

# Discipline in the School of God - Part 3

by J.B. Stoney

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*Elijah's life is a testament to the power of faith and the importance of discipline in God's dealings with His servants.*

**Scripture:** 2 Kings 18:5, 2 Chronicles 32:8, Psalm 46:10, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 26:3

**Topics:** "Faith And Trust", "Godly Discipline"

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## Description

J.B. Stoney preaches about the life and lessons of Hezekiah, highlighting how he was empowered by God to renew the testimony of the Lord in a time of great ruin and desolation, and how he was taught to trust in God even in the face of the end of all things. Hezekiah's life serves as an example of being strengthened by God to fulfill His purposes and to find peace and rest in Him amidst challenging circumstances.

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## Transcript

### ELIJAH

The place which Elijah occupied in God's dealings with His people lends a peculiar interest to his character and history. The nature of the services required of him during that remarkable time necessarily developed the quality of the grace that was in him, and at the same time subjected him to the discipline which was to mould and fashion him for those services. God, in His own counsel, appoints the servant who is suited to carry out His will ; but though that servant be endowed by Him with power to do so, yet unless he be controlled and disciplined by the hand of God, he will continually fall into the devisings of his nature, no matter how godly and divine may be his intent. For we greatly err if we think that having the divine thought is all that is necessary as to our service ; we must truly and efficiently be expressive of the thought; and this subjects us, as servants of God, to discipline which we often cannot understand. Discipline for known faults or shortcomings we can easily comprehend; but when it is that peculiar order of training which fits a man to be God's instrument and witness, we can no more understand it than the plants of the earth can understand why they must pass through all the vicissitudes of winter in order to bring forth a more abundant harvest.

The first notice we have of Elijah is in i Kings 17, when he appears as a herald of judgment to Ahab. But though his public career began here, it was by no means the beginning of his private exercises, for we learn from James 5: 17. that the judgment here so confidently announced was granted in direct answer to his prayer. " As the Lord liveth," says Elijah, " before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word." And why had he prayed for this? Ahab's wickedness had, in the sight of

the Lord, surpassed all who had preceded him. He had married Jezebel, the daughter of the King of the Zidonians, and had reared up an altar to Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. Elijah, " a man of like passions with us," but a righteous man, and one who was dependent on God, could not witness these abominations in the midst of God's people with indifference ; and he earnestly entreats that God would thus speak to the nation in judgment, and vindicate His own name. His trust was in God, and he looked to Him to correct His people, and to lead them into that dependence which he himself had learnt. Suspension of usual mercies was the way of all others to effect this : the loss of dew and rain for three years and a half was fitted to make them remember the source from which their blessings flowed.

The deprivation of natural mercies by superhuman means has always the effect of impressing man with a sense that he must look to the Creator. The course of nature has been suspended by a power unknown to him ; and though, while he enjoyed the usual blessings, he little thought of God, when they are suspended, he is made to feel that he has no remedy but in appealing to Him whom heretofore he had disobeyed and abandoned. Elijah, grieved and oppressed by the apostasy of Israel, finds relief for his heart in prayer, and thus obtains from God the remedy for recalling His people, and Ahab, their king, to a sense of owing every mercy they had to the hand of God. What a striking and interesting light is this in which his history opens to our view!

Having prayed in secret, he comes forth for the first time to declare the result of it, and is thus a blessed and prepared witness for such evil and disastrous times and a witness, too (as the Holy Ghost, ages afterwards, testified), that every soul thus disciplined to wait on God in any emergency will prove that " the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." With what dignity and power does the man taught of God stand forth to testify against the corruptions of his day, as his first meeting with Ahab testifies! (chap. 17 : i). How instructive to see a lone and hitherto obscure man rise up in the power of God and tell the king of Israel, Thus saith the Lord, " There shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word! " Elijah takes the place of precedence which Ahab had forfeited; for Israel's king ought to have been God's most distinguished servant ; but he had grievously departed from God's way, and the Lord now sends His own servant, disciplined in secret, to deliver a message and a testimony which asserted His supreme control over everything. The rain, on which the fruits of the earth depended, should not fall but according to His servant's word.

And now, having delivered his message on behalf of God, this same servant is to be dealt with individually. " Get thee hence," says the Lord, " and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith.... And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there." He is not to be outside the afflictions and judgments with which God visits his people; but he is, through dependence on God, to be above them. So is it with every true servant; so was it with Elijah. The period, which is one of unmitigated affliction , to the wilful, becomes a peculiarly profitable season to the man of faith. If his prayer has been signally answered, he must learn that for that very reason he must live more in dependence than ever ; and also, that the afflictions which he had prayed for must fall on him too, unless he adheres strictly to the path of faith.

Very often when our petitions are graciously answered, we are less careful to retain the place of dependence, whereas the very benefit we have received should make us the more dependent. It is faith in God which sets His servant above the afflictions of God's people, and not any set of circumstances especially ordered for him. Elijah must " hide " ; but, like the blessed One whom he foreshadowed, he is to linger in Israel to the very last, though hidden and unknown, for it is within the precincts of the land that God first provides for him. With His own hand, as it were, He feeds and nourishes him ; the ravens brought

him bread and flesh in the morning and in the evening; birds, so voracious that they neglect to feed their offspring, are transformed by God into ministers for His servant's need ; " and he drank of the brook " Cherith.

But after a while he is made to feel still more keenly the dearth and parching drought of Israel; " the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land " ; he was sensibly to feel the sufferings of God's people, even though they had not been incurred by wilfulness of his own, but at the same time he was to reckon on God and say, " The Lord is my helper." This was our blessed Lord's experience, only in the perfection which always characterised Him ; and to this very scene He refers, when in Luke 4 He felt His rejection by Israel, and how their hearts were closed towards Himself ; and He makes use of it to illustrate to His audience that He was not without resource. If acceptance failed Him in Israel, the same blessed God who had provided a Gentile widow to be the hostess of Elijah would provide reception for the Lord of the earth in the hearts of the desolate Gentiles outside Israel.

Elijah having been taught to wait on the Lord for daily support in the land of promise, is now to hear the word, " Arise, get thee to Zarephath, which belongeth to Zidon, and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee." This was a new fine of discipline, and service is therein opened to him. He, an Israelite, has to leave the land of promise to dwell with a Gentile widow, and be supported by her. The Lord, during His rejection by Israel, dwells, in one sense, with the Gentile ; and blessed it is to see that every true servant is to be led by a path in one way similar to His. Elijah obeys ; and, like Him, he there sets forth the wondrous history of God's grace to man. At the gate he met the widow. When faith simply acts on the word of God we find the . right thing in the right place. He might have passed by the widow who was to support him, because she was poor, and have sought one who was better off ; but his eye was fixed on God, and nothing daunted by the extremity of her poverty, he, without questioning, says to her., " Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." A soul led of God always, I may say, feels its way ; it does not doubt its way, but at first it only asks for the least, and then is emboldened to proceed.

So here, with Elijah, when he found that she willingly discontinued her own work, forgetting the claims her necessity had on her, he is encouraged to ask more, and becomes assured, too, that this is the widow to whom God has sent him. She was willing to share with him all she could, but when the prophet asks her for what she had not, she is compelled to disclose the full tale of her poverty ; and then it is that Elijah rises up in all the greatness of Him whose servant he was. How bright is that moment to the soul which has been carefully threading its way, following the ray of divine light, clear to itself, but as yet shedding no light beyond, when it enters with fun intelligence into the purpose of God!

Thus it was with Elijah. The word of the Lord had now reached him, and he declares to the widow, Thus saith the Lord, " The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth." Forthwith he takes up his abode in her house ; and for a full year is supported in this remarkable way by the Lord. We often fail to receive the word of God, because we are not where it can reach us; that is, we do not advance to the point where the Lord can use us to set forth His name; but when we do, we are able to declare it in full power; and not only so, but we are sustained in the enjoyment of the blessing into which it has introduced us. Must it not have been enjoyment to Elijah to learn day by day how God could sustain him in that poor, desolate home ? Must not the bread and oil, which he ate there day by day, have been sweet, while his soul realised that it came directly from the hand of God ? for I do not believe that there was one grain of meal more in the barrel at the end of the " many days " than there was at the beginning.

But he was not to leave that roof without entering on another line of discipline. The widow's son dies, and Elijah, though not without resource, passes through deep exercises of soul before he appropriates the grace that is in God to meet the need (vv. 17-24). But how fully is that need met! What blessed and momentous revelations were vouchsafed to Elijah in that widow's house, comprising in type the full range of God's blessing to man which was hereafter to be fully accomplished by the Son of God. He learned how God could preserve from death, how He could meet distress on the earth and avert evil; in a word, he learned the range of all temporal blessing known or enjoyed on the earth.

But more than this, he is conducted into a deeper mystery, even that of resurrection from the dead ; he had seen death and its terrors arrested ; but now being brought in contact with the depth of sorrow (for a widow losing her only son, her last link to earth, is the most penetrating illustration of human sorrow and bereavement), he is used of God to display His power and grace in overcoming death, and introducing life anew : and thus in a preeminent way he is educated in the mightiest work of God. The exercises of his soul at this time, because of death charged on himself by the sorrowing widow (v. 18), and the experiences of his soul as to the power of God in giving life from the dead, must have been peculiar and wonderful : and very grateful must have been the testimony of the widow after the resurrection of her son, " Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth." God was honoured and His servant vindicated in the great work of resurrection.

Elijah having learned these deep lessons of the grace and power of God in the house of the Gentile—all of them foreshadowing the glorious disclosures of that same grace and power which have been made to the Gentile during the day of Israel's drought, is now directed to go and show himself to Ahab and testify that the Lord " will send rain upon the earth," chap. 18: 1. He had been hidden from Israel and Ahab had sought him in every nation and kingdom in vain; but now, at this juncture, when the king had arranged with Obadiah to divide the land in search of grass, he comes forth to present himself

His first meeting is with Obadiah. The faithful remnant is ever the foremost to recognise the prophet of God ; and though the faith of the remnant may waver, it is finally reassured and able to announce to the ungodly one the approach of him in whose hand was the blessing. Ahab, on encountering Elijah, charges him thus: " Art thou he that troubleth Israel ? " on which Elijah denounces the king and his father's house as the guilty cause. The man who has learned grace, and comes before the ungodly as the witness and minister of it, can give a strength and point to his denunciations which the man of law never could give. The one comes to rectify and repair every defect which he may expose, the other exposes with the feeling that he has no remedy for what he deprecates.

The prophets of Baal are now challenged to open competition with the Lord of hosts, and the most glorious moment in any servant's life is Elijah's when he stands forth alone to maintain the truth of God against all the assumption of pretenders. He proposes a test and God answers by fire. Let me say in passing that the highest, evidence of God, and of His truth, is in the acceptance which He accords to the soul, which is received by Him on the ground of atonement. This is figuratively expressed here by the fire of God consuming the sacrifice. The accepted soul has the sense that while God receives, He does so in all the strength and terribleness of His holiness ; so that the reception is not merely in grace but established in the stem holiness of His nature, which assures the soul that while He receives it as a sinner, He has pure and holy ground for doing so; and thus not only is the acceptance known to be divine, but its perpetuity and perfectness is guaranteed. And the soul who knows acceptance has a sense of the holiness of Him who accepts.

What a season of strength and education was this to Elijah when, confounding the pretenders of his day by one simple test, a test well understood by the people of God, he stood forth alone, valiant for God and waiting on Him! How his soul must have been enlarged while he held counsel with God, confronting the king and all the people of Israel! What calmness there is in dependence on God. He can patiently allow the pretenders to make full trial of all their powers, and when they have exhausted themselves and proved their inefficiency, he comes forward to repair the altar of the Lord, after the divine order. He is acting for God and with God. He will not only repair the altar, but he will shew how bountifully God can display His power to His forgetful people. What deep and happy conceptions of God Elijah must have had when he ministered thus for Him! He had so learned God at Cherith and Sarepta that he is prepared for these public demonstrations and can enter on them with calmness and dignity.

And now the people having acknowledged their evil and again turned to the Lord, and Elijah having vindicated the truth by the execution of the pretenders, the judgment will be removed. The people were afflicted with drought in order that they might learn that the God whom they had slighted was alone the source and fountain of all their blessings. Having taught them this in His own gracious way, He removes the affliction, for God always removes chastisement when it has accomplished the purpose for which it was sent ; and the servant, who has been faithful in maintaining the truth in the face of opponents, is proportionately used as a channel of God's mercies to His people. Elijah can now say to Ahab, " Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain." But what does he do himself? He goes to the top of Carmel, casts himself down upon the earth, and puts his face between his knees. The strength and power with which God furnishes His servant for public testimony is never a substitute for the deep exercise which the soul must pass through when made a channel of His grace. After a day's work of mighty power, the Lord spent His night in prayer, and communing with His Father. Active demonstrations of power must never supersede that close communion with God, which the real servant seeks and values all the more from having acted publicly for God, in order to know His mind and to follow out His purpose.

Elijah waits on God ; and very instructive is it for us to note how a man who could call fire down from heaven must with intense earnestness wait on God for the manifestation of His mercies. Seven times does Elijah send his servant to see whether there was any indication of the coming and promised blessing. At length there was the very smallest token, " a little cloud ... like a man's hand." It is enough for faith. The prophet not only announces to Ahab that this insignificant token was the very blessing prayed and waited for, but " the hand of the Lord being upon him, he girded up his loins," and conducts Ahab safely to the gate of the city.

What a height of success had Elijah now reached through his faith and labour 1 Could anything, we might ask, henceforth move him after such signal honour and power being vouchsafed to him by God ? One who knows little of the human heart might say it could not ; but, alas! it is no rare page in the history of God's servants when discouragement sets in, from the very point of their greatest success. So was it with David. After a marked deliverance from Saul he exclaims, " I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul," and he retreats to Achish. So was it with Jonah. When his preaching produced such an effect that God's judgment was averted he was so angry that he would do nothing more. So is it with Elijah. After the signal instances and proofs he had had of God's power and present help, when he heard of Jezebel's intentions concerning him, he " went for his life, and came to Beersheba ... and left his servant there. 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; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers," chap. 19: 4.

What a contrast between a man of faith and a man of unbelief! Who would have thought that Elijah under the juniper tree was the Elijah of Carmel but a day or two before ? How feeble and weak is the most notable of God's servants without faith! But such reverses and hours of darkness, however humbling, are as much a part of God's discipline for His servant as are his brightest moments, for then it is that he learns for himself the power of the Invisible. This was the secret of Moses' strength. He endured as seeing Him who is invisible. And when a soul has been much engaged with the external ways of God it needs all the more that peculiar, private and individual education which faith pre-eminently seeks and rests on.

Elijah leaves the land and wanders alone into the wilderness, seeking isolation apart from his fellow men. What a journey! trusting in none, attended by none. What living death, when a man feels only safe when entirely separated from his kind! Our blessed Lord could not "commit himself to man," because He knew what was in man ; but Elijah shunned the company of men in fear and bitterness of soul, and sought his death at the hand of God. Blessed God! Thy compassions fail not ; Thou wilt save the afflicted soul. " He remembereth our frame." The first relief which his weary spirit has is in unconsciousness : " he lay and slept under a juniper-tree." And there the angel touched him and said, " Arise and eat." " And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again." This was a deeper and a closer token of God's interest and care for him than the supply of the ravens or of the widow. The cake baked on the coals and the cruse of water at his head intimate to him how God provides for him; but the presence of the angel to point out and urge him to partake of them displays the Lord's own personal -interest in him. Solitary as he was, he was not left alone or unattended. An angel is sent as his companion and servant ; and a second time he touches him, after watching him doubtless as he slept, and, with increasing solicitude for him, says, " Arise and eat ; because the journey is too great for thee." Whither was that journey to lead ? To Horeb, the Mount of God.

I have no doubt that this double supply of food has a deeply mystical meaning, and illustrates to us the special ways in which the Lord sustains our souls preparatory to a season of deep exercise. Such a time, forty days in the wilderness typify, when the conscious link with things of human interest and support is suspended. Moses and our Lord went through this experience without the preparation accorded to Elijah ; but the latter represents to us the way common to man. Supplied and strengthened at the outset, he went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights.

These forty days in the wilderness without food or human sustenance is the path that must be traversed by the soul that would learn God in His great reality, whether with regard to ourselves or His purposes on earth. At Horeb, the Mount of God, all things are naked and open; and Elijah has to do with God, and with God alone. These individual communications are opened on the part of the Lord by the searching question, " What doest thou here, Elijah ? " He is then instructed to " Go forth " from the cave where he had retreated, and " stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by." Elijah's own true state is now brought out. The Lord is not in the whirlwind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire. These were the demonstrations of God; but for Elijah there was something deeper, holier, more personal; he learns that the still small voice of God is greater than all the outward demonstrations ; a lesson which he needed much, for doubtless the wondrous scene at Carmel had unduly filled his vision at the expense of that personal link with God, which would have sustained him under subsequent disappointment.

To re-establish this link was the object of the interesting scene of the ministry of the angel under the juniper tree ; and to lay bare his soul was the forty days' journey to Horeb, apart from the region of humanity, terminating in this blessed instruction, which brought God Himself so very nigh to him. Well might he wrap his face in his mantle and listen. And though he could not satisfactorily reply to the question, again repeated, " What doest thou here ? " he is instructed to " Go, return," and execute the

Lord's counsels. Wilful as he had been, now, brought to Horeb, the still small voice of God will unfold to him His mind and purposes: the wicked king was to be displaced, and the sword was to be drawn in Israel; but seven thousand souls, a faithful remnant, were still left to testify for God. This was to silence all Elijah's self-consequence: he had said, " I, only 1, am left." But the Lord now shows him that He had seven thousand more witnesses, and, still further, that another prophet was to be anointed in his room. Great as had been his services, God's truth and power did not depend on him ; but though his earthly testimony was to close, God was purposing a higher and more blessed portion for His servant, which, however, is not disclosed to him here, as far as we see. What wonderful education was all this! With what different ideas of God towards himself and towards man must he have departed from that sacred mount! Truly humbled he was, truly interested for God, truly linked to Him in his secret soul, and esteeming others better than himself.

The firstfruits of this instruction at Horeb are seen in his first act, namely, the call of Elisha ; and to him, it appears, he committed the anointing of both Hazael and Jehu. (See 2 Kings 8, 9.) That he had profited by the discipline, his whole subsequent course evidences. In chapter 21 : 17, etc., he encounters Ahab at Naboth's vineyard, and fearlessly denounces him, declaring the judgment of God against him and against Jezebel also. He is used by the blessed God to pronounce how grievous it is in His sight for any one, much more the eminent, to deprive one of His people of their divinely-appointed portion and inheritance, and how such an act will draw down the severest judgment: a fine service for one who had been learning through discipline what is the heart of God towards His people.

Elijah now fears not to be the exponent of this Magna Charta, namely, that God will not suffer any one to divert His gift from His own, without terrible and summary judgment. " He that defiles the temple of God, him will God defile." " I would that they were cut off who trouble you." " Woe unto him by whom the offence cometh." All these scriptures breathe the same principle. Ahab humbles himself, and God in His never-failing grace intimates to His servant a respite of the sentence he had pronounced on the king. Unlike Jonah, whose education being less complete, had rebelled, because the goodness of God thwarted his own predictions, Elijah is content, and fully accords with God's mind. He who has learned grace for himself can understand the ways of grace for others.

We now come to Elijah's last act of public testimony (2 Kings i), when he comes forth to rebuke the king of Israel for sending to Baal-zebul to inquire about his sickness, as if there were no God in Israel. The apostasy had become so fearful and complete that the existence of Jehovah is ignored, and, in the very centre of it, Elijah is to stand up to declare that death must vindicate the truth and existence of God when unbelief disowns and disallows all other evidence. " Thou shalt not come down off that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die." If we do not believe that God is, what awaits us but death ?

The mission of an Elijah is to announce this deeply solemn truth, and then to depart from the guilty scene. Thus did this honoured servant ; he retired and sat on the top of a hill, unassailable and in the conscious power of moral separation and elevation. Is this the same man who had fled for his life into the wilderness ? Captains and their hosts are as nothing to him now. The fire of God (though, as he learned at Horeb, it was not the voice to himself individually) is now at his disposal for the destruction of his enemies. Twice God thus miraculously certifies the authority of His servant, and then tells him to go down and complete his mission.

Apparently his life would be at their mercy, but in the power of God he was as unassailable in the king's court as on the top of the hill. Elijah obeys, and in the presence of the king reiterates God's solemn

judgment, fearlessly vindicating the name of God in the very centre of the apostasy, where its power and evil were more dominant: a fit finale this to his blessed and honourable career of public service. When we transport ourselves into such a scene, while we may be filled with admiration of the man and of his work, we are the rather compelled to lay our hands on our hearts and say to our God, " How dost Thou fashion Thy servants for Thine own glory and purposes! "

But though Elijah's public career is now over, his personal history as to earth has yet to close, and that in a flood of glory, far beyond anything that had been vouchsafed to him in his earthly service. " The Lord would now take him into heaven "-to Himself, and in a way above and beyond the common lot of man. Like Enoch, he was to be " translated that he should not see death." Doubtless he knew what was about to happen; for the way in which he spends his last hours on earth is deeply significant and blessedly instructive, when we think what a prospect was before him in his exit from earth, and the nature of that exit. In these his last hours he connects himself personally, and by personal toil, with all those places in Israel most commemorative of God's ways with His people. Gilgal was where the reproach of Egypt was rolled off; Bethel where Jacob saw the ladder of God reaching from earth to heaven ; Jericho where God would make His grace rise above all man's rebellion and evil ; and lastly, Jordan, which was his point of exit, the crossing of which, while it recalled Israel's glorious entry into the land, told of death, the end of man in the flesh.

In prospect of being borne in a chariot of glory far away from those scenes of slighted mercy and apostasy, Elijah's heart, like that of his great prototype, is still true to God's interests on earth, and he must visit them once more, though at personal cost (for he must have travelled many miles to do so). The fact of his own portion being so glorious does not detach his heart from the interests and glory as to earthly testimony of that Lord for whom he had been so faithful a witness. As to -himself, it was at the spot where in type the waters of death had closed over the old man in his corrupt and fallen nature, that the chariot of fire awaited him to bear him away to the glory; in that glory he has since appeared in close converse with his Lord upon the Holy Mount, and in it he win again appear when He comes for the deliverance of the faithful remnant who are morally identified with that seven thousand of whom Elijah was told in the days of his discouragement-He who, after purging the land of its defilement, will share with all His redeemed ones the joy of His kingdom.

What a course was thine, Elijah!-fraught with trials and death-struggles, but still more fraught with instruction in the heart of Him whom to serve was thy joy and glory; a course entered on in secret prayer and waiting on God, and ended in a chariot of fire to bear thee to Himself!

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## ELISHA

The first notice we have of Elisha is i Kings 19 : 16, when the Lord, while rebuking Elijah for his despondency and self-importance in thinking that all testimony had failed, and that he himself was God's solitary witness on earth, directs him to anoint Elisha, the son of Shaphat, in his room.

Elijah being set aside because he was desponding and discouraged, we may conclude that the prophet anointed in his stead will be one gifted with a character and purpose quite the contrary--even bold and enduring. We often find in Scripture that a man's secular employment gives us an idea of his adaptability for his future service and an intimation of the nature of his course. Elisha is found " ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth " ; and he was doubtless a vigorous and a patient husbandman. Elijah passes by, and casts his mantle on him, thus intimating, I should suppose, that he was to take the place and the calling of the owner of it. Elisha evidently so understood it, but, yielding for a moment to his natural affection, he craves permission to return and kiss his father and mother. The prophet's reply is one fitted to throw him on his own responsibility. " Go back again," he says, " for what have I done to thee ? " It was for him to judge whether Elijah's action towards him had been a divine call or not.

That it was divine Elisha's spiritual instincts told him and though his obedience to it is not as prompt as it might have been, still his measure of faith is followed up by true and suited action. He returns to his home not to remain in it, but to celebrate his surrender of it. " He took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat." He disposes of his possessions for the benefit of others ; at one and the same moment declaring his readiness to surrender for the Lord and his benevolence for His people; he, in a measure, sold what he had and gave to the poor, and " then he arose, went after Elijah, and ministered to him." The first answer in the soul to the call of God is very indicative of the order and character of the subsequent course, and we shall find it thus with Elisha. Though he delays a little at first, he eventually follows Elijah, and that not grudgingly or of necessity, but as one who follows with a hearty good will. And thus it is that he enters on a course where he is to be a minister and a witness of the most remarkable of God's ways and works.

The word of the Lord had been that he was to be prophet in Elijah's room: that is, to fill up Elijah's ministry, and the two ministries were not to co-exist ; so that it is quite fitting that we should not hear of him again till Elijah was about to quit the scene, and then he is presented to us in the high character of the companion of Elijah and the witness of his rapture. As the one retires, the other is brought prominently before us, and deeply significant is the education accorded to him on this the last day of the one, and (in respect to his ministry) the first day of the other ; for this day he is installed into office. The sons of the prophets with one accord tell him that this is the last day for his master ; and as he walked with Elijah throughout this his last day, he is taught the zeal and duties proper to God's servant, as well as God's glorious way of removing His servant from the sphere of his labours.

The scene which closed Elijah's service inaugurated Elisha's. If Elisha was naturally strong and qualified for hard and patient labour here on earth, he derives from the rapture of Elijah a power and an idea of God's ways and grace which must remain with him throughout his course, because his course dates from it; his mind is endowed, and his conceptions of God formed from it, and his ministry must be characterised by the communications and admonitions of his installation. Elisha could never forget that the power he had received was in consequence of that union of spirit with Elijah, which had resulted from his concentrated attention on him, as he was carried up into heaven. " If thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so," was Elijah's reply to his request for a double portion of his spirit. " And Elisha saw it." Here was the spring and source of all his subsequent power. " The spirit of Elijah doth rest upon Elisha," was the immediate testimony of the sons of the prophets, and according as the Spirit of God acted in him, must he ever afterwards have been carried back to this fine beginning, just as Paul must have recalled the moment when on his way to Damascus he was struck down by the " glory of that

light." No doubt the dawn of God's grace in our souls and its effects on us indicate the traits of it which will characterise us subsequently, and we all find that the way in which the gospel is presented to and received by any soul at first, presages the character of its course.

Elijah having disappeared, Elisha's career is begun, and the first test of the grace conferred on him is Jordan, the type of actual death, not of the power of death, but as the last barrier between the wilderness and Canaan. A very suited test was this to be encountered by one endowed like Elisha ; and the first, because he must know at the outset the power which introduces him into God's inheritance, and that Jordan is the portal to it. Unless we pass Jordan we are not in the land, nor have we learnt how God will sustain us there, and how He will drive out before us all our adversaries. Elijah had crossed Jordan, leaving the land in testimony against its evil, heaven being then opened to him as his own personal portion. Elisha recrosses it, and re-enters the land in grace, and in the power of God's Spirit, which was to bear down every difficulty.

Very blessed are the exercises to which he is subjected. Even as the Spirit in double power descended on the church in consequence and in virtue of her union with her ascended Lord, so is it with Elisha : his eye had traced the power and glory of God's grace in removing His servant unto Himself, and now he is a witness of the same power on earth in the waters of Jordan being parted asunder for him to enter on his appointed service ; and thereby he must have learnt that through God every barrier would be broken down. Like Stephen, he had seen how God had raised man to His own glory, and like him, too, he proved that he himself was, through the power of God, victorious over death.

Elisha's first sphere of service in the land is Jericho, and the first opposition he has to encounter is that of those who, by their very calling, ought to have co-operated with him. The sons of the prophets, though they had seen and owned the power which clave the waters of Jordan, refuse to believe in the rapture of Elijah, and raise questions prompted by unbelief, until Elisha suffers them to do as they would, merely to expose their own folly ; for when people will not heed the warnings of the Spirit they must be left to learn by their own mistakes. Elisha learns on the other hand that no help or co-operation is to be expected from the sons of the prophets-the ordained ministry of the day - and that he must be prepared to encounter their ignorance and inapprehensiveness of the mind of God; a very necessary discovery for the servant of God in an evil day, and in such times of declension as Elisha was called to serve in.

Jericho comes after Jordan. Having surveyed the full range of God's grace-its glorious blessedness in the rapture of Elijah into heaven, and its power on earth in making a way for him through Jordan-he must, like Saul of Tarsus, be a minister of it in the place which judicially is at the greatest distance from God in the land of Israel the place of the curse. The men of the city in describing the place sum up in a few words the history of the whole world. " The situation is pleasant, as my lord seeth : but the water is naught, and the ground barren." What a picture! Fair to look upon, but unproductive of what alone can meet the necessities of man. Elisha is the one empowered to meet their need. It is a fine moment, and one of deep edification to his soul, when he is thus allowed to be the instrument of God's grace, and to pronounce the word of the Lord: " I have healed these waters," after putting salt therein out of a new cruse, and the " waters were healed unto this day."

Now this service, which must have established the heart of Elisha in the very grace which he ministered, was brought about by very simple though deeply effective education. He who has learnt for himself the grace and power of Jehovah in heaven above and on earth beneath, knows how to act for Him in scenes morally most distant from Him, as was Jericho; and thus was it with our Lord on the earth. But if Elisha be

the minister of mercy, he must experience what it is to be rejected, and that in the very place most distinguished by the favour of God and the revelation of His goodness. From Bethel, the house of God, come forth youths to mock the ascension of Elijah, crying out as they do to Elisha, " Go up, thou bald head; go up, thou bald head." But the truth of God must be vindicated; and Elisha, though he be the minister of mercy, is the one to invoke judgment on the gainsayer of it. " He turned and cursed them in the name of the Lord; and there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tare forty and two of them." Thus in Jericho and at Bethel he learns two very different lessons. In the one, the mercy of God in meeting the need of man, and in the other, the recklessness of man (where God had shown most favour) and the consequent and terrible judgment that falls on him.

Elisha goes from thence to Carmel, for retirement I should suppose, but ere long he returns to Samaria-the scene of service. We must remember that he is properly filling up Elijah's mission which began with prayer (necessity on the earth looking to God) and closed in glory. And from this (the manifestation of the power of God in opening heaven for the reception of man) Elisha began; and, therefore, in studying his history we should expect to learn how the Lord conducts and uses one who thus begins from above and is not of the earth.

In Samaria he is introduced into a scene which discloses to him the political and moral state of all Israel; chap. 3. Moab has rebelled, and the king of Judah is found in unholy league with the kings of Israel and Edom; and the destruction of all three is threatened, not from the power of the enemy but the failure of water. What a condition and association for Jehoshaphat, the Lord's anointed, and one who was really a godly man, to be in! It is he, however, who at this juncture raises the inquiry, which is always that of a heart which knows the Lord but which is away from Him: " Is there not here a prophet of the Lord?" And this brings Elisha on the scene. An important moment it is to him: important as to the testimony of God which he bore, and as to the personal instruction with which it was fraught. Standing in the midst of the moral ruin of Israel, of which the scene before him was the witness, he, like the blessed One in later times, on the one hand denounces its apostasy, and on the other links himself with the little that remained for God. " What have I to do with thee ? " he says to the king of Israel; " were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, I would not look toward thee, nor see thee."

But though he can both feel the desolation of Israel, and recognise the remnant, he finds that he is not in a moment up to the mind of God concerning a state of things so discordant to the spiritual mind. He must pause and send for a minstrel. " And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him." His mind must be diverted, and separated from the confusion and despair around him, before it could be so in tune as to be used of the Lord. His ministry was from above, and therefore, whenever there was danger of his falling into the current of things down here, it was necessary that he should be not only diverted from it, but so guided in the midst of it as to be free to receive and convey God's mind and purpose. Music is used to accomplish this in the soul of Elisha ; and the effect produced typifies that calm, unperturbed state of mind in which one must be to receive the mind of God above and beyond all that is passing around. If I would know that which is from above, even the counsel and mind of God, I must in myself be calm as to the circumstances around me; otherwise I shall not be able to see it or to act on it.

Elisha had now properly commenced his public ministry amid the apostasy. Hitherto he had been the minister of grace and judgment in a more private way; but now the widespread moral desolation of Israel is before him, and he learns to be calm in the midst of it, ere he announces the signal interposition of God on behalf of His people. This is education of the utmost importance. It is a great moment to the soul when it

can stand still and see the salvation of the Lord; and especially so with Elisha; for we must again remember that he comes in contact with the ruin and destitution of Israel, after having started with the glorious manifestation of God's grace. He had seen first what God is, and now he is learning down here how ruined and necessitous are the people of the God of grace and glory, because of their apostasy and unbelief. And it is in meeting these varied distresses of God's people, and being exercised in his own soul as to the way in which God would meet each, that he himself is enlarged in the power and resources of God.

The next scene in which we find Elisha (chap- 4: 1) is where he is appealed to by a certain woman of the wives of the prophets, who cries to him, " Thy servant my husband is dead ; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen." Here what is noticeable is not so much the nature of the distress as that a widow of one of the Lord's prophets in His own land should be reduced to such straits ; it reveals to us how entirely the nation must have forgotten and neglected the care of God, when such a case could be found there unrelieved.

Elisha is here from God to be a witness of this misery, and at first he is quite unprepared for such a case and says, " What shall I do for thee ? " The extremity of it doubtless astonished him. Here was he, knowing the greatness and power of God toward His people, yet cognisant of the existence of distress peculiar and unprecedented, and it would seem at first as if it were beyond him. He had never before encountered such misery, but it is in such cases that the true servant is taught to trust in God, and by thus trusting to know what to do. Now the first thing for the heart that is simply resting in God is to take into account every provision of God personally possessed; and this is what Elisha does. " Hast thou anything in the house ? " is his next question, and when he hears that she has a pot of off he directs her to borrow of her neighbours empty vessels-to be indebted to them only for empty vessels! for these were to contain God's abundant supplies ; and Elisha is vouchsafed the privilege of knowing that there was enough oil, not only to satisfy the creditor, but that from the largeness of the supply there was a provision for the widow and her sons. So ample and generous are God's mercies when they flow; and this is the most interesting and invigorating knowledge which can be communicated to any servant of God.

But, not only was Elisha to witness these things, he was to experience them himself ; not only was he to see things here in striking contrast to that manifestation of glory from which he started, but he must feel the contrast ; and if he minister to God's people in their necessities out of His fulness, he must feel the necessity and must suffer himself in God's inheritance, in spirit with Him who had not where to lay His head. He, the Lord of the earth, was indebted to a few women who " ministered to him of their substance," and Elisha is here found in somewhat similar circumstances (v. 8). A woman, a Shunammite, provides bread and lodging for him, and in this association he is to pass through in miniature the hopes and sorrows of God's. people. God often leads His servants into a small circle of service, wherein the principles of His full purpose are practically made known. It was so with Noah in the ark; with Abraham on Mount Moriah; with Paul with regard to the church ; with Elisha here. Israel, at this time, was like the Shunammite ; her husband was old, and there was no child for a continuation of their name ; so the nation was decaying, and ready to pass away, and there was no heir to carry it into new life and hopes.

Gehazi, who, I suppose, represents Israel after the flesh, sees and tells the prophet this state of things. Elisha promises a son, and a son is born. But before the harvest, before the feast of ingathering, the child dies, the hope of the family is no more, and the mother flies to the prophet in her distress. He is in Carmel, in retirement, and the depth to which Israel is reduced, as typified in this woman, is as yet unrevealed to him by the Lord (v. 27). But now he was not only to learn it, but his own soul was to pass through the

wondrous way and manner of God's deliverance of His people from this, their low estate. This is quite new experience to Elisha, and only step by step is he brought into it. He must be taught that Gehazi and the prophet's own staff will not do; that no intervention will repair death; nothing but life can meet death, and this Elisha learns in his own person. It is he who is, through the power of God, made to communicate life to the dead child: a simple and distinct type of Him, who, Himself the Eternal Life, came into this world to impart it; but a wondrous place for a man to be set in and a wondrous display of God's grace to him, ignorant Q unacquainted as he had been with the sorrow that he is now empowered to relieve. In all the exercises which Elisha here passed through, as he walked to and fro in the house, and went up again and stretched himself upon the child and prayed, he is taught, though in a comparatively feeble way, what our Lord passed through so fully; on the one hand, the terribleness of death; and on the other, the blessedness of life.

We next find Elisha at Gilgal ; and here he has to meet the dearth of the land, the sons of the prophets sitting before him. The one who has learned the power and grace of God, as the life-giving God, can easily, trusting in Him in the face of all professors, relieve the casual distresses which afflict us in passing through this evil scene. He says to his servant, " Set on the great pot, and seethe pottage for the sons of the prophets " ; but what Elisha, as the servant of God, is preparing, is spoiled by the intermeddling of the unbelieving. The wild gourds, though supposed by the one who gathered them to be an acquisition, only added death to the pottage; and in the same way do all human additions to faith and to God's way bring death. Elisha, still trusting in the life-giving God, is equal to the emergency. He casts in meal and the deadly element is destroyed. A soul that is simply trusting in God will ever be able to carry out its purpose ; for it is of faith, though it may meet with interruptions and hindrances when it least expects them. Faith always increases by exercise, and its sphere or work is enlarged when used ; consequently we next find Elisha feeding the people (an hundred men) with only " twenty loaves of barley, and full ears of corn in the husk thereof," and notwithstanding the objections of the unbelieving servitor, he replies, " Give the people, that they may eat: for thus saith the Lord, They shall eat, and shall leave thereof."

We have now reached chapter 5 of 2 Kings, where Elisha is to act as the prophet of God outside the limits of Israel. He has been practically educated in the power of God, and therefore is prepared to say of Naaman the Syrian, " Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel." And when Naaman obeys the summons, Elisha only sends a messenger to him, saying, " Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." Although quite ready to succour the Syrian leper, he is no respecter of persons, and preserves the dignity of God's servant. He is there to send him forth for salvation and cure, but he makes no account of him as captain of the host of Syria. And hence, when Naaman is healed, Elisha refuses to take anything from him, in the true independence of the servant of God. He would help the Gentile, but not receive from him. And in principle we learn by the judgment passed on Gehazi that if we grasp at and acquire the goods of the world, we shall inevitably involve ourselves in its leprosy.

We should note, that in the history of Elisha there is less apparent need for discipline than in other servants. He is before us as endowed from above, and when we follow him, we see how aptly and beautifully the grace of God flows from the vessel according to the need it encounters ; and though we do not see the discipline through which he learnt so to yield himself to God, that he could fully display His mind—we know that it must have been so; and also that the best evidence of true effective discipline is the meekness and simplicity of heart with which I act according to the mind of God in the various and distinct cases occurring to me. In this light no history is more interesting than Elisha's ; the easy and divine way

with which he meets every variety of difficulty is beautiful. It is instructive to us to follow him and see how the servant acts in each varied circumstance, and how the Lord used him to expound that grace which should be so supremely set forth in eternal power by the greatest of all servants-the Son of His love. To be ready as God's vessel for every emergency that arises is the end of all discipline.

Chapter 6. Here we have a circle of wondrous action reaching from a personal to a national calamity; embracing, I may say, in principle, every grade of human sorrow. First, the sons of the prophets, feeling the straitness of the place, propose to Elisha to go unto Jordan, and dwell there. He goes with them; and as one was felling a beam the axe head fell into the water, and he cried, " Alas, master I for it was borrowed." Elisha immediately enters into his sorrow and distress, which was not merely the loss, but the man's credit was at stake, because it was borrowed, and the prophet's tender consideration for his distress is very touching ; there is in him both tenderness and power to meet every anxious human sensibility. " And the man of God said, Where fell it ? And he showed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither: and the iron did swim. Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it."

We next find Elisha bringing about the defeat of the king of Syria, by warning the king of Israel of his approach; chap. 6: 9. And the king of Syria being apprised of this, and consequently exasperated against Elisha, sends spies to find out his abode ; and, having discovered it to be Dothan, he sends thither horses and chariots, and a great host, and compassed the city: all this warlike array being thought necessary to secure the person of one poor unarmed man striking evidence (even as it was in a later day, when a company with swords and staves was sent out to take the blessed One) that the ungodly instinctively feel their own helplessness in the presence of the power of God, even when it only acts on their fellow-man.

The magnitude of this Syrian host was such, that Elisha's servant was terrified, and says, " Alas, my master! how shall we do ? " And Elisha, in the power of that faith which had quieted his own soul., replies, " Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." " If God be for us, who can be against us ? " was the experience of his soul; and every anxiety of his own being disposed of, he can intercede for others ; he prays that his servant may be assured by that vision of faith which his own eye rested on. " Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see." It is not enough for me to rest by faith myself on God's succour, or to ask others to do so., but I must seek to establish them in the power of it. Readily the Lord grants his request. The eyes of the young man are opened, and he sees the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

And now he prays again with a different request. When the host of Syria had terrified his servant, he had prayed that his eyes might be opened to see the host of God, and he was heard. Now he prays that the eyes of his enemies may be closed, and he is heard again. The Lord " smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha " ; they are completely in his power ; he leads them away from the city into the midst of Samaria, and then with touching and instructive kindness and mercy he will allow no revenge to be taken of these captives, but says, " Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink, and go to their master." How simple and wonderful for a man to be thus led into the mind and resources of God, meeting every contingency in divine grace and strength ; treating the servant with as much consideration and attention as the king ; attaching as much importance to the loss of the borrowed axe head as to a city compassed about by armies ; thus proving that the circle of God's power and grace embraces the smallest as well as the greatest contingency!

Verse 24. We next find the king of Israel reduced to great straits (there is a famine in Samaria), and, imputing it to Elisha, he vows vengeance against him. Now this proves that no amount of mercy conferred can be remembered or appreciated by the human heart if the fear of death be still impending. Elisha had been the witness and minister of God's grace and power in averting from the nation manifold calamities, and instead of there being respect or favour for him from the king for the past, his life is threatened unless he continues to succour them. At this juncture the prophet sat in the house and the elders sat with him, I conclude, waiting on God ; and he gets intimation from the Lord of the king's evil intention. When the messenger enters, he says, " Behold, this evil is of the Lord; what should I wait for the Lord any longer? " The time was now come to announce the word of the Lord, and he does so. " Thus saith the Lord, To-morrow about this time shall a measure of fine flour be sold for a shekel, and two measures of barley for a shekel, in the gate of Samaria." And so it came to pass.

This, the greatest, is the last recorded public service of Elisha to Israel. He had been used of God to show forth His power and grace, from the smallest to the greatest, in the whole circle of human necessity. And now it is over; though with him, as with his great Antitype, it might truly be said, he had " laboured in vain, he had spent his strength for naught." He now sends to anoint Jehu to be king over Israel (chap. 9), and he is to smite the house of Ahab, and avenge the blood of all the servants of the Lord.

The last recorded public event of his life is his interview with Hazael at Damascus; chap. 8: 7. The Lord had showed him that Ben-hadad king of Syria, was to die, and Hazael to reign in his stead and as he looked on Hazael he wept, knowing all the evil that he would do to the children of Israel. And with this, his last public act, we lose sight of our prophet on earth. He had started as the, witness of God's supreme power over death, and of the glory beyond it, and he had pursued his course down here, showing forth according to the revealed power of God, the manner and fulness of His mercy and succour to man. He now passes from our view, mourning for what he foresaw should befall God's people, though it was but the consequence of their own sin and folly. In the same way did the greater than Elisha wind up the history of His association with, and unrequited service to, Israel. He wept over the city which had refused to know the things that belonged unto her peace, and which was to pass under the judgment of God, because she knew not the time of her visitation. And from thence He passes from that perfect life-that work of grace which Elisha's had feebly foreshadowed-to the death in which Elisha could not follow Him.

Yet when Elisha was " fallen sick of the sickness whereof he died " (2 Kings 13 : 14) ; when no longer able to be a public witness ; when Joash, the king of Israel, came down unto him and wept over his face, applying the very words which Elisha had used to Elijah at his rapture, " O my father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof " ; because the sun of Israel was setting in the person of this great prophet; even then, in this moment, when sinking into death, he is strong and mighty in the power and the grace of God. He tells Joash to take bow and arrow; and when at his direction the king had put his hand on the bow, Elisha put his hand on the king's hands and said, " Open the window eastward. And he opened it. Then Elisha said, Shoot. And he shot. And he said, The arrow of the Lord's deliverance." The Lord's grace towards His people was not yet exhausted. It was not only the arrow of His deliverance from Syria, but the direction to shoot eastward toward the rising sun told of coming glory. Elisha was passing away from the scene, sinking westward, as it were : but glory and power would come as the bright shining of the sun after rain. And in the confidence of this he directs the king of Israel to take the arrow and smite upon the ground. " And he smote thrice, and stayed. And the man of God was wroth with him, and said, Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times ; then hadst thou smitten Syria till thou hadst consumed it: whereas now thou shalt smite Syria but thrice."

In his very last moments the dying prophet has to meet with disappointment from the people whom he served, for they were unable to embrace in its full extent the grace offered to them. The king had no energy to be an instrument of that grace. True energy always shows itself in cheerful, abounding obedience, and the heart is conscious of it. Where there is faith, and according as there is, so is there the manifest expression of it, and the outward acts are always in correspondence with the inward power. How blessedly and how in keeping with his life does our prophet pass away! In his death he is full of the coming glory and deliverance, while he has to witness the feeble faith of those whom he served.

Elisha dies, but so great is the power of life by which his whole history is characterised, that mere contact with his bones restores to life a corpse which was thrown into his sepulchre. The power of God in grace and resurrection life were set forth by him ; and not only is he here a voice from the dead, but a pledge of that power which will yet restore Israel to life.

The Lord give us to learn of Himself, to be meek and lowly of heart, doing His will, that He may be able to use us for any expression of His grace that He chooses, be it little difficulties or for great exigencies, to the praise of His name. Amen.

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## HEZEKIAH

Nothing is more interesting or helpful to us than to be taught the ways of God by a living example-one who is like ourselves in nature and feeling, and who is used of God and empowered by Him to do His will. We see thereby how the grace of God works and where it is hindered ; and not only this, but we see the way in which we ourselves under similar circumstances would act, while we also get a clear perception of what the mind of God is as to such circumstances, how it addresses itself to man, and how man is formed and controlled by it. This nature of the divine ways is explained to us through the medium of the human servant; and we learn on the one hand how God would use him, and on the other how he fails when not simply led by God. We require to know both, because unless we do, we cannot get a clear idea of the divine discipline. Scripture, through an individual example, sets forth to us the nature and character of the circumstances through which God's servant is passing; and as we study and observe his instructions to the individual, we arrive at an understanding of God's mind at the time.

Hezekiah comes before us at a very critical period in Israel's history, and the way he is prepared of God and taught of Him for such an eventful time is very instructive. There is often a great similarity in leading points between the position which we are called to occupy ourselves and that occupied by distinguished servants of God. The points of resemblance between the great and the small in God's household are very marked, and the study of His ways with a leading servant often helps another who is unknown beyond his immediate circle. And yet the ways of God may be as truly learned by him, and he may be as thoroughly disciplined under His hand as the most prominent and distinguished servant.

Hezekiah, in his history, presents to us two things : the first, how he was strengthened to succeed in renewing the testimony of the Lord in a very exemplary way, at a time when everything had sunk to the lowest state, and was to all appearance in irretrievable ruin ; secondly, how he was taught to rest in God,

while his soul was brought to a conviction of the end and desolation of everything here. It is very interesting to dwell on a history like this, and to observe how God leads on His servant, uses him to do His will and to walk in His ways, and yet teaches h

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