

Studies in the Life of the Prophet Elisha

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The Background to the Prophet's Ministry

(1 Kings 19)

In these four sessions I am proposing to think with you about the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha. I do not thereby imagine that I shall be telling you anything new. I have in mind the fact that by the time these studies end, we shall as a church be beginning our gospel mission. I thought therefore it might encourage our hearts if together we thought once more about the life and ministry of Elisha, that much loved prophet. Not because of the wonderful miracles of grace that God did in spectacular fashion through him, bringing life and healing and new hope to people who were almost dead, and some of them quite dead, and others despairing. I thought that in studying him we shall be reminded of the resources that are available for us in the discharge of our common duties and, more particularly, in those special duties and responsibilities that will come upon us as a church in the weeks now soon to arrive. If in any way our spirits have been flagging, or our hopes have been drooping, who knows if God might use this study of his Word to revive us again. The first thing therefore we ought to do in thinking of the life and ministry of Elisha the prophet, is to study the background of that man's ministry. Let's begin to do that by reading in the book of Kings.

And he [that is, Elijah] lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, 'Arise and eat.' And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, 'Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you.' And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God. There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and he said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He said, 'I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.' And he said, 'Go out and stand on the mount before the LORD.' And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke 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. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper ['a still small voice' KJV]. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He said, 'I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your

covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.' And the LORD said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.' So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, 'Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.' And he said to him, 'Go back again, for what have I done to you?' And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. (1 Kgs 19:5-21)

If you like to keep your thumb in that place, let us read the New Testament passage that will help us in our understanding of the Old Testament story. That passage comes from the Epistle to the Romans, and chapter 11.

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.' But what is God's reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.' And David says, 'Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs for ever.' So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! (Rom 1:1-12)

May God give us good understanding of his holy Word. The first thing then that we ought to do, if we are to study the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha, is to consider the historical background, the actual situation in which he lived and worked. All of us are aware that the ministry of Elisha was marked by a most delightful and happy outcrop of God's miracles of grace as people were restored to life, and rediscovered the great resources that they had; as Israel were blessed and delivered from their enemies; and as even Gentiles were brought under the grace of God.

But in order to put that period of grace and blessing into its proper context and background, we shall have to consider some exceedingly gloomy Scriptures, because we must be realists and face the conditions under which Elisha was called to minister for God. That is why we read from 1 Kings 19 about the appointment of Elisha. Elijah was commanded by God to go and anoint three lots of people: to anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; Jehu the son of Nimshi to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat, 'to be prophet in your place.' The first we hear of Elisha then, is his appointment at the command of God by Elijah the prophet. It will not have escaped you how solemn an occasion that was. Elijah stood on Mount Horeb and, as the New Testament reminds us, pleaded with God against Israel. Elijah, the Bible reminds us, 'was a man with a nature like ours' (Jas 5:17), but a man marked supremely by his prayers. When Elijah stood on Mount Carmel and prayed for Israel, there followed a remarkable revival. But when Elijah stood on Mount Horeb and pleaded against Israel, God uttered a most solemn sentence and judgment. Let us therefore notice the text very carefully, and try to correct any false impressions we may have of this solemn occasion.

Let us notice exactly what the still, small voice said to Elijah, when Elijah came to the mouth of the cave. It is commonly said by some expositors that first of all God came by in the storm, with its tremendous roaring, and then in the earthquake and then in the whirlwind and in the fire. Great exhibitions of God's wrath and judgment, say the expositors, but God wasn't in any of those things. God in all his grace was not in the earthquake, nor in the fire, nor in the wind. God was to be heard in the calm, still, small voice. But let us understand what was happening and what it was that the still, small voice said. Elijah wrapped his face in the mantle and went out to listen to God. The still, small voice announced a judgment so sweeping in its terms, Israel hadn't seen the like of it for centuries. Go and anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. That same Hazael began the revival of the Aramaic nation and cut Israel exceedingly short. Go and anoint Jehu to be king of Israel, and that same Jehu, when at last he came, rose up and slaughtered the house of Israel, until there wasn't any left of the house of Ahab, and piled their heads in baskets. That same Jehu announced the feast to Baal, congregated all the worshipers of Baal in one of Baal's temples, and when they were all inside he shut the door and set the whole thing alight, and burned it on their heads. There had not been such a severe and such a sweeping judgment in Israel for centuries, and it was that judgment that the still, small voice announced. God wasn't in the whirlwind, God wasn't in the earthquake, God wasn't in the fire. They were but the outriders of his divine majesty. If God was coming in his condescension to the mouth of this cave to speak to Elijah, then first would come the outriders and the postilions of the divine presence, and the fire and the earthquake and the thunder and the wind came with suitable majesty to conduct God almighty, and make Elijah aware of the solemnity of the occasion.

There came a still, small voice, but it came to announce, as I say, the most sweeping judgment that Israel had ever seen thus far. It was a still, small voice, because when God utters judgment, he doesn't lose his temper. He doesn't shout and rave like we do when we fly off the handle, annoyed at something. When God almighty rises up to judge, he speaks calmly in a still, small voice. 'Go and anoint Hazael king over Syria. Go and anoint Jehu king over Israel,' and between them they cut Israel to mincemeat. You will notice again that the

judgment that God commanded in that still, small voice, when he announced the appointment of the executors of his wrath against Israel, did not fall at once. You will have to turn many pages of the Old Testament history until at long length you come to the actual appointment of Hazael as king over Syria. You won't find that until you come to 2 Kings 8, and you'll still have to turn another page to 2 Kings 9, before you read of the appointment of Jehu to be king over Israel. So what in fact is happening is this. God is announcing the coming judgment to Elijah as he stands on Horeb and that judgment at length will fall. But in between time there is an interval, a respite, and it was precisely in that interval of time between the announcement of the judgment and the falling of the judgment that Elisha was appointed to perform his ministry.

We shall have to notice presently that when Elisha was appointed to perform his ministry it was described like this, 'And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death' (v. 17). I give notice of a question, or if you like to do some homework, then I guess a little homework. Elisha, as you see, is appointed to slay people. You might care to read up the story and to ask yourselves, how many people did Elisha actually slay? What did God mean when he had Elisha appointed to slay those that escaped from the sword of Jehu? We'll leave that for a moment: we've got our number one point. Elisha ministered in the interval between an announcement of coming judgment and the actual falling of that judgment.

That isn't altogether unlike us in this Christian age. Before the Lord Jesus went, he announced a coming judgment. Seated on the Mount of Olives he solemnly declared that there would come a day of severe and unparalleled judgment on the Jewish nation. When whirlwind and fire and earthquake will eventually presage and introduce an unparalleled judgment that precedes the coming of the Lord Jesus in power and great glory.

You say, 'He announced it before he went, but it hasn't come yet. We are privileged to be living in a time between the announcement of that coming judgment and the actual falling of that judgment upon men. Living in an interval of grace and mercy while God is calling men to repent in view of the fact that judgment has been announced, and one of these days must fall.' If you think like that, perhaps you may take some encouragement from Paul the apostle himself. He thought like that too. In fact, if you noticed in Romans 11, we read Paul quoting the very words of Elijah on Mount Horeb, and God's answer to Elijah. Paul is to be heard saying in Romans 11, 'You know my dear brethren that what happened to Elijah on Mount Horeb is nowadays happening to us Jews in Palestine and elsewhere around the Roman world. Exactly what happened with Israel and Elijah on Mount Horeb is happening to the Jewish nation in our own day.' So we wouldn't be altogether fanciful if we began to think like that.

But where does the parallel lie? God was announcing judgment, and Elijah as he stands upon the mountain is complaining to God, 'Israel have forsaken your covenant, they've cast down your altars, they're murdering your prophets, and I alone am left. What are you going to do about it, God?' Guilty Israel, murdering the prophets that were sent to her, rejecting God's messages of grace. Now Elijah himself has had to run for his life. What will God do about it? Says God to Elijah, 'I shall bring judgment upon this nation, but yet have I left me seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'

'Do you know,' says Paul, 'It's just like that now. Not only has Elijah come with his message of grace, but God's own Son has come into our world, Messiah himself has come, and Israel has rejected him, and God has cast them off. Even so, not completely, for even now there is a remnant according to grace. Don't you remember what God said to Elijah? "Yet have I left me seven thousand men who have not bowed their knee to Baal." It's like that now. There is an election of grace from Israel. I am proud to be one of them, one rescued out of that guilty nation of Israel that has rejected their Messiah, and I form part of that election according to grace.'

So we are to think of this Old Testament situation as one of those early foreshadowings of what would happen to Israel when they at last rejected Jesus Christ as Son of God and Messiah, and God's wrath fell on them. The fact that there was left a remnant under Elijah that prayed for men was a prototype of the fact that, in this age when Israel has rejected her Messiah, there would be left a remnant from Israel, loyal to the Messiah and believing still in God, a harbinger and promise of greater things, when at last Israel will be restored.

Meanwhile we see God in his mercy waiting; God in his mercy sending out the gospel message, so that Gentiles who hitherto had not been favoured as the people of God could have a chance to hear the gospel and enter into salvation, and be blessed of God in a unique fashion. And if you've been reading your Kings recently you may have noticed something else. After God's wrath had been pronounced upon Israel because of their rejection of Elijah, there was that interval before the final judgment fell, and it was during that interval that Naaman the leper was healed. You say, 'What's so special about that?' Don't you remember what our Lord said? Standing amidst his fellow Jews and countrymen and townsmen in the synagogue of Nazareth, as they curled their lip against him and got ready to deny and reject his gospel, he said to them, 'You know, there were many lepers in Israel in the times of Elisha the prophet, but none of them got healed, except Naaman of Syria' (Luke 4:27). In that interval of time in the Old Testament, God's mercies began to expand, and the Gentile Syrian Naaman was brought in, and was cleansed and converted to the worship of the God of Israel. You say, 'One swallow doesn't make a summer.' I know, but one swallow will do as principle. When we think of Naaman the Gentile brought into blessing and brought to faith in Israel's God in that interval between the announcement of judgment, and its falling upon the nation, we stand in just such a position. But, thank God, instead of one Naaman, there are millions and millions of Naamans, who in this time of grace have had the chance to hear the gospel. Israel's rejection of it has meant that riches have come to the likes of us.

Elisha then began his ministry and finished it in that interval of grace against the dark backdrop of judgment. Unpleasant as it may be to have to do it, we must do it, for God's Word requires it of us. We have a glorious message to preach of new life, of new power, of forgiveness, of new strength, of new resources. We shall not see the significance of what we preach in all its fullness, unless we are prepared honestly to face the background against which God would have us preach it. What urgency is there for our gospel? Why should I bother about the coming mission? What really does the gospel do for anybody anyway? You say it makes you feel good inside. I hope it does, but it does something more. For whether they realize it or not, whether men feel very gloomy, or whether they're on top of the world and feel no need of salvation, the fact is that men are living in that interval between the

announcement of the biggest judgment that this world has ever seen, and the falling of that judgment at the end of this age.

If only more Israelites had heard what God said to Elijah about those coming judgments upon Israel, I tell you Israelites would have been queuing up to be saved. But they didn't know, or they didn't believe it. Yet a Gentile leper like Naaman, because he was ill and in great need, was moved to come all the way down to seek the prophet and to seek cleansing. Many a respectable Israelite didn't bother, didn't see any urgency, didn't know that there was a coming judgment and that the sentence had already gone out, and in their indifference they perished. It happens to us sometimes that we lose the sense of urgency, because we interpret the gospel as merely meeting our own emotional needs and bringing us satisfaction. God be thanked that there is a satisfaction in the gospel, but we forget that it's not just satisfaction we need. First and foremost we need deliverance from the wrath of God.

Let us spend some time then thinking about this matter of God's wrath. Why must it come? Why should Elijah plead against Israel? Because they have rejected their prophets and now 'they seek my life'. What was the significance of that? Well, Elijah had not always stood on Mount Horeb pleading against Israel. Earlier he had stood on Mount Carmel pleading for Israel. You must allow me to tell you the story. Why must the judgment come? What were the reasons?

Israel under Omri, and even more under Ahab and Jezebel, had departed from the true and the living God, and gone off to worship Baal, god of the Sidonians. And you say, 'Who was Baal?' Baal was first of all the storm god. If you stood out there on the coast by Tunisia, when the Mediterranean had one of its wild moods on, you would have been impressed by Baal. How he stormed out there on the sea, with those white horses and foam and crashing waves and wind. Some people when they looked thought or imagined they could see a boar raising its angry head amongst the foam, and they thought it was a god. The god of the storm, but there wasn't any god there at all, only a few drops of water and a few puffs of wind. The Israelites allowed themselves to forget the living God, and to bow down to the physical forces of the universe.

Then Baal, in some of his forms, was the god of fertility, that's why he was likened to a bull. If you had been an Israelite farmer whose whole business and prosperity depended on having fruitful herds, the old bull is chief among the means by which you can have prosperous herds of cattle. People didn't altogether understand the biological mysteries of fertility and, forgetting the living God, they started to worship the physical mechanisms of life, reproduction and fertility. They left the living God and worshipped and served the created thing, the creative process. Modern man is getting perilously near doing the same. Having lost faith in the living God scientists have found out so many of the wonders of the atom and of the cell, which are altogether extraordinary, that some men, foolishly carried away by what little they know, proudly assert that they don't believe there's any God out there. It's the scientist, with his manipulation of the cell and the atom, who is going to bring society to this wonderful paradise that all men seek. Others now put all their hopes and their trust for building a new world and a new society in the computer chip. Nothing wrong with silicon chips, but to put your faith in them as the secret of creating a new world and making it

a glorious place for men to live in is foolishness. Men have lost faith in the living God and have started to worship the mere creature.

So then Israel went away from the living God and started to worship Baal, and God sent Elijah the prophet to bring them back. God in his mercy, instead of bringing judgments upon Israel for their disobedience, in his patience through Elijah, once more brought his people back. That was a solemn occasion when on Mount Carmel God proceeded to demonstrate who the living God is, so that men might know for sure that there is a living God, and who he is (1 Kgs 18:20–40). You say, 'How did God do that? Please tell me.' Well, it was arranged with the priests of Baal and the Israelites on the one hand and Elijah on the other that each would call upon his god. The priests of Baal would call upon Baal, Elijah would call upon Jehovah, and the god that answered, the god that speaks, would be the living God. The priests of Baal had a go. They got their sacrifice and they called upon Baal. 'Baal, hear us!' But he didn't answer.

'Try again,' suggested Elijah.

'Baal, hear us!'

There was no voice.

'Gone to the toilet, I reckon,' said Elijah. 'Try again. Or perhaps he's gone out hunting. Have another go.'

'Baal, hear us!'

They got their knives out, slashed themselves until the blood ran red.

There was no voice.

Do I speak to somebody here that doesn't know the living God? Your faith is merely in things, the material forces of the universe. My friend, there may well come a time when you realise that you need help to get through life, and then if you don't know the living God how sad it's going to be. You cry for help, cry to your atoms, but there's no voice there. Cry to sun, moon and stars. You'll get no voice there. Bow down in front of your computer and your silicon chip, that hitherto has been solving your mathematical problems, and cry to it for some voice that will speak to your heart and tell you about eternity and the meaning of life, and no voice will come back. There will be no true God. You are alone in the universe, crying to the wind. There's no voice to answer. How terribly lonely they are, those who don't know the living God. Little bits of life stuck on a planet going round in space and trying to find meaning and calling in all directions, to what? No answer. Man alone in the universe. Is there a voice to be heard? Oh yes, there is a voice. There is a living God, waiting to talk to men. They need not be alone.

God made Israel to talk to them and speak to their hearts the message of his love and mercy, but they had run away after their false gods. But now, through Elijah his servant, he will speak to them, but what on earth will he say? Consider how they've run away from God, how they've abandoned God. They have left off talking to God for ages and gone after empty nonsenses. Will there be some thundering rebuke? Some terrible announcement of judgment upon them for their apostasy? No such thing. God spoke that day, and he spoke by means of a sacrifice. Elijah placed the sacrifice upon the altar and doused it with water and cried to the living God, 'In the name of Israel, a sacrifice offered for Israel's sake.' The living God responded by fire from heaven, and accepted that sacrifice on behalf of guilty Israel. God

spoke. What a moment in the history of that erring and apostate nation to discover God, waiting to speak to them still and make himself known, not in his judgment upon them, but in his judgment upon that sacrifice.

Who could read the story of Mount Carmel without thinking of another mountain? The living God, can he be heard to speak? Would he speak to me? Where can I hear him? And what will he say? If there's a living God you'll hear him on the mount called Calvary. You'll hear him speak in a voice that is heard from the central cross, 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt 27:46). The answer is that the judgment you deserve has fallen upon God's own Son. This is God incarnate dying for you. Does that speak to your heart? Is that what God is really like? Ponder it, friend. The Bible says that that is how God makes himself known to men, by the preaching of the cross of Christ. There you see that he loves you. This is who his son died for. What a message.

Israel, for the moment, rallied and came round Elijah and professed to repent. The priests of Baal were slain and Israel said they would follow the Lord. It was only a few days later that Jezebel was chasing Elijah up hill and down dale, and Elijah was obliged to run for his life. Israel had not only gone into apostasy after Baal, but here was Israel officially now, in the person of king and queen, rejecting outright the message of God preached on Carmel. What do you suppose is going to happen now? What do you suppose the still, small voice will say about that? Words of comfort? I think not. If men will reject the message of Carmel, there's nothing left but judgment. If men will not have the grace of the sacrifice of Carmel, there is nothing left but the terror of the law of Mount Horeb.

When Elijah stood by that sacrifice on Mount Carmel and pleaded for Israel in the name of the living God and of the sacrifice he offered, there came showers of blessing. When Israel rejected that message, Elijah went and stood upon Mount Horeb. We all know what Horeb stands for. There the law was given. My good friend, if Elijah were to go and stand on Mount Horeb right now, and in the name of God's holy law began talking about you, what do you think God would have to say? If we take our stand to defy God's holy law, there's nothing God can say except to condemn the sinner, the sinner who has already rejected the sacrifice of his Son.

It was in that context that God announced, by that still small voice, the most sweeping judgment that Israel, up to that time, had ever experienced. It was against that background where the judgment had been pronounced, and before it fell, that Elisha was commissioned to go and preach. Would you be surprised to find that that added an edge of urgency to his work and ministry? He really believed it. Once Hazael came and Jehu came, judgment would run red as men and women were slain. Elisha was commissioned to go out and slay them in some other way, that they might escape the sword of Hazael and Jehu. Judgment is pronounced, you'd better believe it. The only way to be saved is to face the fact and to ask, 'How can I be delivered from that judgment?'

The Lord's people are walking in Elisha's footsteps in these coming weeks. If all together we join in this gospel mission we will show whether or not we really believe what we profess. What a glorious message for sinners—the blessed sacrifice of Mount Calvary, and the voice of God that speaks mercy on the basis of that finished work. What will happen to folks if they hear it and reject it? Shall we pray they don't? Or will we also use what means we may to

prevail upon them to hear the Saviour, to hear the voice of God, to confess themselves sinners and worthy of the judgment, and find the way of salvation that he has provided for them. And if we do so, for all our weakness, we will be miniature Elishas in our own day and generation.

Background

*1 Kings 20–2 Kings 1
John 14:19–20; 16:7–16*

In this session I want, for the most part, to move on in Elisha's ministry and think now still of the background to what he did: the background as we find it in the two ascensions of Elijah. Two ascensions because in 2 Kings 1, we have one ascension where Elijah went up and sat upon the mountain and sundry captains with their fifties came in the name of the king to see him with, on the whole, disastrous results. Then that other, glorious ascension as he walked with Elisha and they went finally from Gilgal to Bethel and from Bethel to Jericho. And in Jericho there came the horses of fire and a chariot and Elijah went up to heaven, and Elisha saw him go. The two ascensions of Elijah: one of them up the mountain; the second up to heaven. They formed a vivid, immediate background to Elisha and his ministry. Before I proceed to that, I want just to say a word or two in very brief language about the chapters that come in between. First, because we ought to be fair to the text and not just to pick and choose here and there; and secondly, because attention, however brief, to those intermediate chapters that come between Horeb and the end of 1 Kings, may help to dispel various difficulties that may have come into our mind.

I wonder did you find yourself thinking, in our first study, 'Oh well, I believe what the man says because it's in the Bible that God sent these judgments, but aren't they a little bit bloodthirsty? Do we really believe that God was behind all that slaughtering that went on when Jehu came and slaughtered the house of Ahab? How does that tie in with the God of love, made known to us in Jesus Christ our Lord?' So let's speak just a little bit about those ancient judgments. Is there in our heart any misgiving about the righteousness of God's judgment? Then one of the very foundations of our gospel message will be undercut. We live in a modern world where not only the world, but oftentimes professing Christians, doubt or deny that God will ever judge anybody. I do remember on one occasion, having talked about the gospel message of our Lord Jesus and how Christ died and bore the wrath of God in our place, a student coming up to me and saying, 'You've upset me, because I thought that God didn't ever have any wrath and never got angry. What are you doing saying that the gospel is that Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God in our place? Surely it would be a very wrong thing for God to get angry with anybody.'

This good student believed of course in the God of love, and he believed with all his heart in the forgiveness of God, and wanted to preach it. What he couldn't accept is that God would ever get angry against the sinner. Well, I said perhaps what you would have said. In the first instance of course the Bible does say God gets angry. He's angry with sinners every

day. Secondly, if God doesn't get angry against sin then you won't need any forgiveness. You won't need to preach forgiveness for if there is no wrath of God against sin, you needn't trouble yourself that you have sinned. If there is no wrath against sin, then you won't need the love of God to forgive sin.

When we have said that of course we should next observe that, in these ancient Old Testament examples of the wrath of God, we are not dealing with the perfect expression of that wrath as it will be expressed in the final judgment. We are dealing with God's providential judgment of men, in which God was pleased in his wisdom to use men like Jehu to chastise the people of Israel, even though Jehu himself was one of the biggest rascals that ever walked on two legs. Jehu performed his task in altogether the wrong spirit and did some dreadful things, for which God almighty will yet hold the man responsible. So that when you come to the prophet Hosea you will find him exclaiming against Jehu, saying that God will yet require the blood of Jezreel from that bloodthirsty monster Jehu, for the excesses he committed, and for the spirit in which he committed them. (See Hosea 1:4)

That's no new problem, is it? God at one stage used the Assyrians, says Isaiah, to chastise his people, and Assyria's wars against Israel were God's chastisement on Israel. But Assyria didn't realise it was so, and they didn't do it out of pure motive, to be the executors of God's chastisement. Assyria did it with a proud and a cruel heart against Israel, and says God through Isaiah, 'Now Assyria, you were the rod of my anger, but when you ceased doing what I wanted you to do on Israel, you went beyond it of your own wicked heart. I shall call you to judgment for the evil and the excesses that you perpetrated when you went beyond your brief.' (Isa 10:5-7) So we are to understand that not all that Jehu did in his bloodthirstiness was approved of God. Far from it. Yet God in his providence used Jehu as a judgment upon Israel.

The other thing I would have you notice is that when God announced his judgment, not only on Israel but on Ahab, the first thing God did was once more to preach the gospel to Ahab. It happened like this. Ben-hadad, the Syrian king, had at that time sent a message to Ahab and he said, 'Ahab, your soldiers are my soldiers, your wives are my wives, your people are my people, your goods are my goods.' (1 Kgs 20:1-3). A curious letter to get upon your breakfast table in the morning, is it not? As Ahab sat there with Jezebel at breakfast and pondered this letter with his ministers of state around, he said to himself and to his ministers, 'What do you think this brigand is up to? Claiming that all we've got is his and there's no difference between his and mine, and me and him. What should we do?' Well, he didn't want to kick up a row, so he sent a nice little *billet doux* back to Ben-hadad, and said 'I thought it was a very nice letter you sent me the other day, thank you very much. It is exactly as you say' (v. 4). There he thought the matter would rest. But there came another letter. 'I really meant what I said. Everything you've got is mine. There's no difference between me and you, and I'm coming to get it' (vv. 5-6).

Ponder the significance of that. Ben-hadad was a Syrian. Ahab's ancestors had been Syrians. The Hebrew word is really Arameans, but we'll use the traditional term in English, Syrians. Abraham had been a Syrian and Aramean before he got converted. He lived in Aram-Naharaim, Aramea of the two rivers. A pagan idolater perhaps like the rest of them, but then the God of glory appeared to him, brought him out of Mesopotamia and made

Abraham the great pilgrim of faith, the man that was the very friend of God and knew the living God as distinct from those wretched idols of the Gentile world. That experience of seeing the glory of God and coming to know the real and the living God meant everything to Abraham, and marked him distinct from the rest of men. It was, if you will, a conversion experience like that of the Thessalonian Christians who 'turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven' (1 Thess 1:9-10). To that kind of conversion experience Abraham owed everything, and the nation of Israel owed everything. They stood separate from the nations as the nation to whom God had revealed himself, the living and true God in all his glory, forever marking out Israel separate from the others.

Now here was Ben-hadad, king of the Syrians, coming along to Ahab and saying, 'There isn't really any difference between me and you. You once were an Aramean, weren't you? You've taken this stand of being a separate nation, separate from all the Gentile nations around. You say you have a God who looks after you, the living God, and what we've got are idols. But let me tell you, you're no different from us. Your horses are my horses, your wives are my wives and your country is my country. There is no difference between me and you, and you and me.' So now it is not only a question of Ahab's personal possessions. This isn't merely a takeover bid. It goes to the very fundamental reason for Israel's existence. Was there a difference between Israel and the Gentile world? What is all this business about Abraham being called out and knowing the true and living God? Is it true? Or is this 'Jehovah, the great I Am' that the Jews have got, really no different from what the Gentiles had anyway?

I tell you nothing new when I tell you there is now a distinct tendency in certain parts of Christendom to say that really we should stop evangelising the non-Christian people, because they've got their gods and they've got their religions. For Christians to come along and say that Jesus Christ is unique is an insult to other people's religions. They say that really there's no difference; they want to take the best out of the lot and put them together in a religious potpourri and stop this business that there is a difference. Well, it's a very ancient attitude, Ben-hadad had it. So what will Ahab do?

Twice over God sent Ahab a prophet, and the prophet said in the name of the Lord, 'Now look here Ahab, by yourself you couldn't possibly drive back the Syrians but God is going to do a miracle for you. God is going to defeat the Syrians in order that you may know that Jehovah is God' (20:13). What a lovely gospel message that was to Ahab, virtual apostate as he nearly was. Having rejected the sacrifice on Mount Carmel as he had, here is the supreme God of heaven in his mercy stooping down to Ahab, not willing that even Ahab should perish, but rather come to the truth and discover the true and living God in his own personal and national experience. God coming in and saving the man from his enemy. By his own almighty power God defeated the Syrians and Ahab went free. Said Ben-hadad when he had a military report meeting with his captains, 'How did we come unstuck that time?' 'Well,' they said, 'Sir, you see, their God is a God of the hills. Now if you'd got the Israelites down onto the plain, you'd have found out their God isn't very good on the plain: he's just a God of the hills.' (v. 23) These poor old Syrians couldn't get it out of their heads that the God of Israel was no more than any other little local deity, one more idol, and that there really was no difference, only that Jehovah happened to be very good at fighting battles in hills. 'Well,' said Ben-hadad, 'next time we'll fight them on the plain and we shall win.' Once more God sent a

prophet to Ahab and he said, 'Now Ahab, they're going to try and fight you on the plain this time, but because they have said that I am a God of the hills, some little idol, some local vegetation deity or something, I am going to demonstrate to them that I am the true living God of all the earth. Ahab, it won't be your skill, nor your power or prowess in fighting, it will be my power demonstrated in defeating the Syrians and giving you victory' (v. 28). And that's what happened.

Twice over this great gospel message of the reality of the living God, different from all the heathen idols around, was demonstrated to Ahab. Given to him, for he didn't have to fight for it: God did the fighting, to make God real to Ahab, and show him the difference between a man who knows and trusts the living God, and a man who is still unregenerate, as we would say, following idols.

So the battle was won and Ben-hadad, king of Syria, thought about how to escape the death that stared him in the face. So he sent a lot of his ministers out with ropes around their necks, ready to be pulled. He said to his ministers, 'I know that the kings of Israel are pretty weak kneed, soft hearted chaps. You go out with these ropes around your neck. They won't do anything serious' (vv. 31–32). So out they went and came upon Ahab sitting in his chariot. What do you suppose Ahab should have done with them? Should he not have pulled the ropes? Not Ahab. Instead he said to them, 'You've come from Ben-hadad, I see. How is my brother, Ben-hadad?' The men pricked up their ears then. 'Brother Ben-hadad!? Did you notice what he said? He'll never pull these ropes, thank the Lord, or thank Baal I suppose they said. We shan't have to die.'

Ahab sent for Ben-hadad and invited him to come and sit in his chariot. He said to him, 'Ben-hadad, you know we are brothers after all. What are we meant to be fighting about, because really, there is no difference between me and you, is there?' I don't know about you, but I feel like saying, 'Ahab, you fool! This is the chap that was claiming everything you had. He was going to wipe out your very identity and make you one of him. Your father said there was an enormous, incalculable difference between men who knew the living God and men who served idols. Are you going to say there is no difference? That you're all the same, and virtually deny the great tradition of Abraham and the revelation of the true God, and deny Israel's distinctiveness? If you are you might as well pack up, for the Syrians in the end will destroy you.'

We need to face that same issue, don't we? What is all this great tradition about which we read of in the Scriptures? Not only Abraham and the self-revelation of Jehovah 'the great I Am' to Abraham and to that nation. What is that vaster revelation of God in Jesus Christ, his unique and only Son? Is there no difference between Jesus Christ and all the other religious leaders of the world? If there is no difference then you deny the revelation completely, and you might as well pack up your Christianity.

There came the last time that God would preach the gospel to Ahab and offer him deliverance as a personal experience of the living God versus idols, the day when at last Ahab perished by the sword of those very same Syrians. It happened like this. Ahab persuaded Jehoshaphat and together they mounted a campaign against the Syrians, so says the last chapter of 1 Kings. As they were sitting on their thrones before the battle Ahab got his false prophets, for now the dear man had sunk deeper than ever in idolatry and, leaving the

true and the living God, he called the false prophets of Baal to come in front of him and he asked them, 'What do you counsel? Should I go up to fight these Syrians or not?'

And with one accord they said, 'Yes, go up and fight them.'

Jehoshaphat was sitting upon his throne (how Jehoshaphat ever came to be with Ahab, I haven't the time to tell you but it was an unfortunate place for him to be). Jehoshaphat said, 'Now Ahab, your prophets are very nice gentlemen, but couldn't we just perhaps enquire of a prophet of the Lord?'

Things have come to something haven't they when a king of Judah has to ask permission to consult one prophet of the living God in case he offends his brother Israelite. 'Well,' said Ahab, 'if you must, but it's exceedingly old fashioned stuff. We haven't really got any prophets of the Lord left. Well, we have one, but the man's in prison anyway. He's so impossibly rude, and never speaks anything good to me, so I put him in prison.'

Jehoshaphat said, 'I would just like to hear what he's got to say.'

So a prison officer was sent off to get this prophet of the Lord out of prison. His name was Micaiah. As the captain of the guard brought him out of his dungeon and walked him up the road to speak to the kings he said to Micaiah, 'It's not my business to tell you what to say as the prophet of the Lord, but I just thought I'd better tell you that all the other prophets have been speaking good things to King Ahab, telling him to go. Do what you have to do, but if you find it in your heart to say yes it would avoid a lot of disagreement. At long last we've got Jehoshaphat and Ahab together in this campaign. It wouldn't be any good adding too much disagreement just now, so try to give a nice encouraging word.'

So Micaiah came and Ahab asked him, 'Micaiah, tell us, should we go up to Ramoth-gilead against the Syrians or not?'

Micaiah said, 'Yes, my Lord. Go.'

Ahab was so thunderstruck he nearly fell off his seat. 'Look here my man,' he said, 'how many times have I got to tell you to tell me the truth?'

'Well if you want to know the truth, the fact is that God has sent a lying spirit in the mouths of these false prophets to delude you, Ahab, so that you may go up to the battlefield and perish.'

Wasn't it the truth then? All the prophets had said go up to Ramoth-gilead. If Micaiah says the same thing, why doesn't the man believe him? Not Ahab, for when Micaiah said go up, Ahab in his heart of hearts knew it wasn't right. A lying spirit, a strong delusion that he believed the lie, and Ahab went to his death by a lying spirit, sent in God's providence to the man who would not have the truth. A lying spirit, that the man might be damned. You may feel that was unfair, but remember that when Ahab perished he knew the truth. He knew when Micaiah said 'go up', that Micaiah was not saying the truth. He told him so. He knew what the truth was. The exceedingly solemn thing is that knowing the truth, Ahab, having rejected it so many times, found that he couldn't believe it. He believed the lie, knowing it was a lie, and so went to his death.

We preach the gospel against the sad background that the living God is real. He is long suffering, not willing that any should perish (2 Pet 3:9), and time and time again will he preach the gospel. But there comes a point when the man, with his eyes open, rejects the truth for the last time and will perish believing the lie, knowing it to be a lie. 'Therefore God sends

them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.' (2 Thess 2:11–12)

A sad thing, but thus our gospel says. And if we would preach a gospel that is real and solid, we must believe with all our heart that its message comes from the true and living God, and there is an eternal difference between believing him and believing idols. That Jesus Christ is God's unique Son, 'And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). It is a vast and a great salvation, and it follows that finally to say, 'No' to God, finally to reject God's truth, is to choose the lie. There then comes a point when God almighty fixes the sinner in his choice and he perishes, believing the lie, but knowing it to be a lie. May God give us compassion for men, and faith in God's gospel, for it is the only power of God to salvation (Rom 1:16).

You say, 'Mr Preacher, you have been exceedingly solemn. Have you forgotten that when the Lord Jesus Christ was here on earth he drew a great distinction between himself and the days of Elijah? Is it not true that when he was in Samaria at one time and was refused a nice lodging in a Samaritan village, his apostles were for calling down fire from heaven in the name of Elijah, and our Lord Jesus rebuked them and said, 'Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them' (Luke 9:55–56 KJV). Have you forgotten, Mr Preacher?'

No, I haven't forgotten. Oh, the mercy of Jesus Christ, God's Son! Look at Calvary and its sacrifice, bigger ever than Carmel's sacrifice. I bid you think that Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of God, waits still. Oh for the longsuffering of Jesus Christ our Lord, crucified hand and foot, his side rent with a spear, now exalted upon the throne of heaven and patiently waiting, not willing that any should perish. Our hearts should admire and worship him who, with all authority in heaven and earth given into his hand, waits and does not yet come.

You may think I've gone a long way round to get to the topics we read about at the beginning. That was deliberate, and we shall read them again at the next session, for God's Word never grows old and therefore can be read more than once. I wanted you to have in your mind, and I in mine, those two ascensions of Elijah which we shall consider in detail next time. I want to mention the first of them briefly. Second Kings opens thus, that Elijah went up and sat upon the mountain. The king of Israel fell down out of his window. That was a contrary motion, wasn't it? He had a fall and was sick and liable to die, so he sent a servant to the god Baal-zebub to ask whether he would get well or not. Would he never learn the difference between idols and the true and living God?

Elijah met the man and told him to go back home and tell his master that he would die if he put his trust in idols like that. If he rejected the living God, there was nothing but death. Having delivered that message, Elijah went back up his mountain. So the king sent a squad of troops and they called up the mountain, 'Elijah, come down! The king tells you to come down.'

'Well,' said Elijah, 'If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and destroy the lot of you' (v. 10). So it came. For if Elijah was a man of God, a true representative of the living God, then to reject God is to bring down judgment.

What about Jesus Christ? He once came down to our earth. He's risen and ascended. What was the significance of his ascension? The Holy Spirit has come to witness that Jesus Christ, whom men crucified, is risen from the dead and sits at God's right hand. His ascension has a glorious significance, but the first part of it is this: the Spirit has come to give witness of sin, of righteousness and of judgment (see John 16:8-11). Of sin because the world has failed to believe Jesus. Of righteousness because Christ has gone to the farthest throne, and is publicly declared to be the Son of God. And if those two things be true the Holy Spirit witnesses of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged.

The ascension of Christ tells us all that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. His cross was, on the human side, engineered by his enemies, inspired of Satan. But now Jesus Christ is risen and triumphed, he has ascended to heaven and sits upon the throne of the universe. You must take sides. There is glory for those that take sides with Christ; but suppose we take sides against Christ, what then? Says Jesus himself, the Holy Spirit's message must be this: of judgment, for not to stand with Christ knowingly is to stand on the other side, and the ascension of Christ spells judgment for those that reject him.

That's very solemn. I'm sad to send you home with such solemn things in your ears, but then I didn't write Kings and I didn't write John's Gospel either. Judgment is a reality. That's why we need a Saviour. God willing, on the next occasion we shall go on to consider Elisha and all those glorious instances of God's salvation that he demonstrated, because he had seen the ascension of Elijah to the throne of God.

God's Government

2 Kings 1-3

We have spent two of our studies together considering the background of Elisha's appointment and ministry. Now we will spend our second two studies thinking of the ministry of Elisha itself. When we studied the background of his call and appointment we found it was heavy with ideas of judgment, sombre and solemn indeed. I suspect that none of us enjoyed it. How could anyone possibly enjoy listening to the solemn matter of the judgments of God? In this session and the next we shall be turning to far brighter subjects. That gracious and supernatural ministry that Elisha was given to exercise in Israel at this time. How that he brought new hope and new life to people who were at the very end of their resources and teetering on the edge of disaster. You will observe that all those stories we have just read have this one thing in common: they present to us people in real life situations, going about their responsibilities, trying to cope with life, and finding it too much for them; people that are teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, of slavery, of disaster.

There were the three kings gathered together to try and put down a rebellion against the throne of Israel, a very necessary and urgent task, so that the rebellious Moabites should be subdued and brought again into proper servitude to Israel. Away go the kings to do their kingly job of putting down rebels, and presently they run out of water for their army and suddenly find themselves on the very edge of disaster and defeat. Elisha comes along and, empowered by God, he brings them a supernatural supply in the moment of their distress. He demonstrates to them the infinite resources of God (3:1-27).

Then there was that mother whose husband was dead and she was having to fight a very lonely battle through life to win her daily bread and butter and maintain the family. But now she was in debt and life was proving too much for her, her responsibilities too arduous. She cries to the prophet that the creditor has come to take her sons for slaves in order to discharge her debt (4:1-7). Her work, instead of being a joyful occupation, is now turning into a threat of becoming sheer slavery. Elisha is used of God to point her to a supernatural resource that rescues her from slavery; and makes life, and life's tasks, once more the bearable and interesting work that they ought to be.

Then there was that young boy whose mother for a time had been barren. It was altogether a gracious miracle on God's part that she ever had this child. Doubtless she brought the child up with all the care that a mother would bring to her first born, and a child that she felt had been given to her especially by God. What a responsibility for a mother to have a child like that, specially given by God, by God's miraculous intervention. One day, to her great pride, he grew up strong enough that he was going to take his place with the

workers in the field. He went out to the harvest, but the sun was hot and the work was hard. Eventually, the work and the heat proved too much for the boy and he succumbed. Working the harvest would have proved an utter disaster for him, had it not been for Elisha and the way he was able to point them to a source of supernatural revival and renewal of powers (vv. 8–37).

Finally, there was that theological college. They got themselves into a very curious situation where they were supposed to be offering the students nourishing food. In its place somebody unwittingly put in a whole lot of poison and nearly poisoned the whole college. They were rescued at length by the ministry of Elisha (vv. 38–44).

So these stories are going to regale us with the lovely sight of God's salvation and God's infinite resources. They tell us that when we've come to the end of our own resources, his gracious giving has only begun. There is one little point that we ought to notice before we proceed however. We mustn't think that now we've finished talking about that solemn and unpleasant business of the judgment of God, we can safely forget all about judgment and turn to the lovely side of God's love. Actually, God's judgment and God's love are two sides of the same thing. God's wrath is not something that we Christians ought to regret or be ashamed of. It is a glorious fact that God is angry against sin: it's nothing to be ashamed of. Moreover we shall find, when we begin to peer into the question, that the secret of Elisha's blessing lay partly in this, that he had accepted the fact of God's judgment against Israel's sin.

So then let's begin the story, and we notice how 2 Kings 1, and verse 1 begins, 'After the death of Ahab, Moab rebelled against Israel.' The inspired writer puts the remark there and then you don't hear any more of that rebellion until you come to chapter 3, where the story is told at great length. This is the first major problem, and we're going to be shown how the solution to Moab's rebellion was found in Elisha; why it was that Elisha was able to solve this problem whereas the three kings, instead of solving it, nearly made matters ten thousand times worse and almost brought the armies of Israel to disaster.

Moab rebelled after the death of Ahab and Ahaziah his son, being king of Israel, fell down through the lattice in his upper chamber and was sick. It was a most unfortunate time to have a fall, particularly if you were a king of Israel. Bad enough to have a fall any day of the week, but now in this situation where Moab, one of Israel's servant kings, had rebelled against the throne and were a threat to Israel, for the king to have a fall and have to lie on his bed, powerless and sick, was a most unfortunate thing. A fallen king and a rebel Moab, what a plight to be in! This fallen king, in his distress, unable in his weakness to cope with the rebellion, sent a message for help, and alas, as we saw last time, he sent a message for help to Baal-zebub, idol of the nations that were around. Foolish man, for there was no help to restore him and there was no help to overcome this rebellion either. So Elijah came to his messengers, we are told, and told them to go back to the king and tell the him, 'Foolish king that you are, is it because there's no living God in Israel that you apply to dead idols that cannot help?' There is only one God, and no other name under heaven, given among men, whereby you can be saved (Acts 4:12). What is the use of your going to idols to save you? Because when you have rejected the living God and gone to idols, you will never recover from your fall. When Elijah sent the messengers back to tell the king that message, he got

angry and sent a squad of troops to arrest Elijah. Whereupon Elijah, who had gone up the mountain, would call down fire from heaven upon them and consume them.

We still need that message. It's not only King Ahaziah who fell down out of his window. Man as a whole has fallen, and one of the unfortunate things about our fall is that a lot of the powers that should be subject to us and obey us have rebelled against us. Haven't you found that so? You were meant to be a kind of a king, weren't you, in your own castle?

There's many a British man that likes to think he is king in his own castle anyway. Many of us may be kings in our own castle when we get inside our front doors. But inside the castle of our own lives we have suffered all sorts of rebellions. The tongue is a very necessary organ, and it's not bad so long as it obeys the man that's supposed to be in charge of the castle. But you've got a tongue that from time to time, instead of being under control, revolts and rebels. Have you any rebels in your castle? Many have found that instead of being a sovereign king over their own personality, ruling mind and soul and body, they find themselves very often, as C. S. Lewis used to say, as prisoners in one of the cells of their own palace, shut in and controlled by this passion or that habit. Or, if you would like to use the theologian's term, a prisoner of the flesh, that old unruly principle that is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. We're not talking parables now, we're talking plain reality. There isn't a man or woman whose experience hasn't proved it. We're less than kings in our castle. We've suffered rebellion of what the Bible calls the flesh. There is salvation, but where is it to be found? The whole of the Old Testament unites to tell us that there is salvation, but it is only in the living God.

If men turn to idols, to put their trust in the works of their own hands to save them, they will find to their cost that there is no cure that way, no salvation, no deliverance. And the fall will become permanent and end in eternal death. If men turn and reject our blessed Lord himself, who came to offer the sacrifice by which we might find forgiveness and reconciliation with God, the situation becomes doubly hopeless. For just as Elijah, having been rejected by Jezebel and Ahab, went up the mountain and from there fire came down upon those that would have arrested and destroyed him, so our Lord Jesus has gone to heaven, and the Holy Spirit has come down from heaven to convict the world of its sin, because it does not believe in Jesus. To convict the world that Jesus Christ is right, he is the Son of God and risen from the dead, even though this world condemned him and put him on a cross. To remind the world that at Calvary the prince of this world was judged, Satan was defeated, and there awaits nothing but judgment for all who stand on the side of Satan.

And so Ahaziah died, but the problem didn't go away. Moab was still rebelling. What kind of people were the Moabites? They weren't bad as servants. In fact, our passage tells us in 2 Kings 3, that when he was subject to the kings of Israel and under their control, Moab in fact rendered unto the king of Israel 100,000 lambs and the wool of 100,000 rams—that kept all Israel nicely warm in the winter. He was not a bad servant if only you could keep him in control and behaving properly. Once you let him get out of control and rebel, he could be dangerous. Do you remember what Moab did, for instance, in the wilderness before Israel conquered him? When Israel were pilgrims through the wilderness, they got to a certain stage where Balak the king of Moab tried to curse them through Balaam the false prophet; but he found he couldn't curse them, for God was for them and he wouldn't listen to their

prayers or their cursings. Then, alas, Balaam taught the Moabites to do a very dastardly thing—to cast a stumbling block in the way of these pilgrims who were on their way to their inheritance.

The stumbling block was just this. They invited the Israelites to their religious feasts, and when they held a festival to their pagan deity, the Israelites were invited to join in. Now there was a very big difference between the Moabites' religious festivals and Israel's religious festivals. First of all the Moabites sent out some of the charming young ladies. Their style was beautiful and they had a certain taste in the way of dress, nearer to Paris fashion than the kind of dress the Israelite girls wore most days. They came along with their invitation to a religious party and some of the Israelites said, 'No, we mustn't go to that.'

'But what harm is there in it?' said the young ladies. 'It won't be like your religion. We don't take this religion quite so to extremes as Moses did. There will be fun afterwards and games. Moses is a bit old fashioned. Things have changed since Moses climbed Sinai and gave out the law about not committing fornication. That was all right for that day but nowadays people have a more enlightened idea of what is permitted.'

They put the stumbling block in the way of the Israelites and they taught the people to commit fornication under the name of religion and to eat things offered to idols.

That was a dastardly thing to do. For here were the Israelites, their loins girt, their staff in their hand, pushing across the wilderness. It was tough work, day after day marching, and month after month trying to make progress across the wilderness. Trying hard to believe that at the end of it all there was an inheritance which flowed with milk and honey. They had to take the whole business on faith: milk and honey tomorrow, but only manna today, and sometimes running out of water. So these chaps, worn out and weary as pilgrims, trying to press on, and in their hearts perhaps longing for a little bit of relaxation; so when the stumbling block came, they fell for it. They fell under God's wrath too.

Let us not say that we in our day are immune from such things. The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10, is inspired to write to us to tell us that these things happened to the Israelites as a warning and a lesson for us, 'We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day' (v. 8), let alone the rest that fell on other days as well. The blessed Lord, having occasion to write to the church of believers at Pergamum, said, 'I have this against you, that you have some there like that Balaam who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before my people. They are teaching my people that permissive morals are okay even for Christians. You don't have to be so strict about morals as you used to be. They're teaching my people to eat things offered to idols' (Rev 2:14).

It was a danger in Pergamum. We would be bold to say it isn't a danger for us. Nor should we think of the flesh merely in terms of sexual aberration. That may be one of its ugly results when the flesh gets out of control, but there are perhaps worse things, such as backbiting, anger, malice, jealousy, hypocrisy, envy and greed. For the works of the flesh are numerous indeed. Do you know where Moab had his beginning? He had his beginning when that good man Lot lost control of himself in the cave outside Sodom, got drunk and committed sorry irresponsibilities. What an enemy Moab proved to be to God's people, and what an enemy uncontrolled flesh is to the people of God still.

Moab rebelled and the king of Israel got together with the king of Judah, and he in turn got together with the king of Edom and they said, 'We can't let this kind of thing go on. Not only are we losing our wool, but if Moab gains his independence it won't be long before he comes back with his armies and tries to get control of us. As kings and as responsible people in our free nations we must join together to put Moab down and bring him back into control.' So they put on their uniforms and they put on their crowns. They gathered all the king's horses and all the king's men, and they weren't able to subdue Moab. They did have a campaign against him but, instead of bringing Moab back under control, they nearly brought the hosts of the Lord to disaster. The reason is this: fighting wars is very thirsty work, and the army ran out of water, and they ran out of puff.

It's possible perhaps for us to suffer a similar fate. We fight against the flesh, that old rebel flesh within us, with its wrong and uncontrolled desires. But if you're going to get control over wrong desires, you won't do it unless you can satisfy true, healthy desires. Many a man has found that. He's tried to become religious in order to gain control of the flesh, and he has devised all kinds of disciplines, whips and goodness knows what else, to control the flesh. Or maybe rigorous prayer, or rigorous religious exercises, in order somehow to control the flesh. Only to find to his dismay that instead of achieving control of the flesh, he exhausts himself spiritually. Then he's weaker than he was before, and loses his power of resistance.

If we are going to overcome wrong desire, the number one lesson is that we shall have to find adequate satisfaction of true and healthy desire. It wasn't wrong for Israel to be thirsty in the desert. But if those three kings with their combined powers couldn't provide enough water to satisfy the thirst of their army, then they might as well give up the struggle. They were defeated men. Where could you get water from in the middle of a desert? Well Elisha did it, didn't he? We read the story how, under the inspiration of God, he prophesied that the very next day there would come water, and there came water (2 Kgs 3:16-20). Quietly, without any fuss, but supernaturally it came and satisfied the thirst. The men rose up in their renewed vigour and subdued Moab.

Well that's an Old Testament story, but I do want to mention a New Testament Scripture. Our blessed Lord stood once at the Feast of Tabernacles. At the end of the week, on the great day of the feast when the people had been through all the paraphernalia of their religious observance and had got scarcely anything out of it, our Lord stood and cried, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." Now this he said about the Spirit' (John 7:37-39). It is the number one principle, in our warfare against the flesh, to keep the old flesh subdued where it should be. We shall not do it unless we know something of those supernatural streams of water that come from our risen Lord, to satisfy our spiritual desires, and make us strong and refreshed with true spiritual satisfaction that will in turn give us the strength to overcome the flesh.

How did Elisha succeed in doing it? What was the man's secret of supplying that water for the troops, when the kings themselves had so miserably failed to do it? The answer in the narrative is sandwiched between the first announcement of the rebellion and the story of the overcoming of that rebellion; and in the middle, chapter 2, Elisha's secret is given to us.

It happened when the Lord would take Elijah up into heaven. Elijah and Elisha were going together along the road and Elijah said, 'Tell me, what would you have me do for you?'

Elisha said, 'I would have a double portion of your spirit.'

Said Elijah, 'You've asked a hard thing, but if you see me when I am taken from you, then it shall be.'

So it happened. As the two went together, past Bethel, past Gilgal, back over Jordan into the wilderness, it came to pass that Elijah was taken up by whirlwind in a chariot into heaven, and Elisha saw him go into heaven. As he stood watching that ascending figure, there fell down from the rising and ascending Elijah his mantle, and Elisha took it. Therein lay his secret, actually seeing a man going into heaven. He was, thereafter, actually clothed with the clothes of a man who was now in heaven.

What then is the secret for overcoming the flesh? The New Testament records the words of our blessed Lord. 'A little while and the world won't see me,' so he said in those last hours before he left his disciples to go to Calvary. 'Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live' (John 14:19). Then he added to them, before he left them at the end of the forty days, "But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49). Down from the ascended Christ there came God's Holy Spirit, to clothe the believer in the power of the risen Lord. What a wonderful day that was for the apostles as, with literal eyes, they stood on Mount Olivet, facing the task that the risen Lord had given them, of being his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the outermost parts of the earth. Where should mere mortal men, subject to the same passions as we are, get the power to be witnesses for Christ? As they stood and he was commissioning them he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven, and they stood looking, seeing him go. What a lovely story the ascension is, and we join with the hymn writer who wrote:

But we believe that mortal eyes
Beheld that journey to the skies.¹

They saw him go. We haven't seen him with our physical eyes ascend from Mount Olivet to heaven. Yet there is a sense in which we can see him. The Lord explained it to Judas (not Iscariot) when he asked, 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' And Jesus replied, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him' (John 14:22-23). That is precisely what happens as the Holy Spirit reveals to our inner spiritual sight, not spooky visions, but the glorious reality that there is this man, Jesus Christ our Lord, in heaven and we are imbued with his power. Have you seen him lately?

Rise, my soul, behold 'tis Jesus,
Jesus fills thy wond'ring eyes,
See him now in glory seated,
Where thy sins no more can rise.

¹ John H. Gurney, 1802-62, 'We saw Thee not when Thou didst come'.

All our sins were laid upon Him,
Jesus bore them on the tree.
God, who knew them, laid them on Him,
And believing thou art free.²

How free? Well see him, my brother, my sister. See him in glory, seated at the right hand of God, the great work of atonement finished and the believer forever free. See him in glory, your very representative, gone in, announcing that you are coming on behind. Gone in, not just for himself. Gone into the very throne of God, saying to almighty God, 'There is coming on behind me a whole host of people whom I represent. There's Thomas, there's John, there's Philip, there's Gooding. Father, they'll be here because they're coming on behind me, and I represent them.' And knowing that Jesus has come representing his people who are coming on behind, what has God done with this one who is representing you and me? See where he sits. At the very right hand of God, accepted in the knowledge that behind him there comes you and me. See him as Paul bids us see him in his letter to the Colossians (see Col 1:16–20), the power over principalities, might and dominions, and with resources as wide as the universe itself. For through him, and by him, and to him all things are made.

And before he left his apostles our blessed Lord said that when the Holy Spirit is come he would be witness to the world of judgment, but to his own he would be witness of this, 'He will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine' (John 16: 14–15). Have you some real, healthy desires? He can fill them, and satisfy them. By his Holy Spirit sent down from heaven, all those lovely living streams of water, to satisfy the longing soul. Herein was Elisha's secret of how he could triumph over Moab. Here is our secret of triumphing over the flesh: in touch with that man in heaven, satisfied by the living water of the Holy Spirit.

Before Elisha was able to take that message to other folks, it had to become a reality in his own life. We haven't time, at the end of our study, to go over all the details of that journey upon which Elijah took Elisha just before he left him; but then others have done it, and done it better than ever I could. Let us just notice this simple point, that when Elijah was to impart this gift to Elisha, he took Elisha back out of the land of Israel, out of the inheritance, over the Jordan, back into the wilderness. You can see them going, can't you? There was Bethel, what memories that brought back. And all those folks like Moses, Joshua, Caleb and company whose exploits you could read of if you turned the pages of ancient history. And they had come over Jordan at Bethel. And then there was Gilgal, what lessons they had learned about circumcision and cutting off the flesh, and having no confidence in the flesh. What lessons there had been all those centuries ago, when Israel had come into their inheritance and discovered it for the first time. There weren't many in Israel that were enjoying it now. Physically they were in the promised land, but as a whole they had departed from the living God. Bethel and Gilgal were only names in history, that didn't mean anything to anybody anymore. Positionally correct in the land, experientially dead.

² J. Denham Smith, 1817–89, 'Rise, my soul, behold 'tis Jesus'.

How would you cure that? Says Elijah, 'If you want a double portion of my spirit, then Elisha, you better go back to scratch. Let me take you back, right back into the wilderness now and let you have your own personal experience of entering into the inheritance. To make good in your own experience what the nation once experienced all those centuries ago.' Remember how when they came to their inheritance, first they had to go down into Jordan. Walk into a river in flood, when you couldn't see where the bank was. It was almost committing suicide, wasn't it, to walk into a flooded river like that when you couldn't see where the bank was? Any minute you might be in, and under. That was the prescribed way into those waters and down to the bottom, before you might come up the other side, and into the lovely acres of glowing corn.

I'm not going to say any more about that, because some of you are thankful enough already. You see all sorts of spiritual lessons in that, on how to get into your inheritance, so I leave that to you. But Elisha did it for himself personally, to learn what it meant to enter into the inheritance. But this time with the advantage that the other Israelites didn't have. When he did it, it was in the knowledge that there was a man who'd gone into heaven, and in the power of that man in heaven; and clothed with his mantle and using his power, he went through Jordan, on dry land, just like his fathers had done, and into his inheritance.

Would I know victory in my life over the flesh? It isn't good enough just to know of the Old Testament experience of Israel going into the land. Not good enough to have read in books about the great preachers of Christian times, who have gone in and enjoyed their inheritance. It is for me to start at the beginning and myself personally enter into my inheritance. How shall I do it? I have the advantage that even Elisha didn't have, the advantage of knowing of a Saviour, who for my sake went down into Jordan, went down into death, and died and was buried, and rose again. He has gone into heaven, and is at the right hand of God. His Spirit will make good to me that in Christ I too am seated in heavenly places. The Christ in heaven is risen that he might fill all things, little me included.

Thus Moab was subdued by a man who was, so to speak, in touch with the man in glory, and therefore had at his command those living waters of refreshment and satisfaction. My dear young fellow believer, if you'll permit an elderly saint to talk to you, would you win the battle against the flesh and its wrong desires? You won't win it simply by trying to have some rigorous religious discipline, though discipline is good: we could do with more of it. But the secret of the discipline and the secret of the victory, is to let the living Christ fill you with satisfaction. Satisfy your deepest spiritual desires. Satisfying them so you don't have to pretend that you're enjoying God. So you don't have to pretend you're enjoying spiritual life. Let the risen Christ fill you with his Spirit so it really satisfies your desires, and in the power of that Spirit there is the secret of overcoming the evil desires of the flesh. To that end, may God bless his holy Word for his name's sake.

Aiding the 'Bankrupt'

2 Kings 4–5

We have been considering together the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha. There remain yet many stories in the book of Kings about that prophet's ministry. What I propose to do in this final study is to conduct with you a survey of most of those stories. Rather than preaching you sermons tonight I propose to share, putting into the pool of your thinking, leading ideas that may help us all when next we study these passages, to find keys to their interpretation and enjoyment. Most of the remaining stories from 2 Kings 4 onward, fall into three groups. First there is a group of stories dealing with the ordinary folk in Israel. That in itself is a delightful thing. In previous sessions we were considering together stories of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, as it impinged upon the kings, both of Israel and of Judah. We were learning lessons about the government of God and, very naturally, they were placed in the context of the responsible leaders of states and the heads of government, the kings, both of Israel and of Judah.

Now for a while the Holy Spirit turns the narrative aside and we're going to look at certain ordinary, nameless people amongst the people of God, to consider their problems and how God in his mercy and kindness came alongside them in the routine affairs of daily living. Insignificant as they may have thought themselves, yet important to God. The only reason you have kings and princes and queens and governors is, of course, for the benefit of the people they govern. Now God turns aside therefore from high politics to the ordinary affairs of the home and the business and the school, to demonstrate his grace to his people, available as it was to all of them whatever their task in life and their circumstances. God now picks out certain representative instances and cases, that he might encourage us in our days of need.

In chapter 4, we shall see a succession of stories about people who had got to the stage when they found it almost impossible to cope with the ordinary demands of life. It does sometimes happen, even to the strongest of us, that life threatens to become too much. The demands it makes on us, the responsibilities it thrusts upon us, seem to be too big and we are in danger of not being able to cope. A number of stories then of that kind, in which these people found the grace and mercy and the miraculous power of God. In their need they were pointed to a supernatural resource, and found life. What a lovely thing that is, when we find life ceasing to be a threat too big to cope with and we find grace, power and resource enough and to spare. We begin again to live the life of spiritual millionaires to which we are entitled.

Let's just read one representative story out of that first group, beginning in chapter 4 and verse 1.

Now the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried to Elisha, 'Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.' And Elisha said to her, 'What shall I do for you? Tell me; what have you in the house?' And she said, 'Your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil.' Then he said, 'Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbours, empty vessels and not too few. Then go in and shut the door behind yourself and your sons and pour into all these vessels. And when one is full, set it aside.' So she went from him and shut the door behind herself and her sons. And as she poured they brought the vessels to her. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, 'Bring me another vessel.' And he said to her, 'There is not another.' Then the oil stopped flowing. She came and told the man of God, and he said, 'Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on the rest.' (vv. 1-7)

In the second group of stories there is but one story. That comes in chapter 5 and is the story of the conversion of Naaman the Syrian. I use the word conversion advisedly. Very often we hear this story described and entitled as the healing, or the cleansing of Naaman the leper, and that is very good and accurate for in the story Naaman the leper is in fact cleansed. Thank God that there is more to this story than just cleansing. It is a story of the conversion of Naaman the Syrian. That is interesting, after chapter 4 with its stories of private individuals, how God met the need of his people and pointed them to their supernatural resources in God, but now we're moving out. The story concerns a heathen captain of the Syrians, and how in his need he was brought to God and not only cleansed, but converted and turned to God from idols, to serve the living and the true God. How that conversion was brought about, and the issues at stake in that conversion, form the interest of the details of chapter 5. Just let me point to those verses that make it quite clear that Naaman was not only cleansed, but converted.

Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company, and he came and stood before him. And he said, 'Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel; so accept now a present from your servant.' But he said, 'As the LORD lives, before whom I stand, I will receive none.' And he urged him to take it, but he refused. Then Naaman said, 'If not, please let there be given to your servant two mule-loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD. In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter. He said to him, 'Go in peace.' (5:15-19)

So then we've had the needs of the private citizens met, and now we've got the conversion of the Syrian. It often does happen in that order. When the people of God discover the resources there are in God to fulfil their homely, domestic and other responsibilities, then so very often it leads to God's blessing going out through their testimony to extended realms and folks outside get saved. Well it's lovely when folks get saved. For a while there's a great deal of enthusiasm after folks get converted.

But now finally there's a set of stories beginning in chapter 6 and going through into chapter 7. Three stories in fact that all have in common this particular feature, that the people concerned came to feel that they were somehow closed in and confined, shut up and circumscribed. And there came upon them a desperate feeling that their circumstances and experience were too small, and they wanted to break out into bigger things to stop themselves being absolutely stifled and strangled to death. It can happen to Christian people who, in times past, had a very vigorous experience of the power of God in their lives and witnessed conversions, perhaps, in which they were used as the instruments of God's grace. Later on in life that experience somehow seems to have dried up a bit. What once used to thrill them seems now to have become very small and restrictive. They feel imprisoned in life and the urge comes upon them to somehow break out into something bigger, before life smothers them all together. In these final stories we shall find God putting before his people what is the answer to their feeling of need in that situation, for all three stories are stories of escape into a bigger and larger experience.

So let's start with the first set of stories, the people who found life a bit too much for them. First of all there was this widow woman, otherwise unnamed. She comes to the prophet saying that her husband is dead and the creditor has come to take her two children to be bondmen. Life was threatening this woman and her children with sheer slavery. Life can do that kind of thing. Life can do it for a Christian when our responsibilities, domestic or spiritual or professional, seem to be turning us into drudges and slaves. Let's leave aside all other realms of life and come to the spiritual side. It is true of course that there is a sense in which we all are slaves, and never will be anything else but slaves. There's a sense in which we ought to glory in our very slavery. Read any one of Paul's letters, or any of the other apostles', and they will regularly describe themselves as slaves of Jesus Christ. Absolutely bought with a price, no longer their own. No longer the ones that are to determine life for themselves, they are the slaves of Jesus Christ, bought body, soul and spirit, and belonging to their sovereign Lord and master.

That is true of every believer, but as you read Paul's writings you will not find him exhibiting a slave's begrudging spirit. Work? What mountains of work that man got through. Preaching the gospel, exhorting the saints, visiting the poor, having a word with the elders, making his tents, travelling, writing letters, praying, night prayer meetings, public disputations with the enemies of the Lord, preaching the gospel again. However did he get through the stacks and mountains of work that he did for the Lord? Of course it is true that you can take on too much. To take on more than God has given us the ability to do is a foolish thing, but try and tell Paul that he's taken on too much! I'd be interested to hear what he said in reply! For all he worked like a veritable slave you'll never find a hint of slavish spirit about him. Indeed in his letter to the Galatians, Paul reminds us of Hagar and her son Ishmael and of God's instruction to Abraham, 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman' (Gal 4:30-31).

God doesn't want slaves of slavish spirit. Yet sometimes it can happen that there falls upon us a kind of a feeling of slavery, that the demands that are made on us are too big. We

do them out of a slavish spirit, feeling forced to do them and begrudging doing them. Have you never felt like that? Well I have. Is it simply that one takes on too much, or is it our debts?

'The creditor has come,' said the woman. And the creditor is often at our doors. Paul recognised this as he sat writing his letter to the Romans. There were half a dozen creditors queued outside the door even as he was writing, 'I am a debtor, both to Greeks and to barbarians' (Rom 1:14). He had an inescapable debt that he must try and discharge, and so have we. Who of us hasn't known that feeling from time to time? 'Do I have to do this? Do I have to preach the gospel? Do I have to attend the meetings? It's Thursday night again, now's the prayer meeting.' Or, 'Here's that women's meeting and I've got to make the cakes for it.'

Our duties are turning us into slaves. What do you do when that happens? You keep on doing your duties. You don't say, 'I don't feel in the right spirit to serve the Lord.' Remember the man in the parable who was given the talent to use, and the Lord came back and said, 'Why haven't you used it?'

He said, 'Well I didn't feel like it, and I was afraid of you. I knew you didn't want anybody to work for you out of fear, so I hid it.'

'Who told you that?' said the master. 'If you were afraid of me, you ought to have worked all the more then' (Matt 25:14–30).

If we feel a bit like slaves, and we feel we've got to do it and don't want to, then that's no excuse for not doing it. But of course, God doesn't want us to work in the spirit of slaves. He wants us to work for him out of free will, so that the working for the Lord itself becomes a privilege and a joy. How can it be done? Here comes Elisha to point this woman to resources that she didn't know she had. Frankly miraculous resources, although it was concerned merely with that basic commodity of the Middle East—oil—and finding enough of it to get through life. Yet it was in the end a miraculous resource. It's lovely to get oil from the oil man. It's marvellous to feel that God has given you the stuff. Most of us bow our heads over our meals and thank God that though the baker brought it, it was really God that gave it. For those spiritual resources that we need to discharge our duties in the right spirit there is a more than human supply.

The little story goes that the woman had to borrow the vessels. That was taking on board more obligations, more than her own little vessel. She hadn't enough oil to fill her own, how would she fill anybody else's? Yet she had to get neighbours' vessels and bring them in, and she was told in faith to pour out. As she poured the miracle happened and the vessels were filled, filled until no more was required. Interpret that how you will, for I wouldn't dare interpret that in case I were fanciful, so let me leave it completely and turn over to the New Testament to consider that same problem. You will remember one notable place where it is discussed in the Epistle to the Ephesians in chapter 4, and here it is a question of the gifts that are given to the people of God for them to use in the service of the Lord. Some are apostles, some prophets, some are pastors and teachers and some are also-rans like me, but each with his little job to do. Gifts given us to use in God's employment, but how shall I use them? How shall I discharge the responsibilities that come along with the gift? Are you finding that your gift is making demands of you that you can't fulfil without feeling that you're a drudge and a

slave? That you have a debt to fulfil the duty? Well a good idea is to get inside and shut the door and let Paul remind us in Ephesians of how these gifts were given.

He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. (Eph 4:10)

Oh what a glorious gospel message, that the risen Christ who has distributed to each one of us a gift that we might use for him, having distributed the same, has ascended up on high for that express purpose, that he might fill all things. So that I get my little part and want to use it for the running of the household, or the feeding of the church, or the visiting of the sick, or fulfilling my responsibilities in the gospel.

My empty vessel I may freely bring,
Oh Thou, who art of love, the living spring,
My vessel fill.³

There came oil enough until the need was met. How real is it on a grey Monday morning and a tired Thursday evening? How real is it that there is this Jesus, and if I come he will fill my vessel? As we raise the question we can't help remembering what Elijah said to Elisha. 'You want a double portion of my spirit? If you see me when I ascend, then it shall be.' Would I have a vessel of oil enough and to spare to discharge all the duties and responsibilities and debts that come upon me in life? Then I better ask, 'How real is it that there is a man in heaven? Have you seen him go up? Can you see him there by faith and is he a reality to us?' It is in the secret place of the closed door where he may replenish our stores, and so fill our vessels that we may serve.

Then there follows another story. There was a woman in Shunem and as Elisha passed her back and forth, and she recognised him to be a prophet, she made him a prophet's chamber and he stayed with her, only to discover that there was a bitter sorrow in that woman's life: a sense of frustration, she had no child. That too is a sad condition. It can happen spiritually. I'm not being fanciful. Listen to what the apostle Peter says. 'If you do such and such, and such and such, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ' (see 2 Pet 1:8 KJV). It can happen, can't it, that we have a certain amount of knowledge of spiritual things, but somehow it doesn't produce fruit in life? Whether it is building up of the character, or whether its fruit is to be seen in helping other folks, Christian or non-Christian, a certain kind of barrenness besets us. Then Elisha came to that woman and, by the miraculous resource of God, set in motion the deep running springs of life in that dear woman amongst God's people.

A child was born, and she was no longer barren, and upon that side of it we can't afford to stop any longer. What I want to concentrate on is what happened to that boy when he grew up. There came the proud day when he was big enough to go out with the servants to the harvest field and began to work in his youthful vigour and enthusiasm, doing what work he could. It is lovely to see the spiritual youth growing up, no longer babes but young men

³ Ira D Sankey, 1840–1908, 'It passeth knowledge'.

and young women in Christ, going out to their harvest field to join the workers and the reapers, and begin to shoulder a little bit of their responsibility in the work of the Lord. Harvesting is hard work, and hot work, and thirsty work, and strength sapping work. It's bad enough for old hands at the job, strong vigorous men, for bringing in the harvest will incline to sap the very last ounce of energy you have. It isn't a game. This lad went out to join the reapers in the harvest field and presently the sun got at his head; he felt bad and his strength was exhausted. Perhaps he had sun stroke or something, but he was taken home looking very white, and presently died. Well, as far as you could see he was dead. What a terrible thing to happen. I've known it happen many times too, or come near to happening.

Have you ever known young men and young women, keen for the Lord, running a Bible class, out at all the gospel meetings, serving the Lord with great zeal, joining the work in the harvest field in their eighteens and twenties, and then, and then? They're twenty-five and something goes wrong. They get head pains, or intellectual difficulties or something and they retire from the field; and presently the very life seems to go out of them and you couldn't tell the difference between them and an unconverted person. Have you ever seen it happen? Well I've seen it happen, and it can happen by letting young folks attempt too much work. Working beyond their spiritual capacity, draining their very resources. Pleading with souls and arguing with souls, until they've argued Christianity right out of themselves. They've exhausted all they can think of, and exhausted their spiritual strength. Then come the moments of temptation, the big moral difficulty and temptation, or the big intellectual difficulty and problem; it's more than they can cope with, and they're laid low. They cease from the work, because they don't really believe it anymore, and they feel a hypocrite. So they can't go on taking a Sunday School class because they've come to doubt the inspiration of Scripture, or their own salvation, or this, or that, and they give up. It's a dangerous thing, working for the Lord: it's a spiritual battle. It can exhaust your spiritual strength.

What did Elisha do? Elisha is the man that, by God's good grace, has found the secret of having enough life for himself, and some to give away to other people; but first he sent his apprentice, name of Gehazi. And Gehazi seized the opportunity. I don't think he had been working in a harvest field, not recently, and then he saw the opportunity that he could go in the name of Elisha, with Elisha's staff of office. What a chance to show what a man Gehazi was. Off he went down to Shunem to the place where this poor lad lay dead upon the bed, and entering the room he said, 'Now what's all this nonsense going on here?' And with that he got the sceptre of Elisha and put it in front of the boy's eyes. 'Now look at that. I'm the apostle's authoritative representative, listen to what I say young man and stop all this nonsense,' but there didn't seem to be a lot of response. There very rarely is for that kind of attack. He said, 'Do you see who I am? I'm the next in line, I'm the surrogate prophet. Look at this!' (4:29-31) but there wasn't any response. The lad hadn't come to this position by defying prophets and apostles and all the rest of them. He hadn't intended to come there; it was a case of exhaustion for trying to do too much work without getting his batteries replenished.

Gehazi didn't effect anything at all worth doing with his authoritarianism and his formal bishopric. So Elisha came. He didn't try to beat the lad with his staff or impress him with his office. He went up into the room and he laid on him, hand on hand and mouth on mouth, until the very warmth of Elisha's life was communicated to the body, that cold stiff body that

was lying beneath him. Now that's a chilly thing to do. I don't know if you've tried it, but they got so cold Elisha himself had to say, 'I'm going to stop this for a minute. Warm up, get round the room. Get the blood going again.' So he walked round the room a time or two. Then he went back and presently the very warmth and life and vigour and reality of the life in Elisha communicated itself to that young lad. He sneezed, then he woke up and life was restored (vv. 32–35). Sometimes when you get that kind of situation that's the only thing that will restore it. Not authority, not even argument, but the coming alongside until your very vital life flow, the thing that keeps you alive and warm and ticking, is communicated to the man who for the time being has lost his spiritual resilience. To do it, you'll have to discover life and more to spare. Can you do that? Sometimes we feel there's barely enough to keep our own selves going, we haven't much to spare for other folks. What a lovely thing it is to discover the risen Christ, to have enough life to keep yourself going and to let others make drain upon that resource that helps to keep them going too.

Then the scene shifts to a kind of a theological college. I know not what else to call it, for the sons of the prophets were there before Elisha and doubtless they talked a lot of theology most of the day. There came the dinner hour when they had to be fed. These good lads were allowed to contribute to the cooking and to the food supply to keep the college going. One day one good man went out and, with all the best will in the world, meaning to contribute to the food supply, gathered a lot of wild gourds, not knowing the difference poor lad, and put them in the pot too, and nearly poisoned the whole prophetic staff, students included (vv. 38–41). He didn't intend to, but it nearly happened. It can happen, even in theological colleges, and not simply with the potatoes and the greens. It can happen with the spiritual food that is fed. Where people with the very best of intentions, in thinking they are feeding the nation, put into some of their books and their lectures and their sermons an unbelief that would poison a battleship. Casting doubt on the authority of Scripture, or on the historicity of the resurrection, or the reality of the ascension. Not intending to impugn the authority of God's Word, but doing that very thing. And if it was left to run, it would poison the food supply and destroy spiritual life. What was to be done? It's interesting that Elisha didn't take the first move and say, 'Give me a big spoon and I'll try and get this poison out.'

We are told that Elisha said, 'Bring me flour,' and getting a good lot of wholesome flour he put it into the pot and thus counteracted the poison. Then there came a man from Baal-shalishah and he brought the man of God bread of firstfruits, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack and said, 'Give the people to eat,' and they ate, and though it appeared to be a small supply, they had more than enough and some left over (vv. 42–44).

If ever you should find yourself in a situation where young folks, or older, without knowing what they're doing, are spreading doctrines that, if carried to their logical conclusion, would prove poisonous and undermine and destroy people's faith, then the first necessity is to have on hand a good, fair bag of flour. Or, if you like it in modern terms, a good dosage of Colossians 1, followed by a great handful of Hebrews 1 and a sackful of John 1. That will get their faith going again, in the deity of the Lord Jesus. When you've done that thank the Lord if you've got ready to pour into the food supply a great wallop of 1 Corinthians 15, about the resurrection. Not merely as dry theology, but as the living, creative Word of God, that can come in amongst poison and dispel it, and create good health

and faith. 'The words I speak to you,' said Jesus Christ, 'they are spirit, they are life,' (John 6:63).

Oh for the ability thus to walk with God, that in situations like that one can come in and supply that living food that will positively counteract the effects of poison. Then there came this man with bread of firstfruits, and if I told you what I thought that meant you would say I were fanciful, so I'm not going to! I'm simply going to observe that in the New Testament Paul talks of firstfruits. 'But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep' (1 Cor 15:20). Here's your answer to attacks on the faith and the undermining of youngsters' faith by their liberalism. Christ, risen from the dead, really alive in glory to intercede for the faith of his people. Alive in glory, their representative before God's throne. Alive in glory to succour them in the time of temptation, with those vast spiritual powers that emanate from him and flow into the lives of his people. Oh, for a ministry like Elisha and that unnamed man, that can set before the people of God the bread of firstfruits, and make the very living Christ, risen from the dead, draw near to them, as he drew near on the road to Emmaus and went with them; and in that moment their intellectual difficulties melted like snow before the sun, and their hearts burned within them. Because it wasn't just theology, it was the living Christ, risen from the dead. Firstfruits of them that slept, drawing near to expound his Word and to feed his people.

What do you suppose is going on in this meeting room just now? Well one thing is going on, you've got a very curious preacher, odd and difficult and inadequate, but behind him my brethren, there is the bread of firstfruits. The Lord, risen from the dead and coming alongside, himself to minister to your faith and to strengthen it. To save it from all those poisonous influences that surrounded us every day of our lives as we walk through this world. See him. Bread of firstfruits, risen from the dead, really alive. Said Elijah, 'If you see me when I go up, you shall have a double portion of my spirit.' The only thing that will keep us going through life, and equip us to meet life's duties and responsibilities and dangers, be they physical or intellectual, is that vivid sight, that spiritually we can see is a reality, the risen Son of God. If the people of God get their needs met, and find out what their resources are in the risen Christ, then there's a chance or two that there would be a conversion.

As a result of the testimony of a little slave girl who had been taken captive to Syria, or to Aram as it should be, Naaman the Syrian comes and he gets converted. I shall not need to relate the story to you in detail because millions of gospel preachers have done that already, and I couldn't improve upon them anyway. But I would like to stress what we noticed at the first, that this is the story of Naaman's conversion, not just his cleansing. For you notice what happened after he was cleansed from his physical leprosy. He came to Elisha and he requested two mule-loads of earth. He wanted two mule-loads of earth, 'for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD' (5:17). You say, 'What did he want the earth for?' Well he wanted the earth for this: that when he got home he wanted to worship the Lord, Jehovah. No longer would he worship Baal and Rimmon and all that nonsense. He turned to God from idols. He wanted to serve the living and the true God and he didn't want to worship these old dead idols any more. So he's going to worship the Lord, the man has got converted. But he said, 'I want to do it the right way round. I don't think my ground up there in Syria would be good enough ground to stand on

to worship the Lord. I want better ground to stand on. So please, Elisha, give me two mule-loads of earth so I can put it on the ground. Then when I worship the Lord I'm going to stand on that ground, I'm going to take Israelite earth position. Israelite ground before God.' You say, 'Pity the poor pagan.' How ignorant the man was. Just you imagine it made any difference what kind of earth you stood on, or where you worshipped the Lord. What difference does it make whether you stand on the boards of the gospel hall, or out on the tarmac in the street, or on your deep pile carpet at home? What difference does it make what ground you stand on? You can despise the man's simplicity, but he thought it made a difference. He'd been a Syrian, you see. So had the Israelites. Their forebears were Syrians, but then they got converted and they left Syria and came into Canaan. Their position was different. Now Naaman has got converted. Well he says, 'Sorry, I can't come and live in Canaan, but I would like to take the same ground as you do, and when I stand there to worship I shall be standing on the same kind of ground you're standing on.' That's a jolly good conversion, isn't it? What ground do you stand on before God, might I ask? Has conversion made any difference to the ground you stand on?

Well let me tell you about this conversion. First of all, would you care to think about the man himself? You mustn't imagine that this was some disreputable sinner, dragged up out of the gutter, out of the doss house or Salvation Army Hostel or something. This was Naaman, captain, field marshal of the Syrian land forces. Next to the king, his majesty leaned on his arm as they went to public functions together. Can't you see what a fine specimen of a man he was? Education immaculate: Eton, Sandhurst. Silver sword of the year, out top, brilliant commands. The Lord had given victory to the Syrians through his hand, though he didn't know who it was. Now with his Victoria Cross and distinguished service medals, knighthood, baronetcy and all the rest of it, what a commanding figure. See him in evening dress. See him in uniform. The cultured accent and the fine house he lived in. Damascus was a delightful city. I know it wasn't Israel, but they had a bit of style up in Damascus, even though they weren't dear believers. The spacious lawns and those rivers, Pharpar and Abanah. What broad stately rivers—not the Thames or the Bann, or something like that. Don't you note those kind of things? He was a delightful specimen. You say, 'Well however could a man like that need to get converted? Such a nice, delightful, educated, charming humanist.' The fact however was that he was a leper, and that was a nasty disease to get because it put a blotch on things. All that lovely charm, all that lovely culture, and yet that nasty blotch. The hope was it would go away, but it didn't and it began to spread, and it spelt ruin. But so long as you could cover the spot up with an extra medal or two, nobody could see it.

Difficult to believe what stared him in the face, that he was ruined. It's difficult for some folks, cultured, superbly educated, gracious, much more gracious than some dear Christians. Accent impeccable. Full of good deeds, public service, honoured by their country, upright, honourable people. What's the good of telling them their righteousnesses are as filthy rags? Beautiful people. Difficult to admit that they are patched, blotched with sin, and ruined. It's a fact, it would eventually spread to completely absorb the man. Well, being a sensible man, having tried various things which didn't work, he decided to give ear to the advice of his little servant girl. She said there was a prophet down in Israel, so he went. First he went to the

king, got things a bit mixed up. Went to the king but that was no use and he was sent to the prophet, and so to the prophet he came. As he journeyed, he had a long time to think about these things and he had ideas in his head of how he would get converted, or how he would get cleansed.

They were quite vivid ideas. He was saying to himself, 'Now when I get there, I'll have to send one of my servants to knock on the door, and there I shall be standing. Uniform right, beautiful, immaculate. The servant will knock on the door, then the prophet will come out. When he sees me, he will be impressed. "Field Marshal Naaman? You've come to my service? Half a minute, we'll do the church up for your coming. You wanted to be healed? Right, now there will be a ceremony. There will be a big dais, beautiful red carpet, a few aspidistras just on the side of it. The TV light would be there, the cameras and all the reporters, as Field Marshal Naaman walks stately up to the prophet. And the prophet in his robes says some very impressive words, lays his hand upon my head, and in that moment, just as the cameras are clicking, I am healed! Great headlines in the paper next day. Visit of Naaman! Remarkable miracle, and all this.' Well that was what he was thinking. If he was a man before, now he'd be ten times that.

So he got to the door and the servant knocked. They waited, nothing happened. Then a miserable little servant came to the door. 'Naaman. Who are you?'

'You haven't heard of me? Well go and tell your master Naaman's here, and he wants to be cured of the leprosy.'

Back comes the word through the servant, 'Tell him to wash in the Jordan, seven times if you will.'

He was absolutely livid. 'Stinking little drain of the Jordan, do you think I'm going to go down in there? Who do you think I am? I deserve better treatment than this! For if it comes to dipping in water and things like that, insulting and humiliating a man in front of his servants and everybody else, I've got rivers better than that up in Damascus that I could dip in.'

He went away in a rage. How could you believe that was of God, to humiliate a man like that? It was of God. God doesn't despise our culture, or our achievements, or our education, but when we've said all we can, we are blotched by sin and the heart is corrupt, and God's law declares that if we had our desserts, it would be to be executed, dead, buried. Did it humiliate you the night you got baptised? I hope it did. You're saying that charming you deserved nothing but a grave. Isn't that true? At the bottom of our gospel message, as we saw in our first talks, lies the judgment of God. We shall not come to the gospel of salvation unless first of all we accept the judgment of God. For all have sinned, field marshals and privates, and come short of his glory, and deserve only execution and a grave. The man was going home but then the servants talked some sense into his head and he repented; he came back, dipped in Jordan seven times and the miracle was done. His flesh became as that of a child.

That isn't the end of the story. He went home, but now see the man at his prayers. See the man at his worship, and where is he? Look at what ground he's standing on. It's Israelite ground. It's a bit of land taken from the great inheritance. And the Gentile, who once as a Gentile had no claim on the inheritance, is standing upon a bit of the ground of the inheritance, from the very land of Canaan. He's standing there and worshipping the living God. Could a man get to higher heights in the Old Testament days? He can now, can't he?

My brother, you have been converted to Christ, you owned your depravity, you owned your guilt and rottenness, you owned that you had no ground to stand on before God, and all you deserved was execution, death and burial, and you took that place. But now that you've taken that place, see where God has raised you to and what ground you now stand on. How I'd like to see you at your prayers tonight, standing or kneeling, and have a look at the ground you're standing on. What ground are you standing on? You come to God and say, 'You know who I am God. I'm the Lord Mayor of Belfast.' No you don't, do you? That wouldn't be big enough. You come as a sinner, saved by grace, standing on redemption ground.

I tell you what's more, you're standing on the ground that one day you'll stand on in heaven itself. Standing on a bit of the inheritance, you who were Gentiles and afar off, with no claim to the great inheritance, but now by God's grace redeemed. And there's an inheritance reserved for you in heaven, incorruptible, that fades not away (1 Pet 1:4). And yet the miracle is this, that every night as you stand before God, you stand where Christ stands. Nay, you sit with Christ in heavenly places, before the very majesty of the eternal God. The human mind could scarce conceive the immeasurable dignity, and the glory of the ground on which the humblest believer stands.

About the Author

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