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"THE SPIRIT OF ELIJAH."

SERMON BY

REV. J. ROSS STEVENSON, D. D.

PREACHED IN THE

Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church,

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, NOVEMBER 8th, 1903.

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Sermon Preached in the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church,

Sunday Afternoon, November 8th, 1903,

BY THE PASTOR, J. ROSS STEVENSON, D. D.

Text:—"And Elisha said: I pray thee let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me."—II Kings, ii: 9.

THIS request was made in the last conversation between Elijah and Elisha. About ten years before the Tishbite had cast his mantle on the ploughman, Elisha the son of Shaphet. During all the intervening time the young prophet had ministered to the aged man of God, and a deep and abiding friendship had grown up between them. Now that Elijah had finished the work God gave him to do, and a successor had been provided for him, he knew that the time of his departure had come. He visited sacred places, around which hallowed associations clustered, Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho; and Elisha, with a sure premonition of what was about to occur, followed him as a devoted and inseparable friend. Having looked for the last time upon the places which interested him most on the west side of the Jordan, he makes a way for himself and his faithful attendant through the river, for Elijah is still a Gileadite, and the wild mountain scenery of his boyhood days had a charm for him that could not be forgotten in his old age, and during his last earthly moments. How true this is to human nature; men love the old, familiar scenes of youth most of all, and seek a burial with their fathers. Before his ascension the aged prophet wished to make his last will and testament. Silver and gold he had none; but, as a man of God, he could impart a blessing worth far more than any temporal possession. So he said unto Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for thee before I be taken away from thee." Elisha was not a fortune-hunter in the modern sense of the word; but, called to the prophetic office, he desired an equipment which was essential to usefulness in God's service. So, with rare wisdom and an ambition to do God's will, he proffered the request, "I pray thee let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me."

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We are not to understand by this prayer that Elisha wished to be a second Elijah, or precisely the same kind of a man and prophet that Elijah was. If he cherished any wish of this kind, it was not granted, for, as we shall see, he was a man of far different spirit from the rough, rugged, tempestuous son of the wilderness. God does not repeat himself in any such way; no man can be an exact reproduction of any predecessor, and if he tries to be he is sure to fail. Elijah had faithfully served his day and generation. God had given him a special work to do, and had fitted him for it, and his work was finished. Elisha, coming after him, had his own problems to solve, and his own mission to fulfill, and he must needs have a different spirit. And yet it is the same Spirit. There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit, and to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal. The Spirit of Elijah was to be the Spirit of Elisha, just as he was the Spirit of all the prophets, and of Jesus, and of the apostles. But the Spirit divides to each one severally as he will, and the manifestations of the Spirit in the son of Shaphet were to be different from those in the Tishbite. Hence we may understand Elisha as asking for the gift of the Holy Spirit, that power which had made the solitary prophet of Israel a man of God, and which, if communicated to his successor, would equip him for his life work and make his ministry effective. And with holy boldness he petitions for a double portion of that spirit. This was the portion of the eldest son—Elijah had been like a father to him—and so he claims the right and privilege of the first born. Elisha must have had the Spirit already in some measure. He had no doubt been one of the seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal. Having accepted the call to the prophetic office, for some time he had been engaged in religious work, and coming under the influence of such a strong personality as that of Elijah, he must have grown in grace and shown in his life the fruits of the Spirit. He had enough of the Spirit to want more, and it showed rare spiritual discernment that he should desire this one gift above everything else. The fulfillment of such a desire would be something like a second baptism, an anointing for service such as Jesus himself received when he began his public ministry. For though Christ had grown strong in Spirit, and the grace of God was with him, not until the Holy Spirit descended upon him like a dove was it said of him that he was filled with the Spirit and

was led by the Spirit. Or, as in the case of the apostles, who, having spent three years with Jesus, and having come under the influence of his Spirit, were commanded to remain at Jerusalem until they should be baptized with the Spirit and with power. Hence it was only natural that Elisha should pray for a double portion of the Spirit, and Elijah said, "Thou hast asked a hard thing." Spiritual gifts are not easily transmitted, nor is it within the power of any human being to bestow the Holy Spirit at will. Why, then, was such a request made of Elijah? How could it be possible for him to grant it? It is only necessary for us to remember Elijah's power in prayer. As a prophet of the Lord, he had power with God, and prevailed. This must have been especially true of him as he stood on the verge of the heavenly world, and very near to the throne. We know the Spirit is given in answer to prayer; and not only are we encouraged to request this gift for ourselves, we have the right to ask for its bestowment upon others. And if we have that power with God, which should be ours through prayer, we ought to secure a spiritual baptism not only for ourselves, but for those with whom we come in contact. The condition which Elijah imposed upon Elisha was one of sight—"If thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so." This may have meant, that if the desire was strong enough to continue to the end of Elijah's life, it would be fulfilled, or such a vision could be interpreted as evidence of the young prophet's fitness to receive the great blessing he asked. It would show he had the single eye, and could discern and appreciate spiritual truth whenever revealed. God does not grant a blessing to gratify curiosity, or to furnish an occasion for trifling. He gives more to those who faithfully use what they have, and what we do with present light is a condition to receiving more light. Are we ourselves always prepared for what we wish to receive? Do we mean what we say when we pray to be baptized with the Holy Ghost and with fire? Suppose such a blessing came, would it not really embarrass some, in that it would require a great change in their life's programme, and would compel them to do what they are very much averse to doing? The vision of Elijah would also be an objective token that his request had been granted. The bestowment of the Spirit has often been accompanied by strange external manifestations, as at Christ's baptism, when the heavens opened,

and the Spirit came down like a dove, and the Father's voice was heard, or at Pentecost, when there came a sound as of a rushing, mighty wind, and there appeared unto the disciples cloven tongues like as of fire. So Elisha's Pentecost had its outward symbols. Suddenly, as the two men walked along engaged in holy converse, the chariot and horses of fire appeared in the heavens, and Elijah went up to the presence of his God by a whirlwind, an end corresponding to the prophet's life. According to the Jewish legends, Elijah was at birth wrapt in swaddling bands of fire and fed with flame. During his whole career it was said of him, he rose up as a fire, and his word blazed as a torch, and at last he was taken from the earth by the token which symbolized his own unquenchable spirit. Elisha cried: "My Father! my Father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!" What a plaintive expression, and yet how appropriate a description of the young man's loneliness and desolation! He had been Elijah's own son in the faith, and now he had been left behind to carry on a great work, which seemed to him an impossible task. Israel had lost her sure defense; for Elijah had stood against all the chariots and horsemen of all the surrounding hostile nations, and when he was taken up into heaven, it was as if the standing army of God's people had been removed.

And has not the Church often been compelled to cry out in the same language, when some needed man of God, on whom the very issue of the Kingdom seemed to depend, has been carried up into the skies? But Elisha was to have the sure evidence that he was not left alone. Taking up the mantle which had fallen from the prophet as he ascended into the glory above, the sacred garment which had been baptized with water and with fire, the appropriate emblems of the Spirit's power, and standing on the bank of the Jordan, Elisha smote the waters, and said, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" and it was demonstrated that the power of God which was with Elijah was with him, so that the younger prophet might do even greater things than his predecessor had done. In this power of the Spirit the son of Shaphet began his long and useful career, a career which was marked with innumerable deeds of mercy. Elijah had begun his ministry by proclaiming a famine; Elisha began his prophetic career by healing the spring of waters, so that there would not be any more death nor barren land. His activity in both public and private life was incessant; he was welcomed to the palaces of kings, who regarded him not as an enemy, but as a friend and

counsellor, and addressed him as Father. His advice in war was sought by the rulers of Israel, Judea and Moab. Naaman the Syrian consulted him in sickness, and offered him costly presents. He acted as an intercessor for others at court, and could secure favors for a friend. So expert was he in camp life and the strategies of war, that more than once he was the means of saving the life of the king. He was gladly welcomed in the homes of the people, and was known as the holy "man of God, who passeth by us continually." And at last, in a great old age, when his end came, he was not rapt away like Elijah; he was buried with a splendid funeral, as Josephus tells us, and a sumptuous tomb was shown in after ages over his grave in the royal city of Samaria. He is the only one of the Old Testament saints whose very bones could work wonders after death, because of the grace of a long and gentle life. As we see, Elisha was greatly revered, his services were continuously sought, and he left a deep and abiding impression on the life of his day.

While he was not so great a man as Elijah had been, he did a greater work. Elijah towers above the other prophets in his rugged grandeur like some great mountain peak, a land mark of a continent. His character, his strength of will, his superior courage, his untiring zeal, his personal grandeur, made him a giant in Israel, and Elisha appears after him as only a feeble reflection, whose highest honor was that he poured water on the hands of Elijah. And yet the Kingdom of God advanced more rapidly in his time than during the ministry of his more illustrious predecessor. It has often been so. The apostle Peter by one sermon gathered a larger number into the church in one day than Christ had done during his entire ministry of three years. A short time since an article appeared in one of our religious journals calling attention to the mediocrity of the present day ministry, and the comparison of the modern preachers and teachers with bright luminaries of former times was indeed marked, and somewhat discouraging. It looked indeed as though the "chariot and horsemen of Israel" had been taken away, and only men of Elisha's calibre had been left to do the work. Yet the Kingdom of God still advances, and the sum total of results would indicate a greater advance to-day than has ever been known before. How can we account for this? There are two reasons for it. The great men of former days, who "served their generation according to the will of God," prepared the way for the work that is now

being carried on for the Kingdom. They have labored; others have entered into the fruits of their labor. Elisha could never have done Elijah's work—he was too small a man for that—but Elijah's work having been done, Elisha profited by the preparatory service, and his tasks were made easy for him. As Dean Stanley has said, "We cannot dispense with the mighty past, even when we have shot far beyond it."

But there is still another reason. Elijah had to do his work single-handed, and he felt at times that he stood solitary and alone in the fear of Jehovah. Meanwhile the schools of the prophets had been established, and there were gathered about Elijah those who could aid him in his work, and share in responsibility. This is one of the advantages of having a mediocre leader. Those in the ranks do not depend solely upon him, and are willing to take their share of the work. Some years ago one of our Presbyterian churches had for its minister a man of brilliant gifts, who shone as a pulpit orator, was an ideal pastor, and greatly beloved by his people. His successful ministry terminated with his call to a larger field of labor, and the bereft people cried out, as did Elisha, "My Father! my Father! the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!" The prospect looked discouraging, for no man of like gifts could be found throughout the entire church. It was necessary to call as a successor a young man of some promise, and yet much inferior to the more brilliant preacher and pastor to which the people had become accustomed. The strangest part of it is, that the last days of the church's work were more prosperous than the former days. The whole congregation realized that the success of their enterprises depended not so much upon the minister as upon their own individual efforts, and this distribution of responsibility wrought wonders. So the workers in God's Kingdom fall, but the work still goes on, because the God of Elijah is ever with the church, and his Spirit that worked through Elisha can work in like manner through all who come after him, so that none of his words fall to the ground. There is great comfort in this, when at times we feel that we are unfitted and unsuited for the tasks God places upon us, and contrasting ourselves with great leaders we feel that the work cannot succeed. Just as Elisha took up his great task, and in his own way accomplished the purpose of God through him, so is it possible for each one of us to do. There is a great work to be done, and our Master gives to each his own work. If we only have Elisha's Spirit,

we need not be concerned about the issue. When we think of the number of professing Christians there are in this city, or of even the number there are to-day in this congregation, there are enough to shake this entire city in demonstration of the Spirit and power, even as the small company of early disciples turned the world upside down, if only, like them, we have the victorious power in the conqueror's name, the power of Pentecost.



