

A Vital Ministry in a Day of Transition (Matthew 11:13-14)

T. Austin-Sparks:

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5).

"For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John."

"And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come" (Matt. 11:13-14).

Elijah and John the Baptist are in view in these passages of Scripture, and much for our help can be learned from their experiences.

In the first place, we must take account of their ministries. The two men are brought together in a mysterious identification by the Lord Jesus, and from various fragments it is quite clear that their ministries were one in principle and nature; that is, in a day of fairly general spiritual smallness and weakness, these two servants of God were His instrument and vessel for making a way and a place for Himself in greater fullness. They were way-makers for the Lord, pioneers and pathfinders for His larger purposes and desires. In the familiar words used by John: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). That was the key to the ministry of both Elijah and John the Baptist, the increase of the Lord amongst His people.

Both lived in a time of transition. The principle of transition is clear, firstly, in that Elijah is brought over into full view at the very end of Malachi's prophecies, at the close of the Old Testament, an end-time, a period of transition unto the Lord's coming; in that case, of course, His first coming. But I do not think that what the Lord said about Elijah, in Malachi and later, was exhausted by the first coming of the Lord; the great and terrible day of the Lord is still to come.

We will not enlarge too much on details, but be content to note that that time of transition was governed by the ministry of both these men, and was marked by the gathering out of a real people from among the professing people of the Lord. Malachi makes that perfectly clear:

"Then they that feared the Lord spake one with another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him, for them that feared the Lord and that thought upon His Name. And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of hosts, even Mine own possession, in the day that I do make" (Mal. 3:16-17). Out from the professing, religious realm there is seen in these words to be a true people for the Lord.

Undoubtedly that was the mark of John's ministry, for tradition, formalism, legalism were the dominant features of religion in his day, and it was against these that he hurled his weight to secure a people unto Christ in fullness, in utterness. He sought a transition from one spiritual state to another, and, in the light of a change of dispensation, to secure a people wholly for the Lord. That wants dwelling upon very much more fully, but I think that is enough to give us the clue to the ministry of these men and to relate them in a vital way to our own day - another end-time transition period that is surely ushering in another coming of the Lord and that also is characterized by the need for the gathering out of a real people from among those who profess to be the Lord's. We may expect that what was true in the experience of Elijah and John in their day will in principle be found in God's dealings with instruments of His choice today.

It become clear then that for such a great purpose, to make a way and to make room for the Lord, God had, and has, His instruments, known to Himself and secretly under His hand being prepared. Elijah comes on to the scene mysteriously, almost out of nowhere, after deep secret preparation and discipline. John has spent all his life in the wilderness waiting for the day of his appearing to Israel. Something has been going on in secret. God has had these men in hand in deep preparation, vessels to meet this particular need in the time of transition - transition from a state which the Lord can no longer accept as answering to His known will to a state which will satisfy Him.

He must have a vessel for such a purpose. It may be individuals, as it often is, but it has also through the ages proved to be a corporate vessel, a company of the Lord's people prepared in this way. These instruments, known and secured by God in secret, have, in a secret history with Him, been learning to know the Lord as their heavenly sustenance. Elijah, at a time when earth could not provide any sustenance, was sustained from heaven. John the Baptist, in the wilderness for many years, where he had to know the Lord in loneliness and apart from men, was having to learn the Lord as his heavenly life and his heavenly provision. Such is the

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preparation, the equipment, of any vessel to serve God in this greater purpose of His heart.