

THE GOSPEL MAGAZINE

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Editorial

AMONG THE UNPOPULAR SUBJECTS of today is that of obedience. Disobedience to parents is widespread amongst children, and in some schools there is a breakdown in discipline. Law and order are very much at a discount in the country at large at the present time.

Although the subject of obedience is not very popular, it is nevertheless given a prominent place in Scripture. Man's first act of sin was disobedience to the direct command of God and as a result of one man's disobedience many were made sinners (Romans 5:19). The Bible unhesitatingly declares that by nature we are all the children of disobedience.

The Christian is called to a life of obedience; we are reminded of our supreme Example, the Lord Jesus Christ, who "though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). How thankful we should be that "he became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross".

Obedience is more pleasing to God than ritual — "to obey is better than sacrifice". Without obedience we shall not make progress in the Christian life. At the wedding at Cana, Mary said to the servants, "whatsoever he saith unto you, do it". Here is an abiding principle.

Our obedience, furthermore, must be in conformity with Scripture. Joshua, at the outset of his leadership, was told to meditate in the Scriptures "day and night" and to "observe to do according to all that is written therein; for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then shalt thou have good success".

May such obedience and prosperity be ours.

A Reassuring Word

A Sermon by the Editor

“Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him” (1 Kings 19:18)

THE SCENE IN THIS CHAPTER has been graphically portrayed. It has been called “The Drama of the Desert” and you can see it living before your eyes. There is Elijah drooping, desponding, ready to throw in the sponge and requesting for himself that he might die. He had fled, you remember, from Jezebel, the wicked wife of King Ahab, after the victory at Carmel, and what a victory that was! God’s cause was vindicated and the prophets of Baal had been executed, but reaction was to set in because Jezebel sent a threatening message (verse 2): “So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.” That was a wicked message, a blood-curdling message. She was out for revenge in a very big way and, alas, Elijah’s reaction was unexpected and very surprising. He had up to this point gone on from strength to strength. It seemed as though he was likely to hold on to his way, come what may. He was a man of indomitable courage, a man of strength, of fortitude and valour and all at once he seems to crumble, for when he heard the threatening message of Jezebel he arose and went for his life. The powerful prophet has become the frightened fugitive. He flees. Here is a weak moment of a great man, and the best of men have their weak moments. The best of preachers have their off days and the best of Christians have theirs too, and here we see Elijah very much cast down. He is seized with fear to which he had hitherto been a complete stranger and he went to pieces. And so he flees. He fled and went “to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there”. He couldn’t bear the presence of anybody with him. “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” (verse 4). At last fatigue and anguish overpowered him and he cast himself down under a bush, beneath a shrub, and asked that death might come to him.

But notice how God dealt with His servant, how He dealt with Elijah’s despondency. First of all, God dealt with his bodily needs. God gave him the gift of sleep. He slept under the juniper tree. He was completely exhausted, and it is wonderful what a good night’s sleep will do for you, and there is another verse in the Bible which says, “So he giveth his beloved sleep”. This was God’s gift to Elijah at that time. What a boon sleep is and how we miss it when we have one of those nights when we are tossing and turning during the livelong hours of the night. How thankful we should be for the gift of sleep. That was God’s gift to Elijah at that time. Something else, notice. Food was provided. The angel

came and touched him, and I am sure it was a very gentle touch. He did not shake him violently, he touched him gently, saying "Arise and eat". And there, set before the prophet was the cake on the coals and a cruse of water at his head. It was very humble fare, but it was quite adequate and, after eating, he resumed his sleep. The angel came after a while the second time and said, "Arise and eat". Oh how gently God dealt with him, so that he went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights and he went to Horeb and he lodged in a cave. And it was here that God deals with him spiritually. He had dealt with him physically for he was below par. Preaching can be very draining. It is a great strain on the nervous system, physically, mentally and spiritually. How much more must it have been to Elijah!

This was an opportunity for Elijah to unburden himself. Of course God knew all about him. God is omniscient — He does not need to be told. He had wanted to give Elijah the opportunity to speak about it, to unburden himself, and Elijah tried first to evade the question, and he chose rather to dwell on his loyalty to the cause of God. You remember how he said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts". The Israelites indeed had forsaken God's covenant. It was true what Elijah said, they had ceased to worship God in the appointed way. They had been vexed by Ahab and Jezebel, had bowed down to Baal. Jezebel had slain God's servants with the sword and it seemed as if Elijah alone remained the sole witness to the truth and his life as a consequence was in danger. He was No. 1 on Jezebel's wanted list. So Elijah complained bitterly of Israel's complete apostasy. He was thoroughly discouraged. He was pessimistic in the extreme so he says to God, "And I only am left". But this was God's answer in our text: "Yet have I left me seven thousand that have not succumbed to the prevailing trend." Oh yes, there were seven thousand who refused to join in the general idolatry, but here was Elijah deep in the Slough of Despond. He bemoaned his utter failure, but he had to learn that no works sincerely done for God are ever a failure. It may appear so, but it is not ultimately. There are those great Scriptures which say, for instance, "Cast thy bread upon the waters and thou shalt find it after many days". The seed cast into the ground will ultimately produce a harvest, "some thirty-fold, some sixty and some a hundredfold". This is the message that Elijah had to lay hold of. This is the message we have got to get hold of in days of despondency. He is able; leave the issue with God; results will follow. Do you remember how in the 11th chapter of Ecclesiastes we read, "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that"? Also in Psalm 126: 'He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.' God was dealing with Elijah. Elijah spent time in that cave in Horeb brooding, and there is nothing worse. He was brooding over his disappointment and at the same time he was lashing himself with the conduct of the people. He was in a solitary place. He had nothing to do and went round and round and round the same old problem and

he got nowhere, so God told him first of all, "Quit this place; leave this lonely abode", which only increased his sadness and the irritation of his spirit.

God gave him a fresh work to do. Look at verse 15: "And the Lord said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria." He gave him new work. He recommissioned him after his so-called lapse, his temporary failure, and then comes the stirring words of our text: "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal." And God's answer is full of instruction and encouragement for today. Let us just look at it briefly.

First of all we see here God's verdict: "I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal." In other words, God was saying to Elijah, "Things are not so bad as they seem". Oh they seemed to be bad, true enough, in Elijah's day, "but they did more to provoke the Lord God to anger than all the kings of Israel before". So great was the apostasy that Elijah thought he was the only true servant of God left, and yet things were better than they seemed, for God sees not as man sees. He knew that there were seven thousand who remained true to Him, so God administered a corrective to his thinking. Elijah was assured he was not the solitary hero he imagined himself to be. God brought him down to size. He took him down from his pedestal and, to change the metaphor, he let him see that there were 7,000 pillars holding up the tabernacle of God, whereas he thought, prior to that, that he was the sole supporting column. This was God's verdict — seven thousand left.

Now there is very much to depress us today. There is widespread departure from the old paths and from the old truths, worldliness has gained a firm footing in many a Church and there is widespread indifference to God and His Word, increasing desecrating and secularising of the Lord's Day. There is very much to depress, if we dwelt on it, but here was God's verdict. Things were not so bad as they seemed. Things are bad and things will get worse, for the Scripture says as the end time approaches things will wax worse and worse, and yet God always has His thousands who are walking in the narrow way. So let us not get unduly depressed. Remember God's verdict. We know that ultimately the number of the saved ones will be a great multitude which no man can number.

Notice, God's intervention. I think we should read this with emphasis. "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal," who are walking the narrow way. Now if you turn to Romans 11 you will see Paul is speaking of the remnant of the Israelites, that God has still a purpose for Israel. God takes up this very story of Elijah and the seven thousand and see how Paul puts it. God says, "I have reserved to myself seven thousand men" — I have reserved to Myself. Here is God's intervention. He has reserved a remnant from the general apostasy. Left to themselves the seven thousand would have gone the way of all flesh. They would have followed the way of evil men, but God's grace preserved them. So it is today. God's people are being "delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God's dear

Son", and only by God's grace they are what they are. But even in Elijah's day God had His faithful people. They were small in comparison with the entire nation, but nevertheless they were significant. So it has continued throughout history. God has never left Himself without witness. He has caused it to survive through the darkest hours. It is true today, as well as in the past, and here is His message when we are tempted to despair. We are to remember that God is faithful and we are never to lose heart.

I wonder if you know what conditions were like in England just prior to the Evangelical Revival in the 18th century? They were pretty grim. Bishop Ryle, in his book *Christian Leaders*, writes of the condition of the Churches, let alone the rank and file outside the Churches. He says: "The celebrated lawyer Blackstone had a curiosity early in the reign of George III to go from church to church and to hear every clergyman of note in London. He said that he did not hear a single discourse which had more Christianity in it than the writings of Cicero and that it would have been impossible for him to discover from what he heard whether the preacher were a follower of Confucius, of Mohammet or Christ." That was the situation in England. The churches were empty and it looked as though the Church and Christian witness were finished in England, and Bishop Ryle says what was true of the Established Church was equally true of Nonconformity, but he had this rather interesting remark. He says: "Left to herself the Church of England would probably have died of dignity and sunk at her anchors." I think that is priceless! Things were bad, and then God worked and sent a gracious revival suddenly, sending George Whitfield and the Wesleys, and the face of England was changed. This is one of the great truths of Scripture — God never leaves Himself without a witness, and God often works through minorities. His actions are not tied to majority votes or to mass movements. God has His few, the faithful minority, and it is a lovely phrase that our Lord used of His own: "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

We have seen God's verdict, God's intervention, but here is God's far-reaching knowledge. He knows who His people are and where they are. Elijah was quite ignorant of the existence of the seven thousand. He could bemoan, "I only am left", and yet all the time scattered over the land were those who had remained true to God and God knew their exact whereabouts. He knew all about them, and put together there were seven thousand. Isn't that a great comforting truth, God's far-reaching knowledge?

In case you think this is only Old Testament history, let me draw your attention to the New Testament. Our Lord says in John 10, "I know my sheep and am known of mine", and there is a lovely word that Paul wrote to Timothy: "The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, the Lord knoweth them that are his." He has a tender regard for His people because they are His. Their names were inscribed in the Book of Life before the foundation of the world and He holds them with a tenacious grip and He holds them in tender love, and

today He knows the number and the whereabouts of all His people — their names, their circumstances — are all known to Him. Hidden away they may be in villages and hamlets and towns, in cottages, in houses and humble dwellings, some among the noble and the great, but He knows them all. Unknown they may be to the world at large, they are known altogether to Him. In Romans 11 Paul uses this great story of Elijah and the seven thousand and he ends that passage by saying this: "There remaineth therefore a remnant according to the election of grace." This was the inference that Paul drew from the story of the seven thousand. And Paul, when he was ministering in Corinth — it was not an easy field of service — God graciously came to him and assured him and said: "Fear not Paul, I have much people in this city." That is an encouragement. We do not know God's purpose — it may be that God has much people here, and how we should pray that He might move in our town, that He might move again in mighty power in our country, to send us a gracious movement of the Spirit of God in reviving power. But we have this assurance that the full number of the redeemed will one day be gathered out of every kindred and people and tongue and nation, and in spite of everything, God's purposes will be fulfilled. The Saviour will "see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied".

Are you amongst the number of God's people? The Word of the Gospel comes to you. "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." Here is a word for you. Then here is a word for the believer and it may be that some of us need this gentle rebuke that came to Elijah of old. "Yet I have left me seven thousand . . . all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal." Take it with you and in times of depression, because they will come to you — they come to me, they come to every believer — get hold of this word anew and say, "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel" and the God that spoke these words and reassured His servant of old has still the same power. His purpose of grace will not fail. He always leaves Himself an adequate witness. Take these thoughts — they may be a comfort to you.

M.H.

For Younger Readers

CARINE MACKENZIE

GROUNDWORK

THERE'S MORE THAN OIL in the Middle East! There are many Christian people working hard to spread God's Word in a needy Arab world. We recently attended a conference in Cyprus where we met many people, from Arab countries like Egypt, Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon, who are working to