

Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 307

Elijah under the Juniper Tree

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 5th December, 2010**

Text: *"Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee" (1 Kings 19. 7).*

The events on Mount Carmel at the close of the previous chapter were some of the most amazing happenings there have ever been in the history of the church of God – the way the Lord appeared, the way He vindicated His truth, the way He honoured His servant Elijah. You think of it, one man standing alone on Mount Carmel with all these priests of Baal and everything being put to the test, the Lord sending fire from heaven, the priests of Baal slain, the enemies of the truth overthrown, the cry from Israel: "The Lord, He is the God," the vindication of the Lord's honour and glory. And then Elijah's amazing answer to prayer in the rain coming suddenly in torrents after so many years of drought, the miracle of it, and at the end, when he was blessed with so much strength he was even able to run before King Ahab's horse-drawn chariot.

Now if ever one of the Lord's servants was a great man in the eyes of the people, it was Elijah that day. If ever one of the Lord's servants was honoured and blessed, it was Elijah that day. And then the next morning you find him in black despair. People would say, How is this? How can it be? Is this the same man? What has happened? Is it possible? I think this has often been the case. If you are abundantly blessed at chapel on the Lord's day evening, you do not know what you may be like on the Monday morning. When the Lord specially blesses His people, then Satan specially works to try to overcome them, and though he cannot destroy them, he has remarkable power to cast them down and instil doubt into their minds and into their hearts. So it was here. It is said of Spurgeon that when he preached some of those famous sermons to the biggest congregations ever known in London chapels, on the Monday morning he was sometimes in agony in his study, feeling he was a deceiver and he was out of the secret. O the mystery of the life of faith, the life of grace!

Elijah stood against those hundreds of priests; he stood alone on Mount Carmel; and now he is terrified of a woman. "And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword." Ahab was a wicked man. He was a deceitful

man. He was a weak man. He had a conscience, but he could not stand against his ungodly wife. He did not tell her about the glories of what God had done. He did not tell her about the sacrifice. He did not tell her about the amazing answer to prayer. He told her something that would inflame her, anger her, that Elijah had slain the prophets with the sword.

“Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time.” You think what a strange thing, what a foolish thing for this wicked woman to do. You find that at times people’s wisdom seems to be completely taken from them. She was determined before the day was out that Elijah was going to be dead. She was going to slay him. Why ever did she send him a warning first to tell him what she was going to do? He had the opportunity to escape. But you see the mysterious sovereignty and providence of God in this.

“And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life.” And there seems to me, beloved friends, to be a solemn emphasis here: “When he saw *that*.” He was looking at Jezebel and he was looking at things and he was looking at circumstances. He was not looking to the Lord. He was not looking back to what happened the day before. “When he saw *that*.” Truly this is one of the faults with us in the life of faith: when our eyes are taken off the Lord Jesus, something comes, something happens, and when we see *that*. We should not be looking at it. The Apostle Paul in his troubles said we cannot help *seeing* them, but we should not be *looking* at them. “We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen.”

“To keep our eyes on Jesus fixed,
And there our hope to stay.”

“When he saw that, he arose, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there.” And alone he went into the wilderness. We have to prove that the best of men are only men at the best. What are the strongest of men when left to themselves? What are the wisest of men when left to themselves? What are the most godly men when left to themselves? The strongest man, Samson, was the weakest man in all Scripture when left to himself. The wisest man, Solomon, was the most foolish man in Scripture when left to himself. David, whom God described as a man after His own heart, was the most evil of men when left to himself. We can only stand as we are kept. We can only continue as we

are upheld. We have to learn that we have not got the strength in ourselves. We are not going to have a stock of grace in hand, a stock of strength in hand.

“He himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness.” You see this poor man disconsolate, brokenhearted. He feels everything is finished. He feels he is all alone, and he “sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die.” O the foolishness of our hearts when we are left to ourselves! What was Elijah fleeing from Jezebel for? So that he would *not* die; so that his life might be preserved. When he got away from Jezebel’s clutches, he got under a juniper tree and prayed that he *might* die! O our foolishness when left to ourselves!

But have you noticed that remarkable thing, that though Elijah here prayed that he might die, that he would die, that he could die, he never did die? The Lord was not going to allow His honoured servant to die all alone under a juniper tree. He was going to be carried up to heaven in a chariot of fire.

But poor Elijah here – some people are very severe with Elijah and speak quite harshly of him. One eminent writer in an otherwise excellent book calls him a craven coward. But I think some of us identify with Elijah when we too get under our juniper tree, when everything seems wrong with the world, the church of God, with us and everybody else. But that wonderful scripture seems to shine over it all: “Who remembered us in our low estate: for His mercy endureth for ever.” If ever a man was in a low estate, Elijah was here, and the Lord remembered him in his low estate. What did He do? He sent a messenger from heaven. He supplied his bodily needs. He supplied his spiritual needs. He encouraged him. He sent him on his way. “Who remembered us in our low estate: for His mercy endureth for ever.” I was struck recently by what the Puritans said: when you are reading these things in the Old Testament, never forget that Almighty God is the same today as He was then. That is the way you should read it. Well, those of you who are under the juniper tree this morning, remember that the Lord is the same now, this morning, as He was then.

“But He Himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough.” What ever he meant is not clear: “It is enough.” I think really it is as people tend to say in modern language, “I

have had enough.” He felt he could not take any more. He felt he could not go any further. He felt “all his little strength was gone, sink he must without supplies.” He thought he was finished.

“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.” And whatever he meant when he said that, we do not try to imagine. “I am not better than my fathers.” Now it was not a very good prayer. There was not a lot of prayer in it, except that he wanted to die. It was not a very good prayer. But beloved friends, it received a very good answer. O isn’t that a mercy to you and me, when so often we feel our prayers are so poor, and sometimes not much prayer in them, and sometimes we hardly know what to say or what to ask for, and so much sin and unbelief mixed up with them, that Almighty God, the great God of heaven, bows down His ear to hear and He is not offended, and if they are poor prayers, He sends blessed answers! Now in this gospel day we know the reason why. Well, shall I put the reason why like this:

“When prayer or praise attempts to rise” – it is only an attempt; it is not very good; it is feeble, a lot of sin mixed with it, a lot of infirmity.

“When prayer or praise attempts to rise,
And fain would reach Jehovah’s ear,
His all-prevailing sacrifice
Perfumes, and makes it welcome there.

That is why your poor prayers receive such good answers, for Jesus’ sake, through His infinite merits and all-prevailing intercession. Then pray on, however poor your prayers seem to be, and whatever Satan has to say about them.

“Through Christ my prayers acceptance gain,
Though sinful and defiled;
Satan accuses me in vain,
And I am owned a child” –

owned a child by the way the Lord hears and answers prayer. Elijah here was owned a child.

“As he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him.” Almighty God in heaven in all His greatness and majesty and glory had His loving eye upon this poor, disconsolate man under the juniper tree. There he was sleeping for sorrow, and God sent a heavenly

messenger, a divine messenger, and he touched him. And really, though it was an angel who touched him, it was a divine touch from heaven. There is so much in the Word of God about a touch. This is what you and I want this morning.

“When Jesus’ gracious hand
Has touched our eyes and ears.”

O if only the Lord would come down and touch my heart, make it soft and tender, make it feeling, shed abroad His love there! O we have so much about this touch in Scripture. Remember Daniel once was so weak he could not rise up from the floor, and the Lord sent an angel to touch him. Daniel said, “He strengthened me.” Well, may the Lord touch some of you and put strength in you. And of course this is a vast subject – we cannot really enter into it this morning, though it is interesting and profitable and precious – the touch of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We think of how He touched one man’s eyes, and He touched another one’s ears, and then He touched the bier on which the dead man lay. You have it in so many places, that healing touch, that gracious touch, that almighty touch.

“And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head.” The wonderful compassion and sympathy and tenderness of Almighty God, thinking of his bodily needs, his physical needs, supplying his providential needs. “My God shall supply all your need.” He needed something to eat, apart from his deep, spiritual depression and concern.¹

“And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals.” When you think of the way that Elijah’s needs were met: ravens, Brook Cherith, the widow woman, a barrel of meal and a cruse of oil, an angel from heaven. Rather than that one of the Lord’s dear children should perish, He sent an angel down from heaven. The ministry of angels – a mysterious subject, but there is a word: “He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.”

* There is an excellent book written by one of the godly Puritans named William Bridge called *A Lifting up for the Downcast*.

“And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again.” You see this poor man now lying there in peace. They say the great musician Mendelssohn was a man who feared God. Very beautifully in his oratorio on Elijah, when he brings this scene in as Elijah lies there at last peacefully sleeping, Mendelssohn has the angels singing all around him, “The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.”

“And the angel of the Lord came again the second time.” A wonderful thing when the Lord comes again. When He has been once, that is not the end. “The angel of the Lord came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.” Well, that is exactly what poor Elijah was feeling. That is why he was under the juniper tree. That is why he fled from Jezebel. These were just the sentiments of his heart: the journey is too great for me. You think again of the love and condescension and compassion of the Lord. He spoke to him and He told Elijah exactly what he was feeling, exactly what he was thinking. It is a terrible thing if you are cast down, in trouble, and you say you feel something, and a kind friend contradicts you and says you are not, or at least implies it, does not sympathise with you. But if you are in a state like Elijah was, bemoaning your lot, the Lord does not come and tell you there is nothing the matter. “The journey is too great for thee.” That is just what Elijah was feeling and the Lord told him so. He told him the malady; He told him the difficulty; He told him the problem; and then he gave him the remedy, and sent him on his way strengthened and recommissioned and confirmed.

“Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.” And we are journeying, and it is a mercy if through grace we can say, “We are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you.” When the new birth takes place, we set out on pilgrimage and there is no short cut to heaven. You need the shoes of iron and brass. You need the daily supply of grace, the daily supply of strength. We are completely unfit for the journey. So you have it pictured in Israel of old going through the wilderness. It was forty years. It was a long journey. It was wonderful when they started, delivered, graciously delivered from Egypt, from Pharaoh, the triumph at the Red Sea. “Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously.” That is your beginning in the life of faith when you are blessed in Christ. And then the journey before them. Very soon there

were the waters of Marah, and the Amalekites attacking them. There were all these dangers in the wilderness, and when they had nearly reached the Promised Land, there was Sihon, and Og, King of Bashan.

“The journey is too great for thee,” and it is a mercy if we realise it. “He that endureth to the end shall be saved.” How can I endure to the end? “We are made partakers of Christ, *if*,” and only if, “we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end.” How can I hold fast the beginning of my confidence stedfast to the end? “The journey is too great for thee.” We are so weak and helpless. There is our sin and infirmity and there is the world either opposing or alluring, tempting, and there is Satan. “The journey is too great for thee.” How can we continue? How can we carry on? “The journey is too great for thee” – the spiritual pilgrimage of a child of God. John Bunyan so beautifully opens this up in the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the difficulties and the dangers of the journey to heaven. Then there are times in your life when the journey becomes specially hard, specially rugged, specially uphill. Some of you have been in it – those times of bereavement, when you lost your loved ones, those times of disappointment. Some of you are in a special need now: your ill health, or those in your family, those you love, parents with children, the various problems you have, the things you have at work, things this week, and all the dangers of the way, and “the journey is too great for thee.” The Lord tells him so in sympathy, in love.

Then He makes full provision for him. “Arise and eat.” And let us be clear, the first time this cake that the angel had baked – it is an amazing thing, an angel baking a cake! – this cake the angel had baked and the water were natural things, but the second time he was fed spiritually. How do we know? Because he went in the strength of it forty days and forty nights to the mount of God. So the second time he was fed spiritually, and that spiritual food sustained him and it strengthened him and, if it is a right word, re-invigorated him, and he was able to go on his way, and I think he could have sung,

“Then let the worldling boast his joys,
We’ve meat to eat he knows not of;
We count his treasures worthless toys,
While we possess a Saviour’s love.”

Elijah did enjoy the Saviour’s love here.

“He arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God.” There was so much there: the Lord speaking to him, the earthquake, the wind, the fire, the still small voice, the dealing with his complaints. “What doest thou here, Elijah?” The recommissioning of him. He was given three great works to do which proved the Lord still loved him. He was still the Lord’s servant. It was not time for him to die. He still had a work to do in the Lord’s name. And then that amazing revelation that shocked him. He thought he was the only one left, and the Lord said, “I have left Me seven thousand in Israel.” You do not know where the Lord’s hidden ones are. I find one of the delightful things at times is to come unexpectedly on one of these hidden ones in Israel. Perhaps you have had the experience; I have – in my native town, someone speaking to me; travelling on a train. “Seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal.

“And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God.” And the Lord says, “Arise and eat.” It was a suitable remedy; it was a divine remedy; it worked; it availed. And the Lord says it this morning. Under the preaching of the gospel wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing – and we pray for it and seek it and long for it – if the Lord in the spirit if not in the letter comes to one here and one there this morning and says, I know your journey is too great, but arise and eat. There is a promise. There is free grace. There is mercy. There is matchless love. There is the Saviour Himself. There is everything you need. It is promised; it is sure.

“Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.” And then you will rise up helped and comforted and strengthened. You will be able to go forward and through mercy you will go in the strength of it in Christ for many days. So may it be.