

The Gospel Witness

PUBLISHED WEEKLY

IN THE INTEREST OF JARVIS STREET BAPTIST
CHURCH, TORONTO, AND OF EVANGELICAL TRUTH

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"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ."—Romans 1: 16.

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The Jarvis Street Pulpit

A COMMON MAN'S ACHIEVEMENT.

A Sermon by the Pastor.

Preached in Jarvis Street Church, Toronto, Sunday morning, Feb. 4th, 1923.

(Stenographically reported.)

"Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.

"And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."—James 5: 17-18.

THUS the Holy Spirit in a few words epitomizes the life-story of one of God's outstanding heroes of faith. We shall meditate this morning upon the character and career of Elijah the Tishbite.

I. And I begin with the observation, THAT HE WAS NOT A SUPERMAN: he was "a man subject to like passions as we are." We are never more disposed to regard others as superior to ourselves than when we cast about to find some excuse for not following their example. It is rather an unusual thing for men to admit that there are others greater than themselves; but we are most of us ready to do so when excusing ourselves for not following in the footsteps of those who have walked in the ways of the Lord.

Now Elijah was a man like ourselves. He walked the common earth; he was subject to the same infirmities; he was imprisoned by the same circumstances. He had no greater powers than we have, naturally; and all that is recorded of Elijah is to be accounted for on other than natural grounds. The purpose of the Bible is to show us what God can do, not with angels, but with men. This whole Book is written to show us that the grace of God can redeem human nature, that God can meet us in all our sins and with all our weaknesses, and make saints of us, and giants, too. Ultimately our Lord Himself took on Him our nature; and it is said of Him that He is "touched with the feeling of our infirmities," that He "was in all points tempted as we are," and that "in that he himself hath suffered, being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted."

I read to you the closing verses of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews this morning that we might be reminded of that long roll written by the divine Spirit to record for all generations the mighty exploits of those who believed in God. We are told that we are "compassed about with this great cloud of witnesses;" not merely that they wait to witness our achievements—that may be true, but I do not believe that that is the primary meaning of it: "wherefore seeing that we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with patience the race that is set before us." And that great cloud of witnesses witness to the truth that God can make giants of us all. That is what it is written for. "He left not himself without witness." They are not there as spectators of our attempts; but they are there to witness to us of what God can do for men and women who will trust in Him. "These all having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise." And if you and I live below our privileges, the eleventh chapter of Hebrews will condemn us at the judgment; for what God did for those men of old, He stands ready to do for us: what He accomplished in the life of Elijah, He can accomplish in your life and mine, if we are ready to submit to Him. Therefore my story this morning has to do with a man like ourselves, and the story is written to magnify the grace of our God.

II. Observe, therefore, that ELIJAH LIVED IN A DAY WHEN IT WAS NOT EASY TO SERVE GOD. Ahab was upon the throne: "there was none like unto Ahab, which did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord, whom Jezebel his wife stirred up." The court set the fashion in religion, and the overwhelming majority of people followed the religious fashions of the day. The worship of Baal and of Ashtoreth became popular, and before the eyes of the mass of the people there was no fear of God. The prophets of Baal were many, and the terror of the king was upon the hearts of those who really desired to serve Jehovah. Notwithstanding the difficulties of the time, however, Elijah the Tishbite remained absolutely true to God. He is one of the outstanding figures of all history, one of the mightiest men who ever lived, one of the brightest lights that ever shone for God, and he lived in one of the darkest days the world has ever known. And that is God's way. He laid His hand upon Noah and saved him in a terribly corrupt age; He laid His hand upon Abraham, of whom I was speaking a few Sunday mornings ago; how marvellously He sustained Joseph even in a heathen country! He found His man to accomplish His great miracle, and to set up a standard of what God could do, in the court of Pharaoh, where God was unknown,—He found Moses and called him to be His instrument; and when unbelief prevailed among the people of Israel for forty years, he kept alive the faith of Joshua and of Caleb.

I have had to do with our Home Mission work for a good number of years. We have had before us in time past again and again the story of some little country church—a church that perhaps seemed to bear no fruit through many years, a church whose members for the most part seemed to be spiritually dead; and yet when we considered the advisability of closing that church, we found right in the wilderness some Caleb standing out. "Ah," we have said, "there is a man or a woman in that church who is one of the noblest Christians you can find on earth to-day." Apparently without any human help, like an oasis in the desert, or like Gideon's fleece, wet with the dew of heaven, when everything else was dry, that one person or family stood forth as a witness for God. God has a way of saving somebody, and maintaining his faith, and

building him up in Christ when there seems to be nobody round about him to help him. I could go on down the roll and remind you of the three Hebrew children in Babylon, with no prayer-meetings except such as they had themselves, no help of any sort, but who stood and said, "Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us . . . but if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the image which thou hast set up. We can die, but we will be true." The same was true of Daniel. Why do I say this? Because it is not easy to serve the Lord to-day. It never was easy as far as I know. Perhaps it is a little more difficult now. But we are disposed too often to put the responsibility for our spiritual state upon our circumstances, and to justify ourselves by saying that we have been driven into a corner with nobody to help us. A woman says, "My husband does not fear the Lord;" or the children say, "Mine is not an household of prayer;" or parents complain that they are distracted by the children; or some young man says, "It is hard to serve God in the place where I work." We can all find excuses; but I remind you this morning that God can raise up an Elijah side by side with Ahab. He can make a man "grow like a cedar in Lebanon," under the shadow of an accursed Jezebel. Therefore, if we are not growing, do not blame the times, nor the circumstances. There must be some other reason for our spiritual declension.

III. WHAT IS THE EXPLANATION OF THIS REMARKABLE CHARACTER?

Perhaps it was his mother? perhaps it was his father? How would you write the biography of Elijah? That is where we usually begin: we want to know where he was born; to know something about the influences which were cast about him in the days of his youth. Sometimes I think we make too much of what we call the formative period. There is not any period when the Lord cannot form a man if He wants to. He can make a saint of an octogenarian. The modern Sunday-School idea is that if you are not saved when you are a little boy, or a little girl, you cannot be saved at all. I grant you, we should by all means seek to bring the children to Christ; there are special advantages in remembering our Creator in the days of our youth; but let us set no limit to the power of God. Where did Elijah come from? What about his father and mother? The Holy Spirit tells us the story of a life in this case without telling us anything about his father and his mother. For all we know he might have been like Melchisedec, without father or mother, except that the Word of the Lord says he was "a man subject to like passions as we are." "Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the inhabitants of Gilead:" that is all we know about him. No; is was not Elijah's father nor his mother who made him what he was. It is a great thing to have a Christian heritage. Some of us ought to be humbled that we are not better than we are. We have had Christian influences surrounding us from our youth up; we have had every opportunity to be true Christians; but if there is any man or woman here of whom that is not true, this story affords hope even for you.

There is an explanation of this extraordinary character. I wonder where he lived? He was "of the inhabitants of Gilead." What was his address? This was his address: "As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand." Whoever would find Elijah must address him, "In care of Jehovah"! That is the explanation. And the man who stands before God can stand before anybody. Is that where you live? Where do you live Elijah? And he answers, "As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand."—In the New Testament, "Abide with me." That is the privilege, my friends, of all

of us. We may not be able to choose where we shall live in the city; we may not have a mansion we can call our own; we may have to sing,

"No foot of land do I possess;
No cottage in this wilderness,"

and we may not be able to help ourselves in this respect; but every one of us may enjoy Elijah's privilege. It is our privilege to enter into the holiest of all through the blood of Christ so that we may stand before God; and having taken to us "the whole armour of God . . . and having done all, to stand," if need be, before Ahab. Is that where you live?—"Before God"? It is our privilege to live in the heavenly places,—“O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain,”—get thee, up, up, up! That is where we ought to live. "Before whom I stand." You can afford to be ignorant of a man's pedigree if you know that about him, that he stands before God. I do not care whether you belong to one of the old families or not; I do not care who your father or your mother was: the great and important consideration is whether we are standing before God and living our lives before Him. There, then, is the story of this ordinary man; that is the explanation of all that follows—"subject to like passions as we are." living in Ahab's day when all the tides of life were against him, and would have swept him away from his allegiance to God; he stands out on the page of history because he stood before God.

I am glad to have here on Sunday morning many young men, week by week, who have the ministry in view. The Lord bless you, my brethren. You are undertaking the heaviest task that any man can possibly undertake; and you are preparing yourselves to preach the gospel at a time when it is very difficult to preach it. And I should like, if I may be permitted to do so, out of a few years of experience, to give you this little bit of advice: whatever else may be true of you, whatever your circumstances, to whatever church you may be called, whether it be to a large sphere or a smaller one, make this your supreme determination, that you will seek to minister to others as you come from the presence of God Himself. Whatever your standing before men may be, see that you stand before God; and if you do that, you need have little concern about other matters.

IV. *It is also said of Elijah that "he prayed."* Prayer-meetings are for women in some places—not in Jarvis Street. (From the audience, "Praise the Lord!") Brother Fraser does not mean that women do not come, they do, but we do praise God that great numbers of men rejoice in the hour of prayer. But if you had been writing the story of Elijah, this man who is like an oak,—you know God grows His greatest oaks on the stormy side of the mountain always, where they are exposed to the fiercest winds that blow: that is what makes them what they are—but if you had been writing the story of Elijah, you would probably have sketched him as a mighty man, a heroic spirit, a fearless exponent of the truth, a man of marvellous eloquence, a man wielding a tremendous influence over his fellows. What a subject for a human biography—Elijah! I think I could write a good story of Elijah myself; but we have none of us learned the art of condensation as we see it exemplified in this verse; for the Spirit of God writes His story in one word: "Elijah prayed." The outstanding, distinguishing characteristic of this man was that "he prayed;" and when you say that of a man you have explained every wonder that may characterize his career. Ananias said concerning Saul of Tarsus,

"I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: and here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon thy name." What was God's answer? He said, "Behold, he prayeth." He was learning the first and last great lesson of a successful life, "he prayeth." "Elijah prayed."

But what does it mean to pray? We think of prayer as an excursion to the market with an empty basket: that is the idea we have, people coming up to the place of prayer as the sons of Jacob came to Egypt, with their empty sacks, coming to the storehouses to get something. And when we begin to pray we ask the Lord to open the heavens and send down the rain, so that the earth may "bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater." Not thus did Elijah pray. He prayed "*that it might not rain.*" I wonder if Elijah knew what he was praying for when he prayed thus? I do not suppose he knew the end from the beginning. Some church is going to have a few weeks' evangelistic services, and they decide to have a week's meeting for prayer in preparation. The people gather and ask the Lord to open the windows of heaven and pour them out a blessing. Elijah prayed for rain at last, but not at first. "He prayed," and his prayer was the preparation for further prayer: "he prayed earnestly that it might not rain." Prayer is not an hour's exercise; prayer is a campaign; prayer is an expedition into the enemy's country; prayer is a career; prayer is a life's discipline. Elijah prayed: not for an hour, not for a day, not for a year only. He was a man of prayer. He stood before God. He prayed always. We need to do that, to pray "that it might not rain." I wonder if some of you remember how in years gone by we prayed in this place that the Lord would not send us a blessing until He could send it in His own way; that He would not permit us to have success until He could send it to us in a way that would be glorifying to Himself. Elijah prayed, and he said, "Not yet Lord, no rain yet. Lord shut up the heavens, let there be neither dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." Elijah prayed! And so the prayer-meeting is to last from eight to nine! If the Lord would be good enough to withdraw at nine o'clock! I am not pleading for long prayers. Short prayers, so-called, sometimes may be very long, and long prayers may be very short. But here is a prayer recorded that lasted no less than three and a half years. Elijah prayed for three and a half years "that it might not rain:" He prayed, "Dry up every brook, Lord; empty every granary; let the garden be withered; let the whole land become a wilderness, let it not rain until the people come back to God."

It is of the very essence of faith, my brother, that we should have the spiritual discernment which will recognize, as this same epistle teaches, that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from heaven above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow cast by turning." And Elijah said, "Lord, I want good gifts, I want perfect gifts for this nation. I want it straight from Thy hand. I want to see them prostrate before Thee. I want to hear them crying, 'the Lord, He is God.' And if need be, let there be no rain for three and a half years until they learn to acknowledge God."

Baal was the sun god, the god of nature. The followers of Ahab professed that they were in commerce with the god who had authority over the skies: and Elijah prayed that *God would challenge all false gods*. He prayed that God would prove that "the Lord he is God: there is none else beside him:" and that He would of Himself, by His outstretched arm, put an end to the terrible apostasy that was wasting the land. "He prayed." Perhaps if we were to pray even more than we preach we might have still greater results. I feel it in my heart again and again to pray—and I know many of you also pray,

that God will arise and plead His own cause, that He will Himself prove that the Bible is true—and He will!

But, what about Elijah? *Does it cost anything to pray like that?* Somebody would say, "How foolish Elijah was! He might have been the king's prime minister if he had only had sense enough to keep in with the court. He was the sort of man that Jezebel would have delighted to honour, if only he had been more diplomatic, so as to have maintained friendly relations with the queen. He might have sat at the royal banqueting table, whereas now he flees for his life, hides away from the king." How are you getting along, Elijah? "Oh, the ravens come to see me every day. They bring me bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening." And somebody remarks, "Poor Elijah! and so you have come to that, have you? Instead of being associated with the king and all the royal courtiers, you have actually come down to that—keeping company, not even with doves, but with ravens." I believe he would have said, "But it is a fine meal they bring me. I wish you could sit down with me to breakfast sometimes when the ravens have brought me bread and flesh. It is plain fare, but it is served with some sort of a heavenly sauce, there is about it a kind of heavenly flavour that you never could taste in the banqueting house of Jezebel and Ahab. I would rather have dinner provided for me by the ravens than by liveried servants of the court any day." Do you know what it means to be supplied by the ravens? But let us question Elijah further: Are you still living by the brook, Elijah? "No; the brook dried up, and I moved by divine direction to a place called Zarephath." And how are you getting along there? "I found a humble widow there, just a poor woman." And the cynic answers, "And do you mean to say that you, Elijah, have no companion but a poor widow, and that you are dependent upon her meagre hospitality? What a tragedy! How foolish you were to pray yourself into a position like that!" But the great prophet would reply, "But she is a wonderful cook. She made me a cake the other day, and I never tasted anything like it. It was angel's food; and I have proved, down at the brook, and in the widow's house at Zarephath, that the Lord God of Israel still liveth, and before Him I still stand. I am, indeed, at the king's banqueting table, and I still have the best of company, because I breakfast and dine with the King every day."

You can afford to be unpopular with men, if you stand before God. I want to put this sermon into *The Gospel Witness*, and to send it over the land: I want to give a word of witness in the name of the Lord: There are people who are afraid to cross the threshold of Jarvis Street Church; there are ministers who could scarcely sleep at night if they knew that it was known to certain people that they had been to hear the Pastor of Jarvis Street Church. There are influences which have put terror into the hearts of some people; but I say to all our friends who shall read these words when they are printed that we are perfectly happy with the ravens and the widows,—and with God besides: "The Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom we stand." Our God will vindicate our course. He is doing it, and He will do it in still larger measure in His own time and in His own way.

For a long time *Elijah apparently had nobody to help him to pray*. There were, as he later discovered, a lot of people praying secretly; but this is not the story of a prayer-meeting: it is an example of the power of secret prayer. I was struck with a remark a brother made in the prayer-meeting last night. He said that when we pray publicly, we are more or less subject to external influences, we are praying in the hearing of each other; but when we pray privately, when we enter into our closet and shut to the door, we are just bearing witness to God. That was the secret of Elijah's power—not the prayer he prayed publicly, there is a record of that; but in the Old Testament we are not told that he prayed for the heavens to be shut up; the New Testament interprets that fact, and tells us that the reason for the three and a half years' drought was that Elijah prayed.

Let me enter a plea, therefore, for more private prayer. Let us not have less public prayer, let us continue to come together as we do, but let us each be able to say, "As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand." Let us get power there.

V. I have time for only a word or two on *this further point*. "Elijah prayed." Very well, what else? "*He prayed again.*" He prayed that blessing might not come until it should come in God's way. And then at last "he

prayed again" and it rained. You are just as familiar with the story of the second prayer as I am, and I have no new thing to say about it, but only to remind you of it. *What did that further prayer involve?* It involved the restoration of the altar that had been broken down. It involved the offering of sacrifice to God. It involved on Elijah's part a public avowal of his absolute confidence in God. He is a heroic figure, a wonderful figure, when he comes to Obadiah and declares that he will show himself to Ahab. Obadiah says, "There is no country in which the king has not looked for thee; and if I go and report that thou art here, if I say, Behold, Elijah is here, it shall come to pass as soon as I am gone from thee, that the Spirit of the Lord shall carry thee whither I know not; and so when I come and tell Ahab, and he cannot find thee, he shall slay me." "No," said Elijah, I will shew myself to Ahab this day. Does Ahab think I have been afraid of him? Does Ahab imagine that I have not come into his august presence because I have been afraid of him? I am standing before God, and there is nothing under the stars that I am afraid of. I will surely shew myself to Ahab to-day." And he did. He summoned the prophets of Baal; he restored the broken altar; he put the sacrifice upon it. And mark this! Elijah *destroyed all his bridges*, he left no way of retreat whatever; he was so absolutely sure of His God that he said, "I have come to the place now where I will stake all upon God's faithfulness. I will challenge God: the God that answereth by fire, let him be God."

I wonder if I may venture to suggest what has been in my mind for years. I am going to let you into a little secret. Very dear friends of mine said to me in time past, "Do you think it is worth while? Do you not think it would be easier if you were to withdraw instead of battling your way through in Jarvis Street Church." I will tell you what I said to them. I said, "No, I am very tired of it all; but I am going to prove, as God helps me, that it is possible even in these degenerate days to put into practice the principles of the New Testament; and we will have a New Testament church on the corner of Jarvis and Gerrard Streets, or, so far as I am concerned, nowhere. We will prove that this thing can be done, and that it can be done here." Is that how we are praying? I think it is. I think we have come to that place now where we can say, "The God that answereth by fire, let him be God." We have no elaborate plans; we have no wealth; we have no skill in organization; we have no learning and no eloquence, and no up-to-dateness; we are just as old fashioned as the Bible. Men may call us what they like; our one great prayer is this: "The God that answereth by fire, let him be God." We want God to show what He can do right here with people who will trust Him. I trust we are restoring the broken altar; for if we are you know what the result must be, how at last the fire came. *The fire came before the rain!* The fire always comes before the rain. The fire must come to burn up some things. Then Elijah still prayed. After the people had said, "The Lord, he is the God," he began to pray, and he prayed again, and again, and again, until a cloud the size of a man's hand appeared. Then he sent word to Ahab: "Prepare thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not." He said, "There is the sound of abundance of rain." And you know how the rain came, and the drought was ended.

May we not be used of God individually and collectively in just the same way? *God still answers by fire; and He still answers by rain.* He is still able to pour out a deluge of blessing. Let us continue to wait upon Him until the blessing shall come.

NOTES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS.

The Dorcas Society will meet Thursday, February 22nd, at 2 p.m., for work. A large attendance is requested. It is thought wise, owing to the prevalence of flu, to dispense with the usual Dorcas Tea. The ladies who come to work in the afternoon, and who desire to remain for the Prayer Service, could bring their lunch and tea will be served to them.

For Young Men and Young Women.—There are two of the many classes in the Bible School to which we call special attention. The class for young men is taught by Mr. Wm. Fraser. He is a diligent student of the Word of God, and is gifted with unusual spiritual perception. Those who attend his class will find the Bible is allowed to speak for itself, and they will find the Word speaking to heart and conscience. Many have received great blessing

under his teaching, and we urge all young men of the congregation who are not engaged in teaching themselves, to avail themselves of the opportunity to spend an hour in Bible study under Mr. Fraser's leadership every Sunday afternoon.

The Class for Young Women is taught by Miss Violet Stoakley, who has proved a great inspiration to the young ladies of the church. In this class the young ladies receive sound Biblical instruction, and not a few have been converted. Young women who would receive a good grounding in the essentials of the Christian faith are urged to become members of this class. Or if there are some who desire to take unconverted young women where they may know what to do to be saved, they could not do better than to bring them to this class. All young women are invited.

It must be exceedingly gratifying to the church membership, that these two classes, like the general Bible Class taught by Mr. Syme, of which we wrote last week, are taught under the direction of leaders whose one object is first to bring their scholars to Christ, and then to inspire them with a love for the word and will of God. In both those classes during the past year there have been conversions, and both have led persons into the membership of the church.

The Ministry of Our Printed Page.—Every week brings us new subscriptions for The Gospel Witness, or some contribution to its funds. Last Sunday morning a good friend of our work put a cheque for \$50.00 on the plate for The Witness fund. We need contributions to this fund. If everyone who reads this who has received profit from these pages and who can afford to do so would send a minimum of one dollar as a thank-offering, how happy we should be! The collection taken Tuesday evenings, with the proceeds from the sale of the lectures, is just about covering the expense of publication of the lectures. For the information of strangers we announce that copies of The Witness (five cents each), or of any or all of the lectures (ten cents each) may be obtained at the Church office. This week we received a letter from New Zealand expressing gratitude for The Witness, and the weekly lecture also is going to many outside of the city.

Last Sunday evening three men came boldly forward during the service, and before the service closed testified to having been converted. Last Tuesday the Lecture Hall was filled for the lecture and the Lord's presence was felt.

Next Thursday evening the monthly business meeting of the church will be held, at which the resignation of certain trustees of Jarvis Street will be submitted, and their successors will be appointed. Announcement of this meeting will be made at both services on Sunday, in obedience to the requirement of the trust deed of the property.

Let no one forget that whatever blessing has come to Jarvis Street Church has come in answer to prayer. Therefore of all our activities, the ministry of prayer in public and private is by far the most important. Prayer will not spread, but rather prevent the flu. Therefore come Saturday and Thursday to pray.

Bible Lecture Tuesday, 7.45. Subject: "The Gospel in Joshua and Judges."

The Church Calendar

Sunday. For the week beginning Sunday, February 18th, 1923.

10.00—Prayer Service in the Church Parlor, Mr. George Greenway.

10.30—Monthly Communion Service.

11.00—Public Worship. The Pastor will preach.

3.00—The Bible School will meet.

6.00—Prayer Meeting in Church Parlor.

7.00—Public Worship—The Pastor will preach. Baptism will be administered.

Tuesday, 7.45—Prayer, followed by the sixth Bible Lecture by the Pastor, on "How to Study the Bible."

Wednesday—Junior Service, 7.15.

Thursday and Saturday, 8 o'clock, Meeting for Prayer

The Parliament Street Branch, 250 Parliament Street. Sunday: Bible School,

3.00. Evangelistic Service, conducted by W. L. McKay.

Wednesday, 8.00, Prayer Meeting. Friday, 7.15, Junior Service.