside the brook that has dried up. It is well if, in such moments, rising above the ruin of our earthly hopes or the failure of human props, we can by faith in the living God accept all from Him. The very trial we shall then find to be the means God is using to unfold to us the vast resources of His heart of love and lead our souls into deeper and richer blessings than we have ever known.

Elijah might have preferred another hiding place to Cherith, but to that brook he must go if he was to receive the needed supplies from God. As long as he tarried there, God was pledged to provide for him. How important, then, is the question, Am I in the place to which God has assigned me? If so, He will supply my every need. "Thy will be done" precedes "Give us this day our daily bread." O what comfort there is for trusting hearts in the fact that what God has promised He will certainly perform. "My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). There is no use in our asking, How? He has thousands of ways of making good His word.