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

**2 KINGS-004. GENTLENESS SUCCEEDING STRENGTH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"13.* *He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; 14. And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the Lord God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over. 15. And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him. 16. And they said unto him, Behold now, there be with thy servants fifty strong men; let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master: lest peradventure the Spirit of the Lord hath taken him up, and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley. And he said, Ye shall not send. 17. And when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send. They sent therefore fifty men; and they sought three days, but found him not. 18. And when they came again to him, (for he tarried at Jericho,) he said unto them, Did I not say unto you, Go not! 19. And the men of the city said unto Elisha, Behold, I pray thee, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my lord seeth: but the water is naught, and the ground barren. 20. And he said, Bring me a new cruse, and put salt therein. And they brought it to him. 21. And he went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus saith the Lord, I have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land. 22. So the waters were healed unto this day, according to the saying of Elisha which he spake.."*

*2 Kings 2:13-22*

The independent activity of Elisha begins with verse 13. How short the gap between the two prophets, and how easily filled it is! Not the greatest are indispensable. God lays aside one tool, but only to take up another. He has inexhaustible stores. The work goes on, though the workers change, and there is little time for mere mourning, and none for idle sorrow. Elisha's first miracle is almost an experiment. The mantle which lay at his feet had been thrown over him by Elijah when he was called to his service, and it was now a token that office and power had devolved on him. His first steps tread closely in Elijah's track; as those of wise and humble men, called to higher work, will mostly do. The repetition of the miracle by the same means, and the invocation of the Lord as the God of Elijah,--a new name, to be set by the side of the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob--express the humility which seeks to shelter itself behind the example of its mighty predecessor. The form of the invocation as a question indicates that Elisha had not yet attained certainty as to his power, as not yet having proved it. Where is the Lord God of Elijah? is not the question of unbelief, but neither is it the voice of full confidence, which asks no such question, because it knows Him to be with it. It is the cry, Oh that Thou mayest be here, even with unworthy me! and art Thou not here? The faith was real, though young, and clouded with some film of doubt. But, being real, it was answered; and it was because of Elisha's trust, not Elijah's mantle, that the waters parted. God will listen to a man pleading that ancient deeds may be repeated to-day, and, by answering the cry addressed to Him as the God of saints and martyrs of old, will embolden us to cry to Him as our very own God. We may learn from that first half-tentative miracle the spirit in which men should take up the work of those that are gone, the lowliness fitting for beginners, the wisdom of seeking to graft new work on the old stock, the encouragement from remembering the divine wonders through His servants in the past, and the true way to assure ourselves of our God-given power; namely, by attempting great things for Him, in dependence on His promise.

The miracle was wrought partly for Elisha, and partly for others who were to acknowledge his authority. These sons of the prophets, who stood on the eastern bank of Jordan, had probably not been witnesses of the translation, even if their position commanded a view of the spot. Purer eyes and more kindred spirits than theirs were needed for that.

But they saw Elisha returning alone, and the waters parting before him, and, no doubt, as he came nearer, would recognise what he bore in his hand--Elijah's well-known mantle. They hasten to recognise him as the head of the prophets, and their acknowledgment accurately expresses his place and work. Elijah's spirit rests on him, even though the two men and their careers are very different, and in some respects opposite. Elisha is distinctly secondary to Elijah. He is in no sense an originator, either of fresh revelations or of new impulses to obedience. He but carries on what Elijah had begun, inherits a work, and is Elijah's Timothy and son in the faith. The same Spirit was on him, though the form of his character and gifts was in strong contrast to the stormier genius of his mightier predecessor. Elisha had no such work as Elijah--no foot-to-foot and hand-to-hand duels with murderous kings or queens; no single-handed efforts to stop a nation from rushing down a steep place into the sea; no fiery energy; no bursts of despair. He moved among kings and courts as an honoured guest and trusted counsellor. He did not dwell apart, like Elijah, the strong son of the desert; but, born in the fertile valley of the Jordan, he lived a life kindly with his kind, and his delights were with the sons of men. His miracles are mostly works of mercy and gentleness, relieving wants and sicknesses, drying tears and giving back dear ones to mourners. He is as complete a contrast to his stern, solitary, forceful predecessor, as the still small voice was to the roar of the wind or the crackling hiss of the flames.

But, nevertheless, there are diversities of operations, but the same God. It is well to remember that one type of excellence does not exhaust the possibilities of goodness, nor the resources of the inspiring Spirit. The comparative merits of strength and gentleness will always be variously estimated; but God's work needs them both, and both may join hands as serving the same Lord in diverse ways, which are all needed. We should seek to widen our discernment to the extent of the rich variety of forms of good and of service which God gives. Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy, Luther and Melanchthon, are all His servants. Well is it when the strong can recognise the power of the gentle, and the gentle can discern the tenderness of the strong, and when each is forward to say of the other, He worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do.

The search after Elijah, insisted on by the sons of the prophets, is of importance only as showing their low thoughts and Elisha's gentle spirit. He is their head, but he holds the reins loosely. Fancy anybody urging Elijah till he was ashamed! The shame would very soon have mantled the cheek of the urger. But though, no doubt, Elisha would tell what had happened, these prophets only think that Elijah has been miraculously borne somewhither, as he had been before, and seem to have no notion of what has really happened. How hard it is to heave heavy men up to any height of spiritual vision! How vulgar minds always take refuge in the most commonplace explanations that they can find of high truths! Gone up to heaven! Not he! He is lying, living or dead, in some gorge or on some hillside. Let us go and look for him! There is nothing on which some people pride themselves more than upon being practical--which generally means prosaic, and often means blind to God's greatest deeds. To go scouring wady and mountain for a man who had been taken up into heaven was practical common sense indeed! But Elisha's gentleness is to be noted. He let them have their own way. Often that is the only plan for convincing people of their errors. And, when the fifty scouts come back empty-handed, all he says is a quiet Did I no say unto you, Go not? The servant of the Lord must not strive, but in meekness instruct those that oppose themselves; and the effectual instruction is often to let them take their own course.

The miracle of healing the waters is of the beneficent kind usual with Elisha, inaugurates his course with blessing, and typifies the healing power which God through him would exert on men. Jericho had been recently rebuilt in spite of the curse against its builders. The bitterness of the spring seems to have been part of the malediction; for men would not be so foolish as to rebuild a city which had only impure water to depend on. However that may be, the main lesson of the miracle, beyond its revelation of the spirit of gentle compassion in Elisha, is the symbolical one. The new cruse and the salt are emblems of the divine gift which cleanses the human heart. Salt is an emblem of purification, and its emblematic meaning prevails here over its natural properties; for the last thing to cure a brackish spring was to put salt into it. The very inadequacy, as well as inappropriateness, of the remedy, points the miraculous and symbolical character of the whole. A jar full of salt could do little to a gushing fountain. But it figured the cleansing power which God will bring to bear on us, if we will; and it taught the great truth that sin must be cleansed at the fountain-head in the heart, not half a mile down the stream, in the deeds. Put the salt in the spring, and the outflow will be sweet.