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Under the Juniper Tree.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church, Fredericton, May 27th.

"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."—I KINGS XIX. 4.

What have we here?—Elijah under the juniper-tree! the Lord's prophet suffering from a bad attack of the blues! You smile perhaps, and yet that is about it. He is sick of life, wants to die. Now here is a study for us—the hero-prophet under the juniper-tree in the wilderness, a study that will give us a view of life we had better have, for there is more or less of it in every true life.

Elijah the Tishbite is one of the most striking figures of the olden-time. We see him with his shaggy hair-cloth mantle flung carelessly around his shoulders sternly confronting the king of the day, the wicked Ahab, and in the name of the Lord predicting a three-year's famine as a judgment upon the land for his idolatrous doings. We see him again at Carmel flinging in the face of the nation in thunder-tones his famous challenge: 'Why halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him.' The Baal prophets accept the challenge, but fail; Elijah follows and demonstrates that the Lord is God, not Baal, and the eventful day closes in bloodshed and storm. The vacillating king is more than half-converted, and the eccentric prophet, to do him honor perhaps, and to encourage his weak resolves, girds up his loins, and runs twelve miles before the royal chariot to the gates of Jezreel. Under the shelter of the gate he seeks refuge from the wild storm that bursts, and being weary he sleeps.

Jezebel, the king's wife, a woman of towering ambition and fierce vindictiveness, learning from the king's lips the fate of her prophets at Carmel, thirsts for Elijah's blood, and sends him a message to the effect that she will have his life. The weary prophet is waked up to hear the Queen's message, and a panic of fear seizes him, and so unlike himself, he flees for his life, scarcely halting till he has reached Beersheba, the southernmost town in the land, and all of a hundred miles from Jezreel. Here leaving his servant, for the simple reason perhaps that he is not able to go any farther, the prophet pushes on a long day's journey into the wilderness. Thoroughly exhausted he throws himself under a juniper-tree, a bush of the broom species, the white-flowering broom. It is said to abound in the Sinaitic desert, growing to the height of eight or ten feet, and casting a delightful shade. There he lies sick at heart, faint and feverish, and prays for death to come to his relief. "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."

Now, let us consider, in the first place, the cause or causes of the Prophet's dejection. It is not at all uncommon for the heroes of faith, the men mighty to do good, to faint and fail sometimes, to be seized with a sudden fear and flee, and to fling themselves dejected and despairing under some juniper tree. Good as they are, they are not so good as to be incapable of being anything but good. Thus have failed some of the very best of men, and perhaps this helped as much as anything their failure, that they did not know why it was they failed. Let us therefore discover, if we can, how it is, that men so good and true and strong as Elijah, sometimes come to be under the juniper-tree of dejection, so that, knowing their weaknesses, we may know our own, and thus avoid the mistakes they made, and the wrong they did themselves and the truth.

And one cause of the prophet's utter spiritual prostration under the juniper-tree, was evidently his physical exhaustion. He had been attempting too much, more than he had strength to do and he failed. The contest at Carmel was a real battle, with fearful odds against him. He was alone in the face of a nation, and humanly speaking it depended upon himself as to how the day would issue. If his right hand should grow weak or weary, how sad for the cause of God, the true religion. And so all the might of the man was brought into fierce action. Then it is very doubtful if he had any rest the night

before, or any food beyond a very light breakfast that morning. All the long day he stood beside his altar in the glowing sun till the battle was fought out, and the agony of effort for him must have been terrific. Then when others sat down to eat and drink, he and his faithful servant repaired to the mountain-top, and there on his knees for an hour or more he wrestled in prayer with God for the promised rain. And I do not think I am saying more than I am warranted, when I say, that that was probably one of the hardest hour's work he ever did in his life.

Some people think it easy to preach and pray, so easy. Well, there are two ways of doing anything. There are mechanics who will hang over a job all the season if you pay them by the day. And there are preachers, too, who know so well how to put in the time. But the easiest way to do a thing is not always the best way. And somehow the great and good never find out how to do their work so very easy. Elijah on Carmel and Christ on Olivet found prayer not so easy.

Then after Elijah's prayer was answered, his work for the day was not done. He girded up his loins and ran twelve miles, keeping ahead of the king's chariot, and part of the distance he ran in the rain. Thus such a day's toil was enough to exhaust a giant's strength.

But that was not all. Where did he sleep that night? Did he sleep at all? Perhaps a brief doze at the gate of Jezreel, crouching in a corner. Then came Jezebel's threat which dragged the weary prophet to his feet again. It should not have done so, but it did. Some time in that wild night of darkness and storm, he and his servant set out for distant Beersheba, and not until they had travelled a hundred miles or so did they rest much. And not even at Beersheba did the prophet rest. On, on, with flying feet, he sped another long weary day, until, utterly exhausted, he sank down under a juniper tree longing to die.

Now, I ask, looking at all he had come through, is it much of a wonder that he was in despair? The truth is the man was tired out. His physical energies were exhausted. It is good to work hard. It is a help to a man, not a hurt—a help in every way you look at it, to work hard. 'Let us thank God if we have to work hard. But then there is such a thing as working too hard. We may overtax our energies, sit up too late and get up too early, apply ourselves to more work than we can stand; and if we do, we will suffer for it. We will be sure to have an attack of the blues.

Melancholy, hypochondria, is a dreadful malady, and I pity the poor wretch who is afflicted with attacks of it. To hang over the pit of despair, to feel the awful blackness of abandonment gathering around the soul—it is the next thing to being lost. And yet, it is safe to say, that in nine cases out of ten it is a disordered stomach that is at the root of the matter, physical exhaustion, the liver out of sorts, and it is a doctor that is wanted rather than a minister.

Again it has been suggested, that the prophet's loneliness had much to do with his dejection. And that is true. Loneliness has its advantages. It is good for a man's spiritual culture to get away alone sometimes, out of all this social chit-chat and night-and-day bustle and business. It teaches a man self-reliance. It develops within him that individuality and independence of character which make him the strong man. But a man may depend too much upon himself, the strength of his own right hand, and he may keep himself too much to himself for his own good and that of others.

And that seems to have been very much so with the prophet. He was a lone man; he had no wife, no family, no one as a companion or friend to draw him out of himself. And he liked the loneliness of existence, the loneliness of the mountain-top or the wilderness, no one to commune with but his own thoughts and God. In what he did he asked no one's counsel but God's, and no one's help but God's. He had to pray alone, and do the work he did alone, bear the burden of it, the crushing responsibility, and he had to do it, because perhaps he gave no one a chance to pray and work with him. He did all there was to be done his lone self. And in that he was not wise. No man, even though he had the strength and wisdom of a thousand men in himself, is sufficient to do all there is needing to be done of himself. If he would succeed he must let others help him, and he must come down from his high dignity and take hold with others. That is where so many fail. No minister, no prophet,

no public man, can do all himself alone. Moses of old was like to wear himself out in the wilderness, and the people as well, with his lone-doing; but his common-sense father-in-law shewed him his mistake, and so saved him from the juniper-tree. But Elijah had no wise father-in-law, nor wife, nor friend, to show him how to husband his strength, and take care of his health, and so yonder he lies almost worn out before his work is half-done.

You will often hear people saying, the energetic and hardworking ones: 'I would rather do it myself than see the useless, careless, bungling way some go about it.' And that is true too. And, yet, if as preachers and parents, we would teach our children and people to be useful and helpful, we must tolerate their bungling till they are able to do it well. It is only by bungling that any of us can learn to do, and it is a mistake for ourselves as well as for others, a wide and ruinous mistake, to do it ourselves alone, when others may help us as well as not. Such a method of work as the prophet was following out, the doing of all himself alone, is the way to bring the Elijahs under the juniper tree, yea deeper than that, under the roots of the cypress.

Another cause of the prophet's being prostrate under the juniper-tree, was perhaps over-confidence in himself. He was a strong man, and a strong man's danger is his strength. It is in that direction where his temptation lies. He is apt to depend too much on his strength and as soon as he does that down he goes. The strong Paul once said, 'When I am weak, then am I strong; and I do not think it is making an unfair use of the adage to put it this other way: 'When I am strong, then am I weak.'

And Elijah was strong on Carmel. He cared not for all the ten-thousands around and before him who would have liked nothing better than to have had the grim satisfaction of tearing him limb from limb, believing him to be the famine-maker. Standing up there alone strong in the strength of the Lord and the cause that is just, he flung defiance in the face of the foe. But he is not so strong as he seems to be, and not so strong as he thinks he is. A few hours afterwards, before the cock thought of crowing at all, a woman's threat sends him bounding away over the plains and hills like a chased deer, and he halts not till he lies panting, half dead with fear, under a juniper-bush away out in the desert. Look at the fallen hero, his strength prostrate in the sand! Listen to his weak wail!—It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.'

From that, it would seem, he had been thinking that his fathers had not been as good as they should have been, and he had been hoping he would do so much more and be so much better than they had been. But now he finds out in his own bitter experience that he and his fathers are cloth of the same web, and hodge-noddy at that, poor weak half-rotten stuff.

And like the prophet in his strength, we think sometimes what we can do, the good we can do. We take hold of work, our duty, the cause that is just, our own reform and the world's, and are going to do so much in our way. How we preach and pray and work! But ah! ere long we are where the prophet was, under the juniper-tree, and wishing for death.

Again, disappointment helps to bring the prophet under the juniper-tree, disappointment in himself and the people. He thought he could do more than he has done, or can do, and then he expected so much, too, from the people. What devotion there was, or seemed to be, in that shout that broke from ten-thousand throats at once on the slopes of Carmel: 'The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!' It thrilled the prophet's soul, and led him to hope the greatest things for the people. But he soon saw that their loud profession was only loudness, voice and nothing else, and that made his soul sick unto death. He said in his venation perhaps as another had said before his day: 'Men are liars all.' You cannot trust them. They are with you to-day, and to-morrow they are somewhere else. Here they are just now, rushing, crushing, wildly enthusiastic; but presently some new claimant for popular applause starts up, and they are off to worship him for a day.

Such, then, are some of the causes that brought the hero-prophet to his utter prostration under the juniper-tree. And they are such as to bring any good strong man there.

We come now to consider, in the second place, God's cure of the prophet's dejection. And observe the Lord did not answer

the prayer he prayed under the juniper-tree. He answered that one he prayed on Carmel, but not the one he prayed out in the wilderness. There are prayers the Lord never answers. They are unworthy of those who make them. And that was the case with the prophet's under the juniper-tree. It was the peevish fretful cry of a disappointed child, the cry of his heroic weakness. So the Lord in mercy to him heard him not. He had still work for him to do, and therefore instead of killing him He cured him. And in this way:—

First, He ministered to the wants of his body. He put him to sleep. "So He giveth His beloved sleep." O balmy sleep, what a boon to the weary! How it soothes and cheers! It subdues and calms the wild excitement of the overburdened brain, and steadies and strengthens the over-strung energies.

Then after the prophet had slept for some time, perhaps for forty-eight hours, an angel woke him up, as only an angel can wake up, to get him to take some nourishment. 'Arise, eat!' The prophet had been utterly done out. With gentle ministering hands the angel waited on him, nourishing him with the freshest and sweetest of bread, bread baked in the hot ashes, and with the clearest of water from the desert spring. The prophet ate and drank like a hungry man. Then he went to sleep again, and slept long and deep. How long he slept we know not, but he slept till the angel returned to wake him. By this time he was refreshed. Again the angel fed him, so fed him that for forty days after he continued his journey in the strength of that food.

This journey is very perplexing. Indeed it cannot be satisfactorily explained. It was not a forty day's journey from where he was to Horeb, nor anything like it—not more than ten or twelve at the farthest. All sorts of suggestions have been made to account for the length of this journey and the object of it. I incline to the idea that he was not quite himself, and so wandered about aimlessly under a clouded brow, until at length he woke up, as if from a long troubled dream, and found himself forty days afterwards in a cave at Horeb.

Now, we may learn from all this how much the state of a man's health has to do towards making or marring him in the grandest sense. Let even Elijah lose his health, and his strength is all gone. He is a physical, mental, moral wreck, wandering uselessly and aimlessly in the Sinaitic deserts. And in order to any more usefulness from him his health must be restored. And the Lord did that for him. After a two-or-three months' sojourn in the wilderness he was himself again. Plenty of sleep, and food, and mountain air, and the angel's watchful care, brought him round to be as well as ever, and as good and strong as ever.

The next thing the Lord did for him after he was well again, was to rebuke him sharply for being where he was. 'What doest thou here, Elijah?' The prophet whined out an answer: 'I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life to take it away.'

You see he did not go down on his knees, and confess, as he should have done; 'Lord, I have been weak. I have been too full of myself. I have been trusting far too much to my own strength. I have been myself doing the very thing I have been so quick to see in others and condemn in them. I have sinned, I have sinned!'

No; he did not do that. He did what we all do, blamed everybody but himself. It is the people who are to blame, the Lord's people, not the prophet. The children of Israel have done so, and so, and so. They have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, slain thy prophets. And so it is all their fault that he is where he is. Ah, how weak and wicked even the Lord's prophets are!

It was clear therefore he needed new revelations from Heaven for himself; so the Lord took him out of the cave, and led him up the mount. There the bewildered prophet stood, and watched, not without some alarm, the grandest displays of natural forces at work that it has ever been the privilege of a man to behold.

Suddenly a tornado came sweeping and roaring up the pass, carrying everything before it, uprooting trees, dislodging huge masses of rock from the face of the mountain, and hurling all down with a vast tumult and confusion into the valley below. But it went almost

Concluded on fourth page.