

The Companion of the Way

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE BREAD OF THE WEARY (I Kings 19) - Elijah

I. THE SETTING -- REACTION AFTER VICTORY

Though more than five hundred years elapsed between Joshua's wars and Elijah's ministry, the two periods were strangely linked by the tragic facts of the history of Jericho. When the city was destroyed, Joshua pronounced the solemn words: "**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 he set up the gates of it**" (Joshua 6:26).

When, long after, Ahab came to the throne of the northern kingdom, "**In his days did Hiel the Bethelite build Jericho: he laid the foundation thereof in Abiram his firstborn, and set up the gates thereof in his youngest son Segub, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by Joshua the son of Nun**" (I Kings 16:34). Immediately the record states: "**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**" (I Kings 17:1). The rebuilding of the city upon which the curse lay was an act of daring impiety characteristic of the days of Ahab, but the Word of GOD failed not of its fulfillment, and the builder carried out his plans at bitter cost.

Though such happenings took place in Israel, GOD did not leave Himself without a witness, and He raised up

A Man For the Times

a man who, in striking contrast with his contemporaries, was characterized by a life in the presence of GOD. Elijah knew the living GOD, and could say of Him in truth -- "**before whom I stand.**"

Three and a half years after his first appearance to Ahab, there came the day when Elijah stood a lonely figure on Mount Carmel, but he was vindicated as the Lord's prophet by the fire which fell

from Heaven upon his sacrifice. It was a notable triumph. Jehovah was honored as GOD in the people's homage, the false prophets were slain, and the drought of judgment was ended by the rain of blessing. Few scenes have been as thrilling as that enacted on the mountain, with one man against eight hundred and fifty. That one man was utterly victorious because the living GOD was with him.

So manifold were the blessings of GOD that day that we might well expect the narrative to continue with further triumphs wrought by a prophet greatly cheered in heart. But the notorious Jezebel, who was responsible for so much of Israel's idolatry and corruption, added to her crimes by sending to Elijah the dire threat: "**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**" (I Kings 19:2). The emphasis of the threat was on the words, "**by to morrow about this time.**" The threat bore the stamp of urgency, and when it reached Elijah it found him overwrought by his exacting experiences in Carmel, weary in body, and depressed in spirit. Apparently he expected a greater response from the people than was manifest, and he was greatly downcast. Perturbed by Jezebel's message, he fled through the territory of Ahab and through Judah till he came to Beersheba, a hundred miles to the south.

"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" (I Kings 19:3). The name of Beersheba (the well of the oath, Genesis 21:31; 26:33) reminded him of the covenants made by his fathers with their neighbors, and hence of the covenants of his faithful GOD. Though Elijah left his servant there, he found neither comfort nor rest for his own agitated thoughts.

"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" (I Kings 19:4). Bitter in spirit (see I Kings 19:10, 14), he continued to flee south, having as his goal Horeb, the mount of GOD. Thither Moses had gone also in a day of idolatry and had spent long days and nights with GOD, interceding for his sinful people, but as the sequel shows, it was to make intercession against Israel (Romans 11:3). He pressed on alone, but when only a day's journey from Beersheba, he felt he could travel no further, and so he sat under a juniper tree (or, the broom, a desert shrub common in that district, growing to a height of about ten feet). Under its shade the very man whom GOD purposed to translate without death prayed that he might die. Was this the man who had stood so nobly on Carmel? Could such brief time permit such change?

He was alone, and yet we feel our kinship with him. There have been times when we have come to "**the well of the oath,**" and have even ministered to others the certainty of the divine promises but have failed to drink of their cheer ourselves. Though perhaps unseen by others, we have fled from opportunity and duty, and have sat where he sat, and like him have prayed in

Bitterness of Soul.

It was a veteran toiler of the mission field who once wrote, "*There is a juniper tree just outside every mission station.*"

"He requested for himself that he might die." The identical words recur in Scripture touching

another disconsolate man. Of Jonah we read that when the gourd under which he sat outside Nineveh withered, and the east wind was vehement, and the sun beat upon his head, **"he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live"** (Jonah 4:8). So Elijah of Carmel and Jonah of the depths of the sea, alike wondrously honored of GOD when they proclaimed His message, were alike in their weariness and gloom.

"I am not better than my fathers." Crushed and despondent with the seeming failure of his mission, he felt himself to be as his fathers. They had called to the people to return to GOD, and their voice had fallen on deaf ears. So had his. He would be better dead. Thus he reasoned, and yet without adequate cause. As GOD showed him at Horeb, there were seven thousand men in Israel who had not bowed unto Baal. To the hearts of these the ministry of Elijah would be as refreshing as the heavy rain had been to the parched ground. At that moment, when the people had owned GOD publicly, they needed the teaching and guidance of the prophet in order that the impression made upon them might be deepened and their energies turned to worthier channels. In his depression of soul, Elijah saw nothing of this; no ray of hope gladdened the future; he had no heart to continue; he sought to die. But GOD had told him no such thing. Death was not for him. The time would come when on another mount, neither Carmel nor Horeb, he would stand with Moses in the company of his Lord, and talk with Him **"of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem."** (Luke 9:31). That death, the death of the Son of GOD, was the true theme of the adoring heart, even as it was the theme of Heaven and the counsels of eternity. GOD had

Nobler Purposes for the Lips

of Elijah than the employment they found under the juniper tree, but the weary man knew nought of this and sought not whether GOD's meaning for his present life was yet exhausted.

The story of Elijah gives vivid illustration of a truth taught in the next chapter of I Kings. In the warfare between Ahab and Benhadad, king of Syria, the servants of the latter king sought to excuse their defeat by saying, **"Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they."** Accordingly they prepared anew, and their forces filled the valley. Then **"there came a man of God, and spake unto the king of Israel, and said, Thus saith the LORD, Because the Syrians have said, The LORD is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys, therefore will I deliver all this great multitude into thine hand, and ye shall know that I am the LORD"** (I Kings 20:23, 28). The Syrians deemed the Lord to be a GOD of the hills, but not of the valleys, yet He showed His power in both. Thus it was with Elijah, that GOD answered by fire on the height of Carmel, and to the lonely figure asleep under the juniper tree He drew near with awakening touch, and with voice of compassion. There is special comfort for us in this latter scene, for in our own day nothing endears our Lord JESUS to us in His present dealings more than His compassion in our weakness.

II. THE REVELATION -- GOD'S GENTLENESS IN OUR FAILURE

"And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat" (I Kings 19:5). His complaints hushed in a merciful sleep, Elijah lay far from the haunts of men, but he was not forgotten. He, too, must know the grace of the

perpetual presence. To him there came One who bore the august title of "**the Angel of the Lord**," an expression used always in the Old Testament in the singular number and borne by one Being alone. Repeatedly had He appeared in His people's history. He it was who had called to Abraham from Heaven to stay the hand that held the knife and had spoken to Moses from the bush. In view of these things, and many more, we recognize in the angel none other than our Lord JESUS CHRIST, appearing in angelic guise long before His incarnation at Bethlehem. What He was in lovingkindness then, He is now. Surely our hearts should bow before Him with joyous adoration exceeding that of the faithful of the Old Testament, since we have seen in fulfillment what they could see only in prophecy or type -- Bethlehem, Calvary, and Olivet.

In that path of implicit trust in the Father's will which the Son of GOD traveled through this scene to the Cross, there was no failure,

No Fretting, No Despondency,

and no murmuring. Never did He deviate from the way appointed for Him; never did He flee from His ministry; never was He moved by fear of man. When the Pharisees said to Him, "**Get thee out, and depart hence: for Herod will kill thee,**" He replied, "**I must walk today, and tomorrow, and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem.**" Even in that hour His heart was full of compassion, and He spoke of His yearning for His wayward people -- "**How often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!**" (Luke 13:31, 33-34).

In all His ministry, whether in Old Testament days, in the days of His flesh, or in His ascension glory, He is the same in heart. "**His compassions fail not. They are new every morning**" (Lamentations 3:22-23). Well might we add with the Scripture, "**Great is thy faithfulness**" (Lamentations 3:23). "**He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust**" (Psalm 103:14). He knew the frailty of His weary servant under the tree and came to him with a gentleness which only such need could draw forth. On Carmel "**the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench**" (I Kings 18:38), but under the juniper tree there was a nearness not known on Carmel. On the mount was the devouring fire; in the wilderness was

The Very Touch of the Angel's hand.

No word of rebuke was heard -- that would come on the proper occasion at Horeb, but here was "love that would not let him go."

"**Thy gentleness,**" said David, "**hath made me great**" (II Samuel 22:36). It was gentleness which woke the sleeping prophet and bade him rise and eat. the word "**touched**" in this passage is that used in the narrative of Jacob, when the wrestler "**touched the hollow of his thigh,**" but here is no painful, enfeebling discipline. Rather is there the kindness that aroused Elijah to find his needs fully met. While the prophet had slept, the Angel of the Lord had provided for all his weakness.

"**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. 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**" (I Kings 19:6-7). Elijah beheld all that the journey demanded placed at his head, and ready for his use. There was no lavish banquet to intrigue the natural eye, yet that food sustained him as no other could have done. The lesson is not hard to find. In the "**cake baked on the coals**" is prefigured One who would know the fire and who would be the bread of GOD to all who would believe. Thus did the Lord JESUS say to the Jews, "**I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst**" (John 6:35). He was the living Bread which came down from Heaven, but that men should eat of Him necessitated His death upon the Cross, when He should feel the fierceness of the fire of judgment for their sins. His sufferings are over, but He remains "**the cake baked on the coals,**" the food of all who walk the heavenward way.

With the cake there was the cruse of water, fit emblem of the HOLY SPIRIT given from the Father and the Son to be "**another comforter.**" Even as in John 6 the Lord said, "**He that believeth on me shall never thirst,**" so in John 7 He spoke the words of gracious invitation, "**If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living waters. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.**" Admittedly, the figure of the flowing stream surpasses that of the cruse of water, yet the latter spoke of the same HOLY SPIRIT. As the cruse was associated with the cake, so was the giving of the Spirit the result of the death and resurrection of the Lord JESUS. Not till His atoning work was completed, and He had taken His place at the right hand of the majesty on high, was the Spirit poured out upon His people on earth. In wondrous Grace all who believe on CHRIST have been made to eat of the living bread, and "**to drink into one Spirit**" (I Corinthians 12:13).

We watch this ancient scene and reverently wonder what things filled the thoughts of the Angel as He gave to Elijah the figures of a greater giving, figures which spoke of the time seen from the depths of eternity when He should give Himself for the hunger of the souls of men. Fully known to Him was that which He should experience when He should leave Heaven for earth, the bitterest scorn that men could heap upon Him, and the most shameful indignities that sinful hearts could devise. Well He knew that He would then be "**delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God . . . and by wicked hands . . . crucified and slain**" (Acts 2:23). But the love that purposed the Cross was eternal love, even the love that dwelt in the heart of the One who stood so patiently beside the overwrought prophet.

Why did the angel give Elijah two meals? Seeing that the food was of such quality, would not one have sufficed? Here, again, we see the lovingkindness of the Lord, and trace its operation elsewhere in Scripture, for it is the same blessed Person who fills Old and New Testaments. The first meal looked backward and dealt with the ravages of the strenuous past; the second looked forward and strengthened Elijah for the future. The Angel thus showed His appreciation both of that which had been, in the weariness of the flight, and of that which was to be, in the arduous toil of the journey to Horeb.

This same deep understanding of every circumstance of the way is set forth vividly in two passages of the New Testament.

The Principle of the Two Meals

is seen in John 20 in the appearance of the Lord in the midst of His own after His resurrection. He greeted them with His "**Peace be unto you,**" which looked backward, and comforted them after the bitterness of their experience during the three days of the Cross and entombment. Then He showed the ground and reason of their peace in the print of the nails in His hands, and the spear wound in His side. All the sorrow of the past, all their perplexity, all their sense of shame at their forsaking of Him was swallowed up in the revelation of those wounds. Death had been vanquished, and since death had failed, nought else could separate them from Him. He showed Himself alive by many infallible proofs (Acts 1:3), and none was more evident than the witness of His hands and side. This word of peace was the first meal. then later, as He looked down the years of their service, yes, and of their sufferings, and gave them His commission, "**so send I you,**" He repeated His "**Peace be unto you**" and thus strengthened them for all that lay ahead. This was the second meal.

The same thing is seen in the words of comfort in Hebrews 4:16, "**Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.**" Mercy and grace are here very closely allied in their meaning, as in their bounty, but the difference in the two may be illustrated thus. It is the close of the day, and the believer kneels before the Lord and tells Him of all that has transpired through its hours and of all the weakness and failure. When all is spread humbly before His gaze, He gives His mercy, and all is dealt with. This is the first meal. But the heart looks up again to Him and tells of the burden that must be taken up once more, the cares of the new day, and the same inadequacy in self to meet them. Then He gives His grace, His all-sufficient grace, to help in the time of need. This is the second meal.

III. THE BLESSING -- STRENGTH FOR THE JOURNEY

"**And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meal forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God**" (I Kings 19:8). The voice had spoken: "**The journey is too great for thee.**" Ahead lay the long days and nights, and the prophet must be sustained to endure them, as also the deep lessons of Horeb. The journey is ever too great for us, be it the whole way homeward, or just one day's march. Without this heavenly food we must falter and fall, yet the voice of our Lord bids us arise and eat. If we look, we too shall see "**a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water.**" With the vision of faith we shall see One who endured the Cross and rose again, and we shall find the living water, even in Him who was sent down by the exalted CHRIST to indwell us forever. With such supply we may press on wherever the journey may lead, not in our own strength, for such we shall not have on earth, but in "**the strength of that meat.**" So shall we prove the truth of that precious word, "**My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness**" (II Corinthians 12:9).

How dear He should be to our hearts -- He who is "**Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.**" When we fail, He fails not, but abides with us still. He is the GOD of the hills of triumph; is He not also the GOD of the valleys of weakness?

~ end of chapter 5 ~