**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 KINGS-019. ELIJAH'S WEAKNESS, AND ITS CURE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"1.* *And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword. 2. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to-morrow about this time. 3. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. 4. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough: now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers. 5. And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then, an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. 6. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. 7. And the angel of the Lord came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. 8. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God. 9. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there, and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah? 10. And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left: and they seek my life, to take it away. 11. And He said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not In the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: 12. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. 13. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him and said, What doest then here, Elijah! 14. And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant, thrown down Thine altars, and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. 15. And the Lord said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: 16. And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. 17. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. 18. Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.."*

*1 Kings 19:1-18*

The miracle on Carmel cowed, if it did not convince, Ahab, so that he did not oppose the slaughter of the Baal prophets; but Jezebel was made of sterner stuff, and her passionate idolatry was proof against even a sign from heaven. Obstinacy in error is often a rebuke to tremulous faith in God. She fiercely puts her back to the wall, and defies Elijah and his God. Her threat to the prophet has a certain audacity of frankness almost approaching generosity. She will give her victim fair play. This woman is magnificent in sin. The Septuagint prefixes to her oath, As surely as thou art Elijah and I Jezebel, which adds force to it. It also reads, by a very slight change in the Hebrew, in verse 3, he was afraid, for he saw,--which is possibly right, as giving his motive for escape more distinctly.

**I.** We may note, first, the prophet's flight (verses 3-8). Beersheba, on the southern border of the kingdom of Judah, was eloquent of memories of the patriarchs, but though it was nearly a hundred miles from Jezreel, Jezebel's arm was long enough to reach the fugitive there, and therefore he plunged deeper into the dreary southern desert. He left behind him his servant, his young man, as the original has it, whom Rabbinical tradition identified with the miraculously resuscitated son of the widow of Zarephath, and supposed to become afterwards the prophet Jonah. Thus alone but for the company of his own gloomy thoughts, and wearied with toilsome travel in the sun-smitten waste, he took shelter under the shadow of a solitary shrub (the Hebrew emphatically calls it one juniper, or rather broom-plant), and there the waves of depression went over him.

His complaint is not to be wondered at, though it was wrong. The very overstrain of the scene on Carmel brought reaction. The height of the crest of one wave measures the depth of the trough of the next, and no mortal spirit can keep itself at the sublime elevation reached by Elijah when alone he fronted and converted a nation. The supposed necessity for flight, coming so immediately after apparent victory, showed him how hollow the change in the people was. What had become of all the fervency of their shout, The Lord, He is the God! if they could leave Jezebel the power to carry out her threat? Solitude and the awful desert increased his gloom. The strong man had become weak, and it was ebb-tide with him. His prayer was petulant, impatient, presumptuous. What right had he to settle what was enough? If he really wished to die, he could have found death at Jezreel, and had no need to travel a hundred miles to seek a grave. He was weary of his work, and profoundly disappointed by what he hastily concluded was its failure, and in a fit of faithless despondency he forgot reverence, submission, and obedience.

If Elijah can become weak, and his courage die out, and his zeal become torpid apathy and cowardly wish to shuffle off responsibility and shirk work, who shall stand? The lessons of self-distrust, of the nearness to one another of the most opposite emotions in our weak natures, of the depth of gloom into which the boldest and brightest servant of God may fall as soon as he loses hold of God's hand, never had a more striking instance to point them than that mighty prophet, sitting huddled together in utter despondency below the solitary retem bush, praying his foolish prayer for death.

The meal to which an angel twice waked him was God's answer to his prayer, telling him both that his life was still needful and that God cared for him. Perhaps one of Elijah's reasons for taking to the desert was the thought that he might starve there, and so find death. At all events, God for the third time miraculously provides his food. The ravens, the widow of Zarephath, an angel, were his caterers; and, instead of taking away his life, God Himself sends the bread and water to preserve it. The revelation of a watchful, tender Providence often rebukes gloomy unbelief and shames us back to faith. We are not told whether the journey to Horeb was commanded, or, like the flight from Jezreel, was Elijah's own doing; but, in any case, he must have wandered in the desert, to have taken forty days to reach it.

**II.** The second stage is the vision at Horeb (verses 9-14). The history of Israel has never touched Horeb since Moses left it, and it is not without significance that we are once more on that sacred ground. The parallel between Moses and Elijah is very real. These two names stand out above all others in the history of the theocracy, the one as its founder, the other as its restorer; both distinguished by special revelations, both endowed with exceptional force of character and power of the Spirit; the one the lawgiver, the other the head of the prophetic order; both having something peculiar in their departure, and both standing together, in witness of their supremacy in the past, and of their inferiority in the future, by Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. The associations of the place are marked by the use of the definite article, which is missed in the Authorised Version,--the cave, that same cleft in the rock where Moses had stood. Note, too, that the word rendered lodged is literally passed the night, and that therefore we may suppose that the vision came to Elijah in the darkness.

That question, What doest thou here? can scarcely be freed from a tone of rebuke; but, like Christ's to the travellers to Emmaus, and many another interrogation from God, it is also put in order to allow of the loaded heart's relieving itself by pouring out all its griefs. God's questions are the assurance of His listening ear and sympathising heart. This one is like a little key which opens a great sluice. Out gushes a full stream. His forty days solitude have done little for him. A true answer would have been, I was afraid of Jezebel. He takes credit for zeal, and seems to insinuate that he had been more zealous for God than God had been for Himself. He forgets the national acknowledgment of Jehovah at Carmel, and the hundred prophets protected by good Obadiah. Despondency has the knack of picking its facts. It is colour-blind, and can only see dark tints. He accuses his countrymen, as if he would stir up God to take vengeance.

How different this weak and sinful wail over his solitude from the heroic mention of it on Carmel, when it only nerved his courage I (verse 22). The divine manifestation which followed is evidently meant to recall that granted to Moses on the same spot. The Lord passed by is all but verbally quoted from Exodus 34:6, and the truth that had been proclaimed in words to Moses was enforced by symbol to Elijah. If the vision was in the night, as verse 9 suggests, it becomes still more impressive. The fierce wind that roared among the savage peaks, the shock that made the mountains reel, and the flashing flames that lighted up the wild landscape, were all phenomena of one kind, and at once expressed God's lordship over all destructive agencies of nature, and symbolised the more vehement and disturbing forms of energy, used by Him for the furtherance of His purposes in the field of history or of revelation. Elijah's ministry was of such a sort, and he had now to learn the limitations of his work, and the superiority of another type, represented by the sound of gentle stillness.

It is the same lesson which Moses learned there, when he heard that the Lord is a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth. It was exemplified in the gentle Elisha, the successor of Elijah. It reached far beyond the time then present, and was indeed a Messianic prophecy, declaring the inmost character of Him in whom the Lord is, in an altogether special sense. Elijah as a prophet brought no new knowledge, and uttered no far-reaching predictions; but he received one of the deepest and clearest prophecies of the gentleness of God's highest Messenger, and on Horeb saw afar off what he saw fulfilled on the Mountain of Transfiguration. Nor is his vision exhausted by its Messianic reference. It contains an eternal truth for all God's servants. Storm, earthquake, and fire may be God's precursors, and needed sometimes to prepare His way; but gentleness is the habitation of His throne, and they serve Him best, and are nearest Him whom they serve, who are meek in heart and gentle among enemies, as a nurse cherisheth her children. Love is the victor, and the sharpest weapons of the Christian are love and lowliness.

The lesson was not at first grasped by Elijah, as his repetition of his complaint, word for word, with almost dogged obstinacy, shows. The best of us are slow to learn God's lessons, and a habit of faithless gloom is not soon overcome. It is much easier to get down into the pit than to struggle out of it.

**III.** The commission for further service, which closes the scene, is a further rebuke to the prophet. He is bidden to retrace his way and to take refuge in the desert lying to the south and east of Damascus, where he would be safe from Jezebel, and still not far from the scene of his activity. The instructions given to anoint a king of Syria and one of Israel were not fulfilled by Elijah, but by his successor; and we have to suppose that further commands were given to him on that subject. The third injunction, to anoint his successor, was obeyed at once on his journey, though Ahelmeholah, on Gilboa, was dangerously near Jezreel. The designation of these future instruments of God's purpose was at once a sign to Elijah that his own task was drawing to a close (having reached its climax on Carmel), and that God had great designs beyond him and his service. The true conception of our work is that we sire only links in a chain, and that we can be done without. God removes the workers and carries on the work. To anoint our successor is often a bitter pill; but self-importance needs to be taken down, and it is blessed to lose ourselves in gazing into the future of God's work, when we are gone from the field.

Further, the commissions met Elijah's despondency in another way; for they assured him of the divine judgments on the house of Ahab, and of the use of the Syrian king as a rod to chastise Israel. He had thought God too slow in avenging His dishonoured name, and had been taught the might of gentleness; but now he also learns the certainty of punishment, while the enigmatical promise that Elisha should slay those who escaped the swords of Hazael and Jehu dimly points to the merciful energy of that prophet's word, his only sword, which shall slay but to revive, and wound to heal. I have hewed them by the ... words of my mouth.

Finally, the revelation of the seven thousand--a round number, which expresses the sacredness as well as the numerousness of the elect, hidden ones--rebukes the hasty assumption of his being left alone, faithful among the faithless. God has more servants than we know of. Let us beware of feeding either our self-righteousness or our narrowness or our faint-heartedness with the fancy that we have a monopoly of faithfulness, or are left alone to witness for God.