

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

ELIJAH AND THE PEOPLE AT MOUNT CARMEL

It was a remarkable but wise decision that Solomon made in an extremely difficult case which was once brought before him. Two women came to him with an infant, to which they each asserted a mother's claim; the one stating that the child of the other woman having died, she had taken hers from her before she was awake, and laid her own dead child in its place; whilst the other asserted that the contrary was the truth, saying, "**The dead child is hers, and the living is mine;**" they therefore besought the king to determine the matter.

But how was it to be done? The king calls for a sword, and on its being brought, he said, "**Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it.**"

You are aware how the king, from these expressions of the two women, settled the dispute and decided the cause (I Kings 3:24-27).

A better compassion than that of a woman for her sucking child has God for his dear children, He, too, will have them entirely as a whole living sacrifice, or not at all. He will not consent to our being divided between himself and the world. The love he requires is that of *all* the heart, *all* the soul, *all* the mind, *all* the strength.

Such, likewise, is the Requirement of our Lord Jesus Christ. "**He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me, is not worthy of me.**"

We must be wholly the Lord's. Such was Elijah himself, and such he taught others to be, as we shall see by attending the portion of his history which is now to be considered.

"And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word. Then said Elijah unto the people, I, even I only, remain a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men.

“Let them therefore give us two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken” (I Kings 18:21-24).

A great and ever-memorable scene is here unfolded. The ancient controversy, whether the Lord be the one only and true God, is now to be decided by himself. The passage before us, however, shows only the preparation for this astonishing decision.

Here we have:

- I. Elijah’s expostulation;
- II. His challenge;
- III. His confidence of faith.

I. We are to transport our thoughts to the summit of mount Carmel

Below roars the sea on one side and bounds the view; on the other, the eye stretches over the brook Kishon into the spacious plain of Esdraelon, where mount Tabor is seen in the distance, and still nearer, the little town of Nazareth, while the lake of Genesaret glimmers there beyond in the blue horizon; to the north we behold the mountains of Lebanon with their cloud-caped summits. On the magnificent height of Carmel, so renowned of old for its fertility, there is at present a monastery and a Turkish mosque, beside many subterranean chapels, caverns, and grottos, appropriated to religion.

Hither, every year, on the supposed anniversary of the memorable day recorded in the text, multitudes of Mohammedans and nominal Christians assemble to pay, in common, religious homage to Elijah. How would Elijah himself deal again with these priests of Baal, if he could once more return to the ancient scene of his zeal and conflict? You are to behold him then at present on the heights of Carmel, surrounded by the four hundred and fifty priests of Baal, the four hundred prophets of the groves, who ate at Jezebel’s table, a lewd and profligate race, by the idolatrous king and his pompous court, and by multitudes of the poor, perishing, seduced people, awaiting, with anxious curiosity, the transactions about to transpire.

These being assembled, Elijah appears before them upon the rising ground, conspicuous to all; a plain man covered with a mantle.

He looks around him with a cheerful and undaunted countenance, while all are silent to listen to his address. He then exclaims audibly to the whole assembly, **“How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him.”**

The effect of this bold and serious address was a dead silence on the part of the assembled multitude. They seem to have felt the power of his expostulation concerning their doubt and indecision.

With the court and the priesthood the case was different; they were decided idolaters, who had sold themselves to work wickedness in the service of Baal. But the people, perhaps, had not been able entirely to forget what great things the Lord had done for their forefathers: they could not bring themselves to renounce entirely all allegiance to him; therefore they sought to persuade themselves that they were not idolaters in reality, but worshipers of the true God under the name of Baal, confounded the Lord God and Baal together, and invented a religion in which they gave themselves to all the lusts and abominations of heathenism, but retained the self-complacent notion that still walked in the way of their fathers; that though the form of their worship might be a little different from that of their ancestors, the substance was the same. What awful self-delusion! What pitiful double-mindedness! Such were the people to whom Elijah addressed his remonstrance.

But if Elijah were now preaching amongst ourselves, would he not still have to deliver many a severe animadversion upon halting, wavering, instability? Surely he would not long endure to witness the double-mindedness and indecision which prevails among professed Christians. Certainly we see some decided characters on the one side, and on the other—on the path of death, as well as on that of light and life—and as to the former sort, there is a decided sentence against them already pronounced in the Word of God. But will it eventually fare better with those who may be called borderers, who halt between two opinions, who practically, at least, doubt which master they shall serve? And O that the generation of these halting ones did not constitute the majority among us! But, alas! Is it not so? Decided living unto God is surely no common thing.

But what, dear brethren, is our supreme happiness? Is it not to enjoy fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ? Is not this the one thing needful? Let the Lord be your treasure; let him be your supreme love. **“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world;”** until it can be demonstrated that these are your supreme good; that these can save and make you happy; that these can redeem and comfort you. Could they indeed do so, then the time you spend on religion would be entirely lost time. Make sure, therefore, of your choice, and be decided as to how you mean to live and die.

If human existence be confined to this present life merely, and if we have nothing beyond it to look for, then **“let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die!”** then **“walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes;”** for why should we then lose time upon an imaginary thing, a nullity! But if this is not our rest; if there be a world to come, an eternity hereafter, what means our loitering upon the way, our settling down in the land of our pilgrimage? Be therefore pilgrims and strangers decidedly; lay aside every sin—everything which would impede your progress; esteem all such things as dross and dung, that ye may enter in at the strait gate, and that the word *Eternity* may not at last be a word of thunder to you. Surely it is well worthwhile to sacrifice all other cares to this one—of escaping eternal punishment, and becoming partakers of everlasting happiness. To act half as children of time, and half as children of eternity brings with it entire death. If the word of God be true, submit yourselves to it in all things, even in those which are ever so opposed to our corrupt nature and wayward desires. Believe it heartily, both in its promises and its threatening. But if ye are wiser than God, then show it decidedly; only do not halt, for that is irrational and absurd, and do not mix light and darkness together.

Neither attempt to compromise between God and the world. If Christianity be of God, decide for it with body and soul; embrace the cross; be willing to suffer affliction with the despised people of God; forsake the pomps, pleasures and vanities of the world, and employ all your endeavors to promote the kingdom and glory of Christ. Do not waver between the righteousness of Christ, and your own. Which of the two will avail you in the judgment?

If it be only the righteousness of Christ, then value yourselves no longer on your own supposed virtues, as many do, with whom we cannot belong in company without hearing of the good works they have done and are doing, both of humanity and religion. Neither be undecided as to the choice of your friends and associates; for **“he that is not with me,”** saith Christ, **“is against me; and he that gathereth not with me, scattered.”**

And the Holy Ghost, by his apostle, saith, **“Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty”** (II Corinthians 6:14-18).

“And the people,” it is said, **“answered Elijah not a word;”** they perceived, no doubt, that his remonstrance was well founded, and his expostulation just. And does not our remonstrance, made to you upon it, commend itself to your consciences?

II. Whether the Lord be God, or Baal be God, rests not now with Elijah to determine

The Lord God himself will answer that question. Elijah proceeds, **“I, even I only, remain a prophet of the Lord; but Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men!”**

God be thanked that he was not the only man of God then living in Israel; he, however, was the only one at that time who stood up among them publicly to maintain the Lord’s cause against his adversaries; the rest were either slain, or banished, or concealed in dens and caves of the earth.

Imagine, then, Elijah’s situation at this time. Among the whole concourse at Carmel he knew not a single brother in the land except Obadiah; not one besides who was likeminded with himself, not one who made common cause with him, or kept him in countenance. Think what it must be for a man thus to stand alone in the midst of a host of strangers. What an overwhelming power is there in the sight of such a multitude of opponents to abash and discourage! But our prophet blooms in this moral desert like the rose; yea, he flames like a meteor in the troubled sky. The peace of God is within him; his heart is at ease; he breathes freely; his tongue does not falter. He is cheerfully bold to testify the name of the Lord his God before this untractable and deluded multitude because he is truly zealous only for the honor of God and simply devoted to that one thing.

We, my brethren, should not be so easily daunted and confounded in our confession of Christ before men, were we simply and unreservedly devoted to him, and not secretly concerned also for *our own credit and reputation*. But, alas, we have too little love to the God of our life, to the God of all grace, who hath **“called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus.”** Were we but wholly given up to the simplicity of love, we should prove invincible; for **“many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it.”**

“Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men.” You are aware, brethren, how much there is in the feeling of being overpowered by numbers, to inject the doubt, “Am I, then, the only person in the right, and all these in the wrong?” How easily are we thus induced to make the gate of the kingdom of heaven somewhat wider, and the narrow way somewhat broader; to give up this or that particular portion of the truth, and not to be so very precise and exact in the cause of the Gospel.

But Elijah was clearly above the influence and operation of circumstances like these. He was sure of the justice of his cause, and though the whole world had thought differently from himself, he had no mind to compromise, or to give place—no, not for an hour; and why? Because he able to say, **“I know in whom I have believed.”** He was an experimental believer, whose faith was interwoven with his existence and happiness.

“Baal’s prophets are four hundred and fifty men.” As if he would say, “This maketh no matter to me; no, nor even though they were as many thousands; for we shall soon decide the point with them.” He had faith to behold more engaged for him than all that could be against him.

III. The people at mount Carmel are all on the full stretch of expectation, while Elijah addresses them upon the preparations to be made, and the purpose to be answered by them

“Let them therefore give us,” he added, **“two bullocks; and let them choose one bullock for themselves, and cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under: and call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken.”**

They agreed to the proposal; some from curiosity, to see what would happen; others, in the hope that Baal would gain the victory; but some few, perhaps, from a real desire to be certain whether the Lord was the true God. What a hazardous proposal this appears on the part of Elijah! He ventured the whole credit of the Lord’s worship upon the issue of it. But he acted really at no hazard; he was assured that his gracious God would not leave nor forsake him.

The world had already received more than one answer by fire; so that it ought not to have required another: but one more such answer still awaits this evil world; **“the earth and the works that are therein shall be burnt up”** (II Peter 3:10).

- God answered by fire when the first transgressions when cherubim and a flaming sword were planted at gate of Paradise.
- God answered Sodom and Gomorrah by fire, and the shores of the Dead Sea retain the traces of it at this day.
- By a fiery vision God confirmed his promises to Abraham, when a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passed between the pieces of the sacrifice.
- From the of fire in the bush God spake unto Moses; and of the fire, clouds, and thick darkness, he spake to Israel on mount Sinai.
- By fire he answered transgression of Nadab and Abihu, the two elder sons of Aaron, who in their priestly capacity offered strange fire unto the Lord; for “there went out fire from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.”
- By fire as well as earthquake God answered Israel in the matter of Korah; for “**there came out a fire from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense.**”
- By fire God answered Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple; for the fire came down and the glory of the Lord filled the house (II Chronicles 7:2, 3).
- God likewise answered the waiting apostles at Pentecost, by cloven tongues as of fire.

“And the God that answereth by fire, let him be God.”

Let us spiritually apply this to ourselves. The fire of the Holy Spirit is the witness of God in every true believer. This fire consumes the dross of his corruptions, and warms, cheers, and enlightens his soul. He that is insensible to the testimony of this witness, is still dead in trespasses and sins.

Let us show then that our hearts burn within us, by the spirit of our life and conversation before God and man.

May the Lord Jesus inscribe his name on our hearts in the flaming letters of his love, that he may not see it necessary to write it in our ashes in the eternally glowing characters of his just displeasure. For he will answer and declare his name to the adversaries, by the fire that is prepared for the devil and his angels; in order that every creature, either with the voice of rejoicing or in the language of self-condemnation, may give him the glory. The Lord, he is God, and his name endureth forever. Amen!

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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