

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET.

– *JULY 10. – 1 KINGS 17:1-16. –*

"And the barrel of meal wasted not, and neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord." – 1 KINGS 17:16.

OUR preceding lesson in this series dealt with the division of Solomon's Kingdom, after his death. Our present lesson has to do with the ten tribes division and Elijah's mission as a prophet to them. The elders of the ten tribes which refused to recognize King Rehoboam chose Jeroboam, who had been at one time an influential officer in matters relating to their province during Solomon's reign: the same who had been anointed before Solomon's death by a prophet of the Lord, with the information that he should be the king of the ten tribes. Following this announcement he was obliged to flee for his life, as he would have been considered an enemy of the kingdom. Upon Solomon's death, however, he had returned, finding favor with the elders of the ten tribes.

We saw, in the previous lesson, that the course of King Solomon had tended to break down the boundaries and barriers between true and false religion, between the worship of God and the idolatry of surrounding nations, Solomon having to some extent at least countenanced the worship of heathen gods by some of his wives, and the representatives of heathen nations at his court. This, which would be considered by many, a proper, liberal course, was out of harmony with the Lord's instructions on the subject, and did great injury to Israel – leading those whose religious instincts were on the lower levels to regard all nations as more or less right, and on a religious parity.

Jeroboam, fearing that the people by going to Jerusalem to worship the Lord at the Temple, as previously, would become alienated from him as their king, and become attached again to Rehoboam and the line of David, took advantage of the fact that the

people had become indifferent to the true religion, the worship of the Lord, and for the sake of establishing his kingdom and perpetuating the separation from Judah, he established idolatry, casting two golden calves, and saying to the people, "These be thy gods, O Israel, that brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." These two golden calves were set up in different parts of the land, one at Bethel and one at Dan, so that some could go to worship one, and some the other, a part of his pretext being that the former custom of worship at Jerusalem was too difficult for the people. Moreover, still further to separate the peoples, he instituted feasts and sacrifices at different dates from those appointed of the Lord through Moses, and still practiced in Judah. It has been suggested by some that these calves were originally set up as representatives of Jehovah; but we think not. A calf was chosen as the symbol for God, probably because the people while in Egypt were accustomed to the worship of the sacred bull Apis, of Egyptian mythology, and quite probably the Israelites had joined in that worship to some extent during their bondage. Their tendency toward bullock or calf worship is illustrated also by the fact that this was the form of idolatry to which they naturally took when Moses was absent from them for forty days in Mount Horeb, receiving the Law. The King himself had just returned from exile in Egypt to take the throne: he had therefore been several years under the influence of Egypt's idolatry.

During the twenty-two years of Jeroboam's reign Israel made great progress away from the Lord and into idolatry; and to the more thoroughly accomplish this end the king built altars to these bullocks and instituted a new order of priesthood that, so far as possible, he might cause the people to entirely forget the true God, and his Levitical priesthood as well as his Temple at Jerusalem. Jeroboam seems to have appointed himself the chief priest of the new religious institution, for he offered the incense at the altar.

Following the death of Jeroboam there was a period of repeated insurrections against king after king who took the throne of Israel, until Ahab, of whom it is written, "Ahab, the son of Omri, did

evil [R2325 : page 191] in the sight of the Lord, above all that were before him." Ahab's wife, Jezebel, was seemingly still more wicked than himself, and really instigated most of his evil deeds. It is a well recognized fact that a good wife can be a great help to her husband: the history of Jezebel shows that a wife's influence for evil may be even more potent. It was during the reign of Ahab that as the Lord's servant and prophet Elijah delivered the messages and did the works recorded in this and several succeeding lessons.

The work of establishing a new religion, which Jeroboam began, was ably carried on by his successors: and Ahab, influenced by Jezebel, his wife, seems to have out-done his predecessors not only to establish the new religion, but to exterminate the religion of Jehovah. He and his wife openly established the worship of Baal and slew the prophets of Jehovah, – the first religious persecution on record. Not only the out-spoken prophet of the Lord who delivered the message, but all the true Israelites who had respect to Jehovah, were obliged to hide from Jezebel's wrathful zeal for the worship of Baal. [R2326 : page 191]

Under divine direction, Elijah appeared in the presence of King Ahab and delivered a message, saying, "As the Lord God of Israel liveth [whom you seem to think is dead] before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." At first, probably, the matter was considered a foolish boast, but when the dew and rain ceased and scarcity and famine resulted, the full purport of the judgment began to be understood, and the King sent hither and thither, everywhere, to find Elijah; presumably to induce him, either by entreaty or by cruelty, to lift from the land what he probably considered to be an evil spell or curse. But God had directed Elijah where to hide, in a place where he could himself be supplied with water, and where he could be fed by ravens.

Elijah's prediction of a famine was not merely a prophecy; rather, it was the declaration of a divine judgment upon Israel. The object of

the famine was to bring the Israelites to their senses – to show them that they were leaving the true God to trust in idols. The force and appropriateness of this particular kind of a judgment may be recognized, when we remember that the claim made for Baal was that he was specially the god of the forces of nature: his worship was presumed to bring *increase* in the home and in the field. The drouth and consequent famine would be a contradiction, therefore, of these claims made in the name of Baal, and would shatter faith in him, and prepare Israel to recognize and worship again the true God, Jehovah.

Meantime, Elijah, following the directions of the Lord, lived for about two years at the brook Cherith, drinking of its waters, and fed there by the ravens. Various efforts have been made to discount the miracle implied in the statement that the ravens brought Elijah bread and flesh morning and evening. Some have claimed that the word translated "ravens" might, with a little different accent, be translated "Arabian," or signify the inhabitants of a village called Orbo. But, in addition to the fact that God is abundantly able to work such miracles as are necessary to his plans, we know that the raven of the East is in many respects a peculiar bird, which exhibits not only extraordinary intelligence but sometimes also sympathy. For instance, Bishop Stanley, in his "History of Birds," relates that a gentleman who had been driving ran over and bruised the leg of his Newfoundland dog, and says: "While we were examining the injury, Ralph, the raven, looked on also. The minute the dog was tied up under the manger of my horse, the raven not only visited him, but brought him bones, and attended him with particular marks of kindness."

A missionary in India says, respecting ravens in general, and these which fed Elijah in particular – "While I do not claim to know where the ravens got the bread and meat, a residence of thirty years in the East helps me to guess where they got it. My own little children have often come crying into the house, their hands scratched and bleeding from the claws of kites and crows [the raven is of the crow family] that had snatched from them the food they were eating. Our

nurse was one day preparing a fowl to be grilled, for my sick wife, and standing in the doorway, plate in hand, she called the cook to come for the fowl. When the man came, the nurse discovered that her plate was empty; a kite or crow had carried away the fowl without her knowledge. Meat sellers are obliged to be on the alert to prevent crows and kites from robbing them. I do not profess to know anything about it, but it is my firm conviction that those ravens [which fed Elijah] stole the food from the bazaars of Jerusalem or Jericho."

In any case, the lesson to us is one of the divine care and providence over those who are devoted to God's service. He who sustained Elijah can equally sustain us. The important question with each of us should be, Am I the Lord's servant, in the place and doing the work which he has directed? If so, our bread and our water shall be sure, and no good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly. – Isa. 33:16; Psa. 84:11.

"Nor is it a singular case –
The wonder is often renewed,
And many can say to his praise
He sends them by ravens their food.

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"Thus worldlings, tho ravens indeed,
Tho greedy and selfish their mind,
If God has a servant to feed,
Against their own wills can be kind.

"Thus Satan, that raven unclean,
Who croaks in the ears of the saints,
Compelled by a power unseen,
Administers oft to their wants.

"God teaches them how to find food,
From all the temptations they feel,
This raven who thirsts for my blood
Has helped me to many a meal."

– *John Newton.*

Next Elijah was directed to a widow of Zarephath, across the border, in the Kingdom of Zidon. Our Lord refers to this, and incidentally confirms this entire piece of history respecting Elijah, the three and a half years of famine, and his visit to Sarepta. – Luke 4:26.

Considering that the drouth and famine extended also into Zidon, it would seem to have been a bold request of the prophet, to ask the widow woman for water to drink, and bread to eat. Her willingness to share with him was remarkable under the circumstances. It suggests to us a fact that with all our increase of civilization and wealth, the people of to-day are far less hospitable and less generous. A writer familiar with the customs of the East, says that there the gift of water to the thirsty is regarded as a sacred duty, saying: "Never yet, during many years' residence in Syria, and many a long day's travel, have I been refused a draught of water by a single individual of any sect or race. The Bedouin in the desert has shared with me the last drop in his waterskin." The Lord's people have great need to cultivate a large generosity, not only of thought, but of deed; and the blessing which came to the widow of Sarepta as a result of her generosity to Elijah, should serve to impress this lesson upon our hearts.

Furthermore, altho the woman was a Gentile, she had respect to Jehovah, and in some manner evidently recognized the Prophet as one of his servants. This, no doubt, had to do with her willingness to share her last morsel of food. Indeed, the intimation of our Lord is that this poor Gentile widow was more worthy of divine care than many of the widows of Israel. She explained to Elijah that her barrel, or rather stone jar, of meal was about exhausted; and that she was preparing for herself and her son what she presumed would be her last meal before they would die of famine. The Prophet's demand that he should have a small cake from it first was not because of greed or selfishness on his part, but as one feature of the lesson of faith which the Lord wished to inculcate. If the woman had the faith necessary to obey, then she

would be esteemed worthy of the Lord's assistance through the Prophet; if she did not exercise the faith, another widow might have been found who would. Thus it is with us, – at various steps in the journey of life the Lord brings us to the place where he tests our faith. If we exercise the faith we will get the blessing; if we do not, we will lose it. "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Nevertheless the woman was not asked to exercise this faith without being first given a definite promise from the Lord; and so with us – we are not to be blindly credulous respecting the words and promises of men, and to consider this to be faith in the Lord; but when we recognize the word of the Lord, we are to trust it implicitly, and to act accordingly.

Not always, or even often, does God deal with his people after this manner of miraculous provision for their sustenance. Nevertheless, we are to recognize him as the author of all our blessings – "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of Lights." His promised provision is not for weeks and months and years in advance, but "daily bread" – bread for each day – "thy bread and thy water shall be sure." Nor are we to expect or ask for the luxuries of life, but to remember that our "Father knoweth what things we have need of" – what things would be for our highest welfare and best interests.

The meal, the bread, of that time might fitly be considered as a symbol of the bread of truth, of which we are privileged to eat, and of which our supply is continued from day to day. The olive oil, used by the ancients much as we use butter, is frequently used in the Scriptures as representing divine grace and the holy spirit; and so we, as the Lord's people, are not only supplied with the bread of truth, but also with the spirit of truth, which helps to make it nourishing and profitable to us. Another prophet speaks of the experience of the world during the dark ages, saying, "There shall be a famine in the land, – not a famine of bread nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord." – Amos 8:11.

We have elsewhere shown that this famine of Elijah's day and the period of its duration, as well as the Prophet and his experiences with Jezebel, etc., were typical of God's dealings with the Church, and her experiences during this Gospel age.*

*See [MILLENNIAL DAWN, VOL. II., Chap. 8.](#)

Note here also the beautiful poem by Mrs. Charles, found in [POEMS AND HYMNS OF DAWN](#), page 127. It suggests a very profitable thought respecting the Lord's blessing upon the widow of Sarepta, and shows how an application of its lesson may be made by all who are the Lord's people.

"Is thy cruse of comfort failing?
Rise and share it with another."
