

The Testing of Self-Interest in the Servant

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the self-interest testing of Elijah and John the Baptist, emphasizing the importance of selflessness and reliance on God in ministry.

Scripture: 1 Kings 18:36

Topics: "Spiritual Transition", "Selflessness in Ministry"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the ministries of Elijah and John the Baptist as vital instruments during times of spiritual transition, highlighting their roles as way-makers for the Lord. Both figures experienced profound highs and lows in their spiritual journeys, illustrating the fluctuating nature of human emotions and the necessity of relying on God rather than personal feelings. Sparks points out that God prepares His servants in secret, equipping them to fulfill His greater purposes, and that true ministry requires selflessness and a focus on God's work rather than personal struggles. The sermon encourages believers to recognize their dependence on God and to remain steadfast in their calling, even amidst trials. Ultimately, the message is a call to prioritize the Lord's interests over self-interest, as exemplified by the lives of Elijah and John.

Transcript

Reading: 1 Kings 18:36-40; 19:2-5,9,15-16; Mal. 4:5-6; Matt. 3:1-6; 11:2-14; 14:3.

Elijah and John the Baptist are in view in these passages of Scripture, and much for our help can be learned from their experiences.

A Vital Ministry in a Time of Transition

In the first place, we must take account of their ministries. The two men are brought together in a mysterious identification by the Lord Jesus, and from various fragments it is quite clear that their ministries were one in principle and nature; that is, in a day of fairly general spiritual smallness and weakness, these two servants of God were His instrument and vessel for making a way and a place for Himself in greater fulness. They were way-makers for the Lord, pioneers and pathfinders for His larger purposes and desires. In the familiar words used by John - "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). That was the key to the ministry of both Elijah and John the Baptist - the increase of the Lord amongst His people.

Both lived in a time of transition. The principle of transition is clear, firstly, in that Elijah is brought over into full view at the very end of Malachi's prophecies, at the close of the Old Testament - an end-time, a period of transition unto the Lord's coming: in that case, of course, His first coming. But I do not think that what the Lord said about Elijah, in Malachi and later, was exhausted by the first coming of the Lord; the great and terrible day of the Lord is still to come. We will not enlarge too much on details, but be content to note that that time of transition was governed by the ministry of both these men, and was marked by the gathering out of a real people from among the professing people of the Lord. Malachi makes that perfectly clear - "Then they that feared the Lord spake one with another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared the Lord and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, even mine own possession, in the day that I do make" (Mal. 3:16-17). Out from the professing, religious realm there is seen in these words to be a true people for the Lord. Undoubtedly that was the mark of John's ministry, for tradition, formalism, legalism were the dominant features of religion in his day, and it was against these that he hurled his weight to secure a people unto Christ in fulness, in utterness. He sought a transition from one spiritual state to another, and, in the light of a change of dispensation, to secure a people wholly for the Lord. That wants dwelling upon very much more fully, but I think that is enough to give us the clue to the ministry of these men, and to relate them in a vital way to our own day - another end-time, transition period that is surely ushering in another coming of the Lord, and that also is characterised by the need for the gathering out of a real people from among those who profess to be the Lord's. We may expect that what was true in the experience of Elijah and John in their day will in principle be found in God's dealings with instruments of His choice today.

Preparation in Secret

It becomes clear then that for such a great purpose - to make a way and to make room for the Lord - God had and has His instruments, known to Himself, and secretly under His hand, being prepared. Elijah comes on to the scene mysteriously, almost out of nowhere, after deep secret preparation and discipline. John has spent all his life in the wilderness waiting for the day of his appearing to Israel. Something has been going on in secret. God has had these men in hand in deep preparation, vessels to meet this particular need in the time of transition - transition from a state which the Lord can no longer accept as answering to His known will, to a state which will satisfy Him. He must have a vessel for such a purpose. It may be individuals, as it often is, but it has also through the ages proved to be a corporate vessel, a company of the Lord's people prepared in this way. These instruments, known and secured by God in secret, have, in a secret history with Him, been learning to know the Lord as their heavenly sustenance. Elijah, at a time when earth could not provide any sustenance, was sustained from heaven. John the Baptist, in the wilderness for many years, where he had to know the Lord in loneliness and apart from men, was having to learn the Lord as his heavenly life and his heavenly provision. Such is the preparation, the equipment, of any vessel to serve God in this greater purpose of His heart.

All Prone to Variable Soul Emotions

Then we come to the next phase - the heights and the depths. We see Elijah at Carmel, not only literally on a height, but spiritually in great eminence, with an open heaven and the power of God being manifested - people being bowed under those sovereign activities of the Lord, a tremendous time of life and of fulness. And then we see him fleeing for his very life at the threat of a woman, casting himself down under a juniper tree, saying, "O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers." 'I am an utter failure; let me die.' From the heights to the depths!

John the Baptist - what a day his was! He, by revelation from heaven, had said, "Behold, the Lamb of God... He that sent me... said unto me, Upon whomsoever thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon him, the same is he that baptizeth in the Holy Spirit. And I have seen, and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (John 1:29,33-34). And then we read his troubled enquiry, "Art thou he that cometh, or look we for another?" (Matt. 11:3). Again, from the heights to the depths!

There are many lessons in that. Great spiritual heights where you are enjoying the Lord, in real fellowship with Him, and where there is a large measure of spiritual fulness, followed within a very brief time by the feeling that it is no longer worth living, that everything is gone, and major questions are arising about the very things upon which you were before most positive, about which you would have allowed no contradiction - your own heart asking questions about it all, about your very life-work and the worthwhileness of your existence, whether you have not been altogether mistaken, whether it has not been a great illusion. It is a tremendous thing to observe this change in two such men as these. Well might James say, "Elijah was a man of like passions with us" (James 5:17)!

The first thing to be noted from this is that there are times when we come into experiences of barrenness, of a seemingly closed heaven, and no longer the enjoyment of the consciousness of the Lord's presence and of spiritual blessing. There are times like that in the life of the greatest servants and instruments that God has ever used. It is as well for us to recognize it. Some of us would not range ourselves alongside of these men as to our spiritual stature, but if they went that way, should we expect anything else?

Fluctuating Soul Emotions to be Repudiated

The next thing to note is that every instrument, however greatly owned and used of God, is, after all, utterly dependent upon Him. What a proof it is that our resource is the Lord and not ourselves! We are nothing in ourselves. If only we would really remember, that although the Lord may have called us and used us and made us know quite well that He has apprehended us, in ourselves we can drop down to the depths of despair. If we go into ourselves, that is how it can be. If we sink down into our souls - our feelings, our reactions to situations, our appraisals, our judgments of how things appear, of what seems to be - if we get down there and begin to look from the earthly standpoint, from the merely human angle, that is how we can be and shall be. It is for you and for me at all such times to say, 'Now, after all, is this myself or is this the Lord? Is this just because I have got down into my own soul?' We have to challenge ourselves as to ourselves. David was always doing that. It looks to me as though David was constantly taking himself into a corner and looking himself in the face, so to speak, and talking to himself. On one occasion he was pouring out a terrible complaint, and then he said to himself, "This is my infirmity; but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High" (Psa. 77:10). 'This is how I am made, and what I am like, but this is not the Lord.'

Well, there are times when we have to pass through spiritual experiences like this. There is no guarantee that we shall not have them. The Lord allows them for us to learn from them - mainly to learn how unreliable are our own souls, so that we come to repudiate our own moods and all that belongs to that soul realm. In such times of suspense and of seeming emptiness, when all has gone into unreality, we learn what it is that we are really resting upon spiritually. The Lord is now working into us the principles of our testimony. We have borne a testimony, and now is the time to have the principles of it wrought in and wrought out; and that takes place in times like these when we are no longer on the mountain, but down in the valley. Now what about the principles of your testimony - not the things you said, the profession you made, but the actual principles of that testimony?

The Lord Does Not Meet Us on Soul Ground

I must close with a word as to the Lord's way with His sorely tried servants. How did He come to their rescue? Now note - neither in the case of Elijah nor of John the Baptist did the Lord make a lot of them personally. He did not meet them on their soul ground. He does not do that. We get down into our souls, become the prisoners of appearances and feelings, and the Lord never comes there to us and takes our ground. He says, "What doest thou here?" We have got to get up, we have got to get on our feet again. We may be quite sure He is full of sympathy - the story of Elijah reveals the Lord's tender care for His servant - and yet He cannot condone and accept that level and realm which we have taken, and He will not make a great deal of us personally; we must not expect that He is going to do it. He did not say to Elijah, 'Oh, Elijah, you are all wrong; after all, you are a great man, you are much better than your fathers.' And He did not say anything like that to John the Baptist. What He had to say about John - how great a man he was - He said to the people when even John's disciples had gone. He did not say to John, 'There hath not arisen a greater than you'; but He did say it of John to others. The Lord is not going to pat us on the back.

What did the Lord do in both cases? Well, in effect, He said, 'Elijah, the work is going on; now then, is it yourself or the work you are concerned about? Elijah, go and anoint Elisha!' Oh, what a new prospect came in with Elisha! - a transferred ministry. If Elijah had been caring only for himself, he would have felt jealous, piqued. But no, he went on his way and did it. And to John the Baptist - 'John, the work is going on; you have said you must decrease and I must increase. I am going on with the work, John. You may be put aside out of it, but I am not giving up the work. I am going on with the purpose that I started.' It tests us as to our utter selflessness. It puts us on the right basis. It is a tremendous thing, if really our hearts are in the work. The Lord says, 'You may be having a bad time, you may feel you have come to an end - but I have not; I have a Jehu yet, I have an Elisha yet, I have the kingdom yet that you, John, have talked about. I am going on.' You see the point. The Lord has not abandoned His work. We may be having a bad time, but the Lord is not giving up, He is going on with the thing which He has taken in hand; and while you and I may not at the end be beheaded like John, the principles are these, and we shall only be able to come back into line with the Lord's going if a new severance from self-interest takes place, and if we are concerned only with the Lord's interests. But remember that the Lord snapped His fingers at Jezebel. Remember her end, and Herod's end; and see Elijah and John the Baptist as spiritual forces going on through the ages, and speaking to us today.

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