

Elijah Standing Before the Lord.

BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

"And Elijah the Tishbite . . . said . . . As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand."—1 Kings 17:1.

This solemn and remarkable adjuration seems to have been habitual upon Elijah's lips in the great crisis of his life. We never find it used by any but himself, and his scholar and successor, Elisha.

Both of the men employ it under similar circumstances, as if unveiling the very secret of their lives, the reason for their strength, and for their undaunted bearing and bold fronting of all antagonism. We find four instances in these two lives of the use of the phrase. Elijah bursts abruptly on the stage and opens his mouth for the first time to Ahab, to proclaim the coming of that terrible and protracted drought; and he bases his prophecy on that great oath, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand." And again, when he is sent to show himself to Ahab once more at the close of the period, the same mighty word comes, "As the Lord of Hosts liveth, before whom I stand, I will surely show myself unto him this day." And then again, Elisha, when he is brought before the three confederate kings, who taunt, and threaten, and flatter, to try to draw smooth things from the lips, and get his sanction to their mad warfare, turns upon the poor creature that called himself the King of Israel with a superb contempt that stayed itself on that same great name, and tells him, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand," were it not that I had regard for the King of Judah, I would not look toward you nor see you. And lastly when the grateful Naaman seeks to change the sole character of Elisha's miracle, and to turn it into the coarseness of a thing done for reward, once again the temptation is brushed aside with that solemn word, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none."

So at every crisis where these prophets were brought full front with hostile power; where a tremendous message was laid upon their hearts and lips to utter; where they were likely to be daunted or dazzled by temptations, either of the sweetness or the terrors of material things, these two great heroes of the Old Covenant, out of sight the strongest men in the old Jewish history, steady themselves by one thought,—God lives, and I am his servant.

For that phrase, "before whom I stand," obviously means chiefly "whom I serve." It is found, for instance, in Deuteronomy, where the priest's office is thus defined: "The sons of Levi shall stand before the Lord to minister unto him" And in the same way, it is used by the Queen of Sheba's wondering exclamation to Solomon, "Blessed are thy servants, and blessed are the men that stand before thy face continually."

So that the consciousness that they were servants of the living God was the very secret of the power of these men. This expression, which thus started to their lips in moments of strain and trial, let us see into the very inmost heart of their strength. These two great lives, which fill so large a space in the record of the past, and will be remembered forever, were braced and ennobled thus. The same grand thought is available to brace and ennoble our little lives, that will soon be forgotten but by a loving heart or two, and yet may be as full of God and of God's service as those of any of the great of old. We too may use this secret of power, "The Lord liveth, before whom I stand."

What thoughts then which may tend to lift and invigorate our days are included in these words? The first is surely this—Life is a constant vision of God's presence.

How distinct and abiding must the vision of God have been, which burned before the inward eye of the man that struck out that phrase! Wherever I am, whatever I do, I am before him. To my purged eye, there is the Apocalypse of heaven, and I behold the great throne, and the solemn ranks of ministering spirits, my fellow servants harkening to the voice of his word. No excitement of work, no strain of effort, no distraction of circumstances, no glitter of gold, or dazzle of earthly brightness, dimmed that vision for these prophets. In some measure, it was with them as it shall be perfectly with all one day, "His servants serve him, and see his face,"—action not interrupting the vision nor the vision weakening action. To preserve thus fresh and unimpaired, amidst strenuous work and many temptations, the clear consciousness of being "ever in the great Taskmaster's eye," needs resolute effort and much self-restraint. It is hard to set the Lord always before us; but it is possible, and in the measure in which we do it, we shall not be moved.

How nobly the steadfastness and superiority to all temptations which such a vision gives, are illustrated by the occasions, in these prophets' lives, in which this expression came to their lips. The servant of the Heavenly King speaks from his present intuition. As he speaks, he sees the throne in the heavens, and the Sovereign Ruler there, and the sight bears him up from quailing before the earthly monarchs whom he had to heed, and in connection with whom three out of the four instances of the use of the phrase occur. How

small Ahab and his court must have looked to eyes that were full of the undazzling brightness of the true King of Israel, and the ordered ranks of his attendants! How little the greatness! how tawdry the pomp! how impotent the power, and how toothless the treats! The poor show of the earthly king paled before that awful vision, as a dim candle will show dim against the sun. "I stand before the living God," and thou, O Ahab, art but a shadow and a noise. Just as we may have looked upon some mountain scene, where all the highest summits were wrapt in mist, and the lower hills looked mighty and majestic, until some puff of wind came and rolled up the curtain that had shrouded and hidden the icy pinnacles and peaks that were higher up. And as that solemn white Apocalypse rose and towered to the heavens, we forgot all about the green hills below, because our eyes beheld the mighty summits that live amongst the stars, and sparkle white through eternity.

My brethren, here is our defence against being led away by the gauds and shows of earth's vulgar attractions, or being terrified by the poor terrors of its enmity. Go with that tallman in your hand. "The Lord liveth, before whom I stand," and everything else dwindles down into nothingness, and you are a free man, master and lord of all things, because you are God's servants, seeing all things aright, because you see them all in God, and God in them all.

Still further, we may say that this phrase is the utterance and expression of a consciousness that life was echoing with the voice of the Divine command. He stands before the Lord, not only feeling in his thrilling spirit that God is ever near him, but also that His word is ever coming forth to him, with imperative authority. That is the prophet's conception of life. Wherever he is he hears a voice saying, This is the way, walk ye in it. Every place where he stands is as the very holy place of the oracles of the Most High, the spot in the innermost shrine where the voice of the god is audible. All circumstances are the voice of God, commanding or restraining. He is evermore pursued, nay, rather upheld and guided by an all-embracing law. That law is no mere utterance of iron impersonal duty,—a thought which may make men slaves, but never makes them good. But it is the voice of the living God, loving and beloved, whose tender care for his children modulates his voice, while he commands them for their good. He speaks because he loves: His law is life. The heart that hears him speak is filled with music.

Ahab and Jehoram, and all the kings of the earth, may thunder and lighten, may threaten and flatter, may command and forbid, as they list. They and their words are nought to him whose trembling ears have heard, and whose obedient heart has received a higher command, and to whom, "across the storm," comes the deeper voice of the one true comforter, who alone it is a glory absolutely to obey, even "the Lord, before whom I stand." People talk about the consciousness of "a mission." The important point on the settling of which depends the whole character of our lives, is—Who do you suppose gave you your "mission?" Was it any person at all? or have you any consciousness that any will but your own has anything to say about your life? These prophets had found one whom it was worth while to obey, whatever came of it, and whosoever stood in the way. May it be so with you and me, my friend! Let us try always to feel that in the commonest things we may hear the command of God, that the trifles of each day—trifles though they be—vibrate and sound with the reverberation of his great voice; that in all the outward circumstances of our lives, as in all the deep recesses of our hearts, we may trace the indication and rudiments of his will concerning us, which he has perfectly given us in that gospel which is the law of liberty, and in him who is the gospel and the perfect law. Then quietly, without bluster or mock heroics, or making a fuss about our independence, we can put all other commands and commanders in their right place, with the old words, "With me it is a very small matter to be judged of you, or of man's judgment; he that judgeth me, and he that commandeth me, is the Lord." In answer to all the noise round about us we can face round like Elijah, and say, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand." He is my "Imperator," the autocrat and commander of my life; and him, and him only will I serve. What calmness, what dignity that would put into our lives! The never-ceasing boom of the great ocean, as it breaks on the beach, drowns all smaller sounds. Those lives are noble and great in which that deep voice is ever dominant, sounding on through all lesser voices, and day and night filling the soul with command and awe.

Then, still further, we may take another view of these words. They are the utterance of a man to whom his life was not only bright with the radiance of a Divine presence, and musical with the voice of a Divine command, but was also, on his part, full of conscious obedience. No man could say such a thing of himself who did not feel that he was rendering a real, earnest, though imperfect obedience to God. So, though in one view the words express a very lowly sense of absolute submission before God, in another view they make a lofty claim for the utterer. He professes that he stands before the

Lord, not for his service, watching to be guided by his eye, and ready to run when he bids. It is the same lofty sense of communion and consecration, issuing in authority over others, which Elijah's true brother in later days, Paul the apostle, put forth when he made known to his companions in shipwreck the will of "the God, whose I am, and whom I serve." We may well shrink to make such a claim for ourselves when we think of the poor, perfunctory service and partial consecration which our lives show. But let us rejoice that even we may venture to say, "Truly I am Thy servant;" if only we, like the psalmist, rest the confession on the perfectness of what he has done for us, rather than on the imperfection of what we have done for him; and lay, as its foundation, "Thou hast loosed my bonds." Then, though we must ever feel how poor our service; and how unprofitable ourselves, how little we deserve the honor, and how impossible that we should ever earn the least mite of wages, yet we may, in all lowliness, think of ourselves as set free that we may serve, and lift our eyes, as the eyes of a servant are towards his Master, to "the living Lord, before whom we stand."

Such a life is necessarily a happy life. The one misery of man is self-will, the one secret of blessedness is the conquest over our own wills. To yield them up to God is rest and peace. If we "stand before God," then that means that our wills are brought into harmony with his. And that means that the one poison drop is squeezed out of our lives, and that sweetness and joy are infused into them. For what disturbs us in this world is not "trouble," but our opposition to trouble. The true source of all that frets and irritates and wears away our lives, is not in external things, but in the resistance of our wills to the will of God expressed by external things. I suppose we shall never here bring these wills of ours into perfect correspondence with his, any more than we shall ever, with our shaking hands and blunt pencils, draw a perfectly straight line. But if will and heart are brought even to a rude approach to parallelism with his, if we accept his voice when he takes away, and obey it when he commands, we shall be quiet and peaceful. We shall be strong and unwearied, freed from corroding cares and exhausting rebellions, which take far more out of a man than any work does. "Thy word was found, and I did eat it." When we thus take God's command into our spirits, and feed upon it with will and understanding, it becomes, as the psalmist found it, the "joy and rejoicing of our hearts;" Elijah-like, we shall go in the strength of that meat many days. The secret of power and of calm is—yield your will to the loving Lord, and stand ever before him with, "Here am I, send me."

We may add one more remark to these various views of the significance of this expression, to which the last instance of its use may help us. Here it is: "And Naaman said, I pray thee, take a blessing of thy servant. But he said, As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none."

The thought, which made all Elijah's life bright with the light of God's presence, which filled his ear with the unremitting voice of a divine law, which awayed and bowed his will to joyful obedience, chilled and desanded his desires for all earthly rewards, "I am not thy servant. I am God's servant. It is not your business to pay my wages. I cannot dishonor my Master by taking payment from thee for doing his work. I look for everything from him, for nothing from thee."

And is there not a broad general truth involved there, namely that such a life as we have been describing will find its sole reward where it finds its inspiration and its law? The Master's approval is the servant's best wages. If we truly feel that the Lord liveth, before whom we stand, we shall want nothing else for our work but his smile, and we shall feel that the light of his face is all we need. That thought should deaden our love for outward things. How little we need to care about any payment that the world can give for anything we do! If we feel, as we ought, that we are God's servants, that will lift us clear above the low aims and desires which meet us. How little we shall care for money, for men's praise, for getting on in the world! How the things that we fever our souls by pursuing, and fret our hearts when we lose, will cease to attract! How small and vulgar the "prizes" of life, as people call them, will appear! "The Lord liveth, before whom I stand," should be enough for us, and instead of all these motives to action drawn from the rewards of this world, we ought to "labor that, whether present or absent, we may be well-pleasing to him."

Not the fading leaves of the victor's wreath, laurel though they be, not the corruptible, things as silver and gold, whereof earth's diadems and rewards are fashioned, but the incorruptible crown that fadeth not away, which his hand will give, should fire our hope, and shine before our faith. Not Naaman's gifts but God's approval is Elisha's reward. Not the praise from lips that will perish, or the hollow wealth of dying fame, but Christ's "Well done, good and faithful servant," should be the Christian's aim.

May we, brethren, possess the spirit and power of Elias?—the spirit in that we know ourselves to be the servants of the living God; and then we shall have some measure of his dauntless power and heroic unworldliness! Still better, may we have the spirit of him who was the servant of the Lord, diviner in his gentle meekness than the fiery prophet in his lonely strength! Make yours the mind that was in Christ, that you too may say, "Lo, I come, in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will yea. Thy law is within my heart."—Selected.