

Elijah's Dramatic Appearance

A.W. Pink:

Elijah appeared on the stage of public action during one of the darkest hours of Israel's sad history. He is introduced to us at the beginning of 1 Kings 17, and we have but to read through the previous chapters to discover what a deplorable state God's people were then in. Israel had grievously and flagrantly departed from Jehovah, and that which directly opposed Him had been publicly set up. Never before had the favoured nation sunk so low. Fifty eight years had passed since the kingdom had been rent in twain following the death of Solomon. During that brief period no less than seven kings had reigned over the ten tribes, 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 history of Christendom.

The first of those seven kings was Jeroboam. Concerning him we read that he "made two calves of gold," and said unto the people, "It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And he set the one in Bethel, and the other put he in Dan. And this thing became a sin: for the people went to worship before the one, even unto Dan. And he made an house of high places, and made priests of the lowest of the people, which were not of the sons of Levi. And Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month, on the fifteenth day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah, and he offered upon the altar. So did he in Bethel, sacrificing unto the calves that he had made: and he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places which he had made . . ." (1 Kings 12:28-32). Let it be duly and carefully noted that the apostasy began with the corrupting of the priesthood, by installing into the Divine service men who were never called and equipped by God!

Of the next king, Nadab, it is said, "And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin," (1 Kings 15:26). He was succeeded on the throne by the very man who murdered him, Baasha, (1 Kings 15:27). Next came Elah, a drunkard, who in turn was a murderer, (1 Kings 16:8, 9). His successor, Zimri, was guilty of "treason," (1 Kings 16:20). He was followed by a military adventurer of the name of Omri, and of him we are told, "but Omri wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in his sin wherewith he made Israel to sin, to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger with their vanities," (1 Kings 16:25, 26). The evil cycle was completed by Omri's son, for he was even more vile than those who had preceded him. "And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him. And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him," (1 Kings 16:30, 31). This marriage of Ahab to a heathen princess was, as might fully be expected (for we cannot trample God's Law beneath our feet with impunity), fraught with the most frightful consequences. In a short time all trace of the pure worship of Jehovah vanished from the land and gross idolatry became rampant. The golden calves were worshipped at Dan and Bethel, a temple had been erected to Baal in Samaria, the "groves" of Baal appeared on every side, and the priests of Baal took full charge of the religious life of Israel.

It was openly declared that Baal lived and that Jehovah ceased to be. What a shocking state of things had come to pass is clear from, "And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him," (1 Kings 16:33). Defiance of the Lord God and blatant wickedness had now reached their culminating point. This is made still further evident by, "in his days did Hiel the Bethelite build Jericho," (v. 34). Awful effrontery was this, for of old it had been recorded, "Joshua adjured them at that time, saying, Cursed be the man before the Lord, that riseth up and buildeth this city Jericho: he shall lay the foundation thereof in his firstborn and in his youngest son shall be set up the gates of it," (Josh. 6:26). The rebuilding of the accursed Jericho was open defiance of God.

Now it was in the midst of this spiritual darkness and degradation that there appeared on the stage of public action, with dramatic suddenness, a solitary but striking witness to and for the living God. An eminent commentator began his remarks upon 1 Kings 17 by saying, "The most illustrious prophet Elijah was raised up in the reign of the most wicked of the kings of Israel." That is a terse but accurate summing up of the situation in Israel at that time: not only so, but it supplies the key to all that follows. It is truly saddening to contemplate the awful conditions which then prevailed. Every light had been extinguished, every voice of Divine testimony was hushed. Spiritual death was spread over everything, and it looked as though Satan had indeed obtained mastery of the situation.

"And Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead, said unto Ahab, 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," (1 Kings 17:1). God, with a high hand, now raised up a powerful witness for Himself. Elijah is here brought to our notice in a most abrupt manner. Nothing is recorded of his parentage or previous manner of life. We do not even know to which tribe he belonged, though the fact that he was "of the inhabitants of Gilead" makes it likely that he pertained either to Gad or Manasseh, for Gilead was divided between them. "Gilead lay east of the Jordan: it was wild and rugged; its hills were covered with shaggy forests; its awful solitudes were only broken by the dash of mountain streams; its valleys were the haunt of fierce wild beasts."

As we have pointed out above, Elijah is introduced to us in the Divine narrative in a strange manner, without anything being told us of his ancestry or early life. We believe there is a typical reason why the spirit made no reference to Elijah's origin. Like Melchizedek, the beginning and close of his history is shrouded in sacred mystery. As the absence of any mention of Melchizedek's birth and death was Divinely designed to foreshadow the eternal Priesthood and Kingship of Christ, so the fact that we know nothing of Elijah's father and mother, and the further fact that he was supernaturally translated from this world without passing through the portals of death, mark him as the typical forerunner of the everlasting Prophet. Thus the omission of such details adumbrated the endlessness of Christ's prophetic office.

The fact that we are told Elijah "was of the inhabitants of Gilead" is no doubt recorded as a sidelight upon his natural training—one which ever exerts a powerful influence on the forming of character. The people of those hills reflected the nature of their environment: they were rough and rugged, solemn and stern, dwelling in rude villages and subsisting by keeping flocks of sheep. 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 would present a marked contrast with the town dwellers in the lowland valleys, and more especially would he be distinguished from the pampered courtiers of the palace.

What age he was when the Lord first granted Elijah a personal and saving revelation of Himself we have no means of knowing, as we have no information about his early religious training. But there is one sentence in a later chapter which enables us to form a definite idea of the spiritual caliber of the man—"I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts," (1 Kings 19:10). Those words cannot mean less than that he had God's glory greatly at heart and that the honour of His name meant more to him than anything else. Consequently, he must have been deeply grieved and filled with holy indignation as he became more and more informed about the terrible character and wide extent of Israel's defection from Jehovah.

There can be little room for doubt that Elijah must have been thoroughly familiar with the Scriptures, especially the first books of the Old Testament. Knowing how much the Lord had done for Israel, the signal favors. He had bestowed upon them, he must have yearned with deep desire that they should please and glorify Him. But when he learned that this was utterly lacking, and as tidings reached him of what was happening on the other side of the Jordan, as he became informed of how Jezebel had thrown down God's altars, slain His servants, and replaced them with the idolatrous priests of heathendom, his soul must have been filled with horror and his blood made to boil with indignation, for he was "very jealous for the Lord God of hosts." Would that more of such righteous indignation filled and fired us today!

Probably the question which now most deeply exercised Elijah was, How should he act? What could he do, a rude, uncultured, child of the desert? The more he pondered it, the more difficult the situation must have seemed; and no doubt Satan whispered in his ear, "You can do nothing, conditions are hopeless." But there was one thing he could do: betake himself to that grand resource of all deeply tried souls—he could pray. And he did: as James 5:17 tells us, "he prayed earnestly." He prayed because he was assured that the Lord God lived and ruled over all. He prayed because he realized that God is almighty and that with Him all things are possible. He prayed because he felt his own weakness and insufficiency and therefore turned to One who is clothed with might and is infinitely self-sufficient.

But in order to be effectual, prayer must be grounded on the Word of God, for without faith it is impossible to please Him, and "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God," (Rom. 10:17): Now there was one particular passage in the earlier books of Scripture which seems to have been specially fixed on Elijah's attention: "Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; and then the Lord's wrath be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit," (Deut. 11:16, 17): That was exactly the crime of which Israel was now guilty: they had turned aside to worship false gods. Suppose, then, that this Divinely-threatened judgment should not be executed, would it not indeed appear that Jehovah was but a myth, a dead tradition? And Elijah was "very jealous for the Lord God of hosts," and accordingly we are told that "he prayed earnestly that it might not rain," (Jas. 5:17): Thus we learn once more what true prayer is: it is faith laying hold of the Word of God, pleading it before him, and saying, "do as Thou hast said," (2 Sam. 7:25).

"He prayed earnestly that it might not rain." Do some of our readers exclaim, "What a terrible prayer"? Then we ask, Was it not far more terrible that the favoured descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob should despise and turn away from the Lord God and blatantly insult Him by worshipping Baal? Would they desire the thrice Holy One to wink at such enormities? Are His righteous laws to be trampled upon with impunity? Shall He refuse to enforce their just penalties? What conception would men form of the Divine character if He ignored their open defiance of Himself? Let Scripture answer: "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil," (Eccl. 8:11). Yes, and not only so, but as God declared, "These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes," (Ps. 50:21).

Ah, my reader, there is something far more dreadful than physical calamity and suffering, namely, moral delinquency and spiritual apostasy. Alas, that this is so rarely perceived today! What are crimes against man in comparison with high-handed sins against God? Likewise what are national reverses in comparison with the

loss of God's favour? The fact is that Elijah had a true sense of values: he was "very jealous for the Lord God of hosts," and therefore he prayed earnestly that it might not rain. Desperate diseases call for drastic measures. And as he prayed, Elijah obtained assurance that his petition was granted, and that he must go and acquaint Ahab. Whatever danger the prophet might personally incur, both the king and his subject should learn the direct connection between the terrible drought and their sins which had occasioned it.

The task which now confronted Elijah was no ordinary one, and it called for more than common courage. For an untutored rustic of the hills to appear uninvited before a king who defied heaven was sufficient to quell the bravest; the more so when his heathen consort shrank not from slaying any who opposed her will, in fact who had already put many of God's servants to death. What likelihood, then, was there of this lonely Gileadite escaping with his life? "But the righteous are bold as a lion," (Prov. 28:1): they who are right with God are neither daunted by difficulties nor dismayed by dangers. "I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, that have set themselves against me round about," (Ps. 3:6); "Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear," (Ps. 27:3): such is the blessed serenity of those whose conscience is void of offence and whose trust is in the living God.

The hour for the execution of his stern task had arrived, and Elijah leaves his home in Gilead to deliver unto Ahab his message of judgment. Picture him on his long and lonely journey. What were the subjects which engaged his mind? Would he be reminded of the similar mission on which Moses had embarked, when he was sent by the Lord to deliver his ultimatum to the haughty monarch of Egypt? Well, the message which he bore would be no more palatable to the degenerate king of Israel. Yet such a recollection need in nowise deter or intimidate him: rather should the remembrance of the sequel strengthen his faith. The Lord God had not failed his servant Moses, but had stretched forth His mighty arm on his behalf, and in the end had given him full success. The wondrous works of God in the past should ever hearten His servants and saints in the present.