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The Ministry of Elijah

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 1 Kings 17.

What we have in view, of course, in the first place, is the servant of the Lord. Once more God is found reacting to a state of things amongst His Own people, rising up in His own Divine discontent, and, as always, laying His hand upon an instrument for recovery.

So Elijah stands before us to represent such an instrument, and in God's dealings with him we see the ways and the principles by which a servant of the Lord is made an effectual servant, in relation to the purpose of God.

The Sovereign Choice of God

The first thing related to any such instrument is the sovereignty of God. There is never any adequate, natural explanation for the choice and appointment by God of His servants. There may be things in the instrument chosen which will be turned to account when they are wholly sanctified and brought under the government of God's Spirit, but when all has been taken account of we have to recognise that God's choice of His instruments is always a sovereign choice and not because there is anything in the instrument to warrant His choosing that instrument and selecting it from others. He acts sovereignly in choosing and appointing for His purpose. But, although that may be true, and although God may go beyond choosing and may endue that instrument with spiritual power, yet the

instrument must be controlled and disciplined continually by the hand of God. Otherwise that servant of the Lord, or that instrument, will be found following in the direction of his own soul, following his own judgments, being influenced by his own feelings. The intent and motive may be very good, it may be very godly, but that does not dispense with the necessity of that instrument being continuously under the hand of God for government and for discipline.

That is what comes very clearly before us at the outset in the case of Elijah. There is no doubt about God's sovereign choice, and there is no question as to God having endued Elijah with Divine power. Nevertheless, we see him at every step under the hand of God, and those steps are all steps which are a disciplining of the man himself. God is dealing with His servant all the time, and bringing His servant all the way along under His hand, so that the servant never becomes something in himself, but has everything in the Lord, and only in the Lord. We make a great mistake if we think that it is enough to have the Divine thought as to Divine purpose, that is, to have the knowledge of what God desires to do. That is not enough, that knowledge of the thought of God is not sufficient. There has to be a dealing with us in relation to that Divine thought, and that dealing with us is usually in a way which is altogether beyond our understanding.

If God were dealing with us as sinners, that is, if He were dealing with us because of certain personal sins and personal faults, we could quite clearly understand that; but when He is dealing with us in relation to Divine purpose, as His servants, His dealings with us go far beyond our understanding. We are taken out into a realm where we do not understand what the Lord is doing with us, and why the Lord takes certain courses with us. We are out of our depth, we are altogether baffled, and we are compelled - that is, if we are going on with God - to believe that God knows what He is doing, and we have just to move with Him according to whatever light we may have, and believe that these dealings with us, so far beyond our understanding, are somehow related to that purpose with which we are called, and that the explanation waits some distance ahead, and we will find it when we get there. God does not explain Himself when He takes a step with us. God never comes to a servant of His and says, 'Now I am going to take you through a certain experience which will be of this particular character, and the reason for this is so-and-so.' Without any intimation from the Lord, we find ourselves in a difficult situation, which altogether confounds us, puts us beyond the power of explaining that experience, and God takes us through without any explanation whatever until we are free, until the purpose for which that experience was given is reached, and then we have the explanation.

The point is, that even an instrument, sovereignly taken up by God in relation to His purpose, while knowing His main thought as to His purpose, still needs to be kept every moment, at every step, under God's hand, to be disciplined in relation to that thought, to be governed entirely by God.

Elijah, great man as he was, outstanding in the history of God's movements, was brought to that very point where, although he knew that God had laid hold of him, and although he knew what God's intention was, he could not, by his own initiative and by his own energy, freely go on to fulfil his mission. He could not move more than one step at a time, and even so that step had to be definitely governed by God. He could only take that step under the Divine direction. You see it here in this chapter to begin with. He had to take just one step, and then the next, and that by Divine direction, nothing beyond that. The Lord does not turn even His greatest servants loose with an idea. He does not liberate His most mightily used instruments to take a free course, even though they may know what God is after.

Divine Authority

Some of the reasons for that are clear. Elijah's ministry was one of Divine authority. There were powers at work which were more than human powers. The case with Israel was not simply one of spiritual declension. It was not merely that the people had lost a measure of spiritual life and were on a lower level than they should be, so that they had to have a deepening of the spiritual life. That was not the position at all. Baal had a mighty footing in Israel, and the evil powers, the forces of darkness, were back of this state of things, and the situation demanded more than just spiritual help to Israel. Something more than a ministry of exhortation and of spiritual food, something more than a convention for the deepening of spiritual life was called for. A ministry of Divine authority was needed to deal with a spiritual situation back of the condition in which the people were found. There were mightier forces at work than merely human faults and failings. The mighty power of Satan was there represented by Israel's state. Elijah, therefore, must needs fulfil a ministry of Divine authority, and the very first public utterance indicates that that is what his ministry was:

As the Lord, the 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).

There is a position, and there is an authority by reason of that position. James says that by his prayer the heavens were closed. That is going beyond the merely earthly, human situation. And again, by his prayer the heavens were opened. That is authority in heaven.

Secret Preparation

Now that ministry of authority was born in secret preparation before it came out in public expression. The Apostle James tells us quite definitely that "Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently (you have no mention of that in the historic record in the book of Kings) *that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heaven gave rain...*"

There is a secret history with God. He came into his public ministry with abrupt announcement. He simply stood there upon the platform of the universe, as it were, and made his declaration. But that is not all. There is a secret history with God behind that. All such ministry of Divine authority has its beginning hidden from the public eye, has its roots in a secret history with God. That kind of ministry, born out from that secret history with God, needs very special government by God to preserve its safety, to safeguard it from all those forces which can destroy it, and that is why Elijah, having such a ministry, needed to be governed in every step by God. There must be no generalization of movement in his case, there must be that specific movement, God dictating every step. So God preserves that authority as He produces it, that is, by a hidden life. Such a life and such a ministry must not be exposed, otherwise it will be destroyed.

Separation From The Self-life

So the Lord said to Elijah, "Get thee hence..." Hence? Where from? From this exposure, this publicity, this open place with all its dangers. "Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan." Hide *thyself*. Geography may have little to do with it. What is here spiritually is "hide *thyself*". Cherith means separation or cutting off, and that is linked with Jordan. Cherith is a tributary of the Jordan. We know what Jordan stands for, the death of the self-

life. In the major sense, the Lord's servants have been to Jordan; that is, the self-life has been set aside; but they have to keep near Jordan, and Jordan has to govern them at every step. The most paralysing thing to a ministry of Divine authority is "thyself". It is, in other words, the strength of our own souls. Elijah was a strong-minded man, a strong-willed man, a man capable of very strong and drastic actions, of pouring out a great deal of his own soul-life with great heat, and the self-life of a servant of God is a great peril to the spirit. Paul makes it perfectly clear that, at an advanced point in his ministry and in his spiritual life, when God had entrusted him with visions and revelations unspeakable, which it was not lawful for a man to utter, the main and most immediate peril and menace to the ministry of that revelation was himself. 'Lest I should be exalted above measure....' Then the self-life had not been eradicated from Paul. Paul was not clear of the peril of doing great damage to purely spiritual ministry, and God had to take a special precaution against the self-life of His own servant, not the sinful life in its old sense, but the self-life. 'Lest I should be *exalted*...' I... exalted! What is that? That is the exaltation of the *ego*, the self. What dangers are in that "I", and how truly it stands in peril of getting into an exalted place, a place of power, a place of influence, a place of authority. It is in this sense that the Lord has to say, "Hide thyself": 'get to the place of cutting off, of separation.'

This was so different from what you might expect. You see, here is a man, having had this deep, secret preparation with God in much prayer, who finds himself brought out in Divine authority to make a great announcement which represents a crisis in the purpose of God. You would expect that from that point he would go straight on from strength to strength, from place to place, would at once become a recognised authority, a recognised servant of God, and be very much before the public eye. But God would guard against any servant of His taking up a Divine purpose and a Divine commission in himself, taking it up in his own energy. That will destroy it, and there must be a hiding, a very real hiding. If a geographical hiding is God's way of getting a spiritual hiding, well, be it so. If God chooses to send us out of the realm of public life and ministry into some remote and hidden place, in order to take us away from the peril that is imminent of our becoming something, of our being taken up to be made something of, our going on in the strength of our own self-life, that is all well and good; but whether it be geographical or not, the word of the Lord to all His servants would always be, Hide *thyself!*

Adjustableness

Then you see, connected with that, as a part of it, the servant of the Lord must be found always in the place where he is pliable, where the Lord can get a ready and immediate response. The servant has no programme, therefore there is nothing to upset. He has no set course, therefore the Lord has nothing to break. He is moving with God, or staying with God, just as the Lord directs. He must be mobile in the hands of the Lord, that is, capable of being moved at any time, in any way, without feeling that everything is being broken up and torn to pieces.

"Get thee hence... and hide thyself by the brook Cherith... and it came to pass... that the brook dried up." The Lord did not say that it would not dry up, and the fact that the Lord told Elijah to go to the brook Cherith did not mean that the Lord was going to preserve the brook forever. It was a step, and the Lord said, in effect: 'That is the next step. I do not promise you that you will stay there always. I am not saying that that is your last abiding place, and that you can settle down there forever. That is your next step: go there and be ready for anything else that I want.'

This is a spiritual condition, of course. No one is going to take this literally. If we were to begin to apply this literally as to our business here on earth, we might get into confusion; but we have to be ready in spirit for the Lord to do anything that He likes, and never to feel that there is any contradiction when the Lord, having directed us in one way, now directs us in another. It is a matter of being in the hands of the Lord without a mind of our own made up, though the way be hidden from our own reasoning, from our own will, from our own feelings, hidden from all that soul-life, so that the Lord has a clear way with us.

The brook dried up! Well, were you dependent on the brook? If so, you are in a state of utter confusion when the brook dries up. Were you dependent upon the Lord? Very well, let all the brooks dry up and it is quite all right. Dependence on the Lord is a governing and an abiding law of true spiritual power. Elijah has been spoken and written of as the prophet of power. If that is true in any special way, he was very certainly the prophet of dependence.

That relationship to the Lord made it possible for the Lord to do other things, and to lead him on into new realms of revelation and experience. Oh, what a thing adjustableness is! If we are not adjustable, how we prevent the Lord from bringing us into His full revelation and purpose.

Those disciples of John the Baptist were adjustable, and it was because of that that they came to know the Lord Jesus. You will remember there were those disciples of John who followed Jesus, and said, "Master, where dwellest Thou?" He said, "Come and see." Now had they been fixed and settled, saying, 'We are John's disciples and we must stand by John; we must stay with John, and move with John; let Jesus have His Own disciples, but we stand by John,' they would have lost a great deal. But they were open and adjustable, and moved beyond John.

Those disciples of John which Paul found at Ephesus many years afterward, to whom he said, "Did you receive the Holy Ghost when you believed", were adjustable. When they heard what Paul said, they were baptized into the Name of the Lord Jesus. They were ready to go on from John to Christ, and so they came into the greater fullness (Acts 19).

Unless we are adjustable we shall miss a great deal. Elijah was adjustable, and so God could lead him on. The Lord allowed the brook to dry up because He had something more for His servant to learn, and something more to do through him, and so He said, "Arise, get thee to Zarephath... I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee." He went to Zarephath, and was made a blessing by his obedience.

Experience of Resurrection

Then he was brought by his new movement of obedience and faith into a new exercise, a new perplexity, a new trial; for the woman's son died. The woman was a widow with one son. The death of the son meant for her the loss of everything. It happened while Elijah was there, being looked after by this woman, and he was there in his obedience to the Lord. He had done this in obedience to the Lord, and now, in the line of obedience to, and of faith in the Lord, the Lord allowed this catastrophe to come into the very home to which he had been sent. It clearly raised a big question in Elijah's heart. 'God sent me here, I know that! God raised me up and commissioned me, and in the course of the fulfilling of my commission He brought me into this situation! There is no doubt about the Lord having led this way, and now here I am, having done what the Lord told me, having taken the course that He indicated, and everything has come into death and confusion; there is a terrible

contradiction here!' All sorts of questions can arise when you get in a position like that, and you can begin to go back on your guidance, begin to raise questions as to whether, after all, you were led, or whether you made a mistake in your guidance. Do that, and you only get more and more into the mire. What is all this about? God has a revelation for Elijah beyond anything that he had yet received. He was going to bring him into something that was more than what he had known. He was going to show His servant that He is the God of resurrection; and that has to be wrought in a deep way into the very being of His servant through trial, through perplexity, through bewilderment. Thus the Lord allows the widow's son to die, and the house to be filled with consternation, and all concerned to ask big questions.

The prophet goes up and brings the thing before the Lord, and lays hold of God, and so relates himself to this situation that he and the situation are one, and the boy's resurrection is the prophet's resurrection. There is identification of the prophet with the situation in death, and then in resurrection. The mighty meaning of the power of His resurrection, with new experience of that for the servant of God, was an essential lesson, if this authority was to be maintained, and this ministry to work out to its ultimate meaning in the overthrow of the powers of death, which were working destruction. The servant of God must go through it all in his own heart.

This discipline of Zarephath was relative to the whole ministry of the prophet. Zarephath means testing and refining, and indeed it was a refining fire. But Elijah came out, and everybody else concerned came out into a new place in resurrection.

The Lord write these things in our hearts, and show us how they still remain as spiritual values connected with the reaching of God's end, the fulfilling of His purpose.