

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DECISION AT MOUNT CARMEL

“To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” So spake the Holy Ghost, by the mouth of David, to the thousands of Israel; Psalm 95:7, 8; and again, by the apostle, to the Christian church; Hebrews 3:15; and let us, dear brethren, seriously lay these words to heart.

What is this hardening of the heart? It is having minds unconcerned about God’s testimonies; it is allowing ourselves to live in practical unbelief. Judicial hardness arises from resisting one divine and gracious call after another, and overcoming one holy influence after another, through unbelief. The more favored we are with means and ordinances, the more danger there is of becoming hardened. The greatest numbers of hardened, as well as of converted persons, are generally found under the most faithful preaching of the Gospel.

There are those among us who do not cleave with full purpose of heart unto the Lord. They have already succeeded in resisting many a gracious call which was made to them, and in again shaking off many a conviction which had fastened on them. O that the demonstration of the Spirit and of power may be now vouchsafed unto us that we may become as surely convinced that the Lord is our God, as the Israelites at Carmel, whose further circumstances we are now about to consider, were convinced, by the answer of fire from heaven, that **“The Lord, he is the God!”**

“And Elijah said unto the prophets of Baal, Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first; for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods, but put no fire under. And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made.

“And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked. And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them.

“And it came to pass, when midday was past, and they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.

“And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down. And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, unto whom the word of the LORD came, saying, Israel shall be thy name: And with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD: and he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two measures of seed. And he put the wood in order, and cut the bullock in pieces, and laid him on the wood, and said, Fill four barrels with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood. And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time. And the water ran round about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water.

“And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.

“Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The LORD, he is the God; the LORD, he is the God. And Elijah said unto them, Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape. And they took them: and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there” (I Kings 18:25-40).

What are our reflections after reading this wonderful narrative of sacred history? Is not the answer of the Lord powerful and full of majesty? Yes, the voice of the Lord divideth the flames of fire; the voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness. May we really feel its power and majesty! Here we see,

I. How poor a god is that of the ignorant and infatuated world!

Elijah had made his proposal; both parties were to sacrifice a bullock, and each was to call on the name of his God. **“God,”** said Elijah, **“that answereth by fire, let him be God.”** And all the people agreed to it. **“It is well spoken,”** cried they, as with one voices; and thus the important moment was now come, which should once for all decide whether there be a God in heaven, and who he was. Elijah lost no time. He said unto the prophets of Baal, **“Choose you one bullock for yourselves, and dress it first, for ye are many; and call on the name of your gods.”**

He gives them the precedency on account of numbers; **“ye are many,”** you have the majority on “your side. Yes, my brethren, this has always been the case in the present evil world, that the majority have taken the wrong side; and they so outnumber the little flock of Christ on earth, that they could, as it were, swallow them up, if the safety of the latter depended on their numbers. **“Ye are many!”** Yes, indeed, numerous as weeds of an uncultivated field; vessels of wrath every where; all Israel, except seven thousand, a remnant only preserved; all the rest in Samaria, and her towns and villages alienated from the life of God.

And is it not just the same in many Christian countries at present? True it is, in this world they have the upper hand, and not without reason, for the prince of this world is their monarch. Hence they are honored and looked up to, and we are the offscouring of the people; they are the great and the wise, and we the fools. They are the party that have the judgment of the public in their favor, and the voice of the greatest geniuses, and of the most brilliant talents, and the applause of the public journals—and we! ah, if any one takes our part, he thinks he is doing a most condescending work of benevolence.

We stand as a sort of criminals before the great public, and have no advocate but Him who was in the form of a servant, and who, instead of defending our cause before the world, tells us that **“his kingdom is not of this world,”** and bids us look to the future for our consolation. What wonder is it that we appear utterly wretched and ridiculous to the world, when the very Judge, to whom we appeal, is one whom they have, long ago crucified. Well, be it so, ye sons and daughters of the father of lies! Be the first, and have the superiority—for ye are many. The Lord is at hand!

But to return to the narrative, the priests of Baal make preparation for the sacrifice. This they were obliged to do on account of the people. Probably they would rather have let it alone. If they taught the people to worship Baal against their own better knowledge, how wretched must they now have felt while they cut up and dressed their bullock! So that they would have been glad to be themselves placed in the victim’s stead to escape the inexpressible shame and disgrace which they were now bringing upon themselves. But such a season of the most horrible confusion in the face of their own congregations, shall eventually seize upon all hypocritical and lying priests, however they may now deceive and mislead the people at their altars or from their pulpits. The sacrifice, being prepared, they begin to cry aloud, **“O Baal! hear us!”** and when one of them is hoarse and exhausted, another begins and cries, **“O Baal! hear us!”** and if his faith fail him, a third rallies his drooping spirits and shrieks out, **“O Baal! hear us!”**

One fixes his eyes on the clouds; a second looks down into the depths to see whether the longed-for flame will not burst forth; and another hearkens intently to hear it rumble in the ground beneath him. But though they wait with desponding countenances, from morning until noon, and from noon until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, it is all in vain, the cry of their frenzy dies in the echoes of the mountains. **“There was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded.”**

There lies the sacrifice on Baal’s altar, still unconsumed! At last they begin to be desperate, and to act like mad men. They leap upon the sacrifice, as if to provoke Baal to anger, and to call forth fire from him in consequence of it. Or else the meaning is, that they perform a frantic religious dance about the altar, after the manner of Baal’s orgies. Be this as it may, there is no notice preternaturally signified of it either in heaven or on earth.

A miserable deity indeed—a mere nonentity was their idol itself; for **“an idol is nothing in world.”**

And does the favorite deity of this enlightened age deserve any better name?

Is the god of the Bible-hating and froward generation of the present day—is the god of most of our philosophers and poets, of our politicians and journalists—is the god of very many of our seminaries and universities, professors and students—is the god of our modern scientific institutions—is the god of our polished circles and of our fashionable assemblies in which it is regarded as disreputable to have even the appearance of adhering to the God of the Bible—is such a god any better, anything more real than the deity of Baal of old? What mean those fashionable expressions which we hear every where substituted for the name of God, the revealed Lord? I mean the expressions “heaven,” “fortune,” and such like. How came these expressions to be so in use, except as a flimsy veil to hide the aversion men have to the name and the Word of God? How do they hate to hear of anything like divine communication and manifestation of answers to prayer, of Divine influence on the heart, or communion with God, of experience of his presence—these are mere fabulous and absurd notions to them—these they esteem as mere delusion—proof enough that, with their god, there is neither voice, nor answer, nor attention—proof enough that what they call heaven, and fortune, and fate, denotes a mere nonentity.

And is this indeed the God of our rationalists, and so many of our literary men and illuminated dreamers! It is; and the belief of no better a god than this spreads from them; through all ranks; and no marvel; for a god such as this, that cannot concern himself about the affairs of men, of course will suffer a thousand sins and excesses to take place without being offended; and this is the very thing they want: that the service of the flesh may be a thing allowed; that falsehood, deceit, and flattery may stand as commendable prudence, and the most voluptuous dance be regarded as an innocent amusement; they wish for a god to whom it is indifferent what a man thinks and believes—a god by whose name any one may, with impunity, swear falsely; a god in whose presence a man need not be ashamed of any loose discourse, nor blush at any impure lust.

Behold, such is the god of this perverse generation! I speak not of all but of the majority. Such is their *universal father*, as they would gladly conceive him to be: yes this conceited, Bible-hating, and falsely *rational generation*! Woe unto them; for what will they the end thereof, in that day when their fear cometh, when distress and anguish cometh upon them? Then their cry will be no better than that of “**Beal, hear us!**” and such will their pretended prayers to God be found to have been all their life long. For the god whom they now profess to serve is no God but only an imagination of their own. For true is that which the Holy Ghost saith by the apostle John, “**He that abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God**” (II John 9). Tremble then at this word of the Lord, all ye who have not the God of the Bible, who have not God in Christ, for ye are “**without hope, and without God in the world;**” ye are practical atheists.

But to return to Carmel. There is no end, at present, to the outcry and idolatrous poise. Elijah stands by and surveys the tumult. How must his heart have been ready to break with compassion; yet what a holy indignation must he have felt within him! Then, again, how foolish and ludicrous must the scene have appeared! “And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said,

“**Cry aloud; forasmuch as he is a god: either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is on a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked.**”

Perhaps he has his head and his hands so full, that he neither hears nor sees you. Perhaps he is engaged in meditating some undertaking, or arranging the thunder and lightning; or else he is not at home, but engaged in the chase; or perhaps he has laid himself down a little, and is asleep; cry aloud, and awake him!

Yes, just as there are doubts which must be expelled, not by reasons and arguments, but as one of the primitive fathers says, peremptorily with such an expression as “fie, fie,” which we should use to children; and just as there are cares which are best removed by a smile, so there are absurdities and errors to which a little well-timed irony is the best reply.

Where reasons no longer avail, and where proofs are no longer acknowledged, such irony may occasionally serve a useful purpose. Something like it is met with in the 44th chapter of Isaiah; and there, also, it is leveled at the sottishness of idolatry.

What can be done with obstinate, self-conceited people, who, perhaps, do not once give themselves the trouble to read the Gospel and examine it? Why should we contend long with such about the truth, seeing that all men have not faith; nor is it communicable, like an article of merchandise. Perhaps it is better to advise such persons to “**stay at Jericho till their beards are grown;**” and to say no more. Human nature in the obstinate, ignorant and self-conceited, is sometimes more caught hold of by brevity like this, than by ever so long and serious an address.

Are you disposed to blame Elijah for being able to mock and use irony during such a momentous scene? If so, you are wrong. He discovers here a free and unruffled state of mind; an inward confidence and cheerfulness about the truth and justice of his cause; a certainty of success, and that the true and living God will not forsake him. If there had been the smallest doubt, the least uncertainty in his soul, he would certainly have indulged no disposition to irony.

But what is the effect of it upon Baal’s prophets and votaries? It excites their vexation and impatience to the highest degree. Baal must hear now—he must come forth, whether he will or no. Their cry to Baal is now intense; they draw out their knives and lancets and lacerate their bodies, according to heathen custom, until they stream with blood; as if they had still retained some remnant of the ancient maxim, that “**without shedding of blood there is no remission.**”

With their sinful blood they think to induce Baal to hear and answer them; and then they begin to prophesy—that is, to make all kinds of enthusiastic motions, and to rave and mutter forth horrible incantations. But there was no voice, nor any that answered, nor any that regarded—all was in vain.

And even with the living God himself, my brethren, such excitements of spirit, and forced ecstasies and devotions are not the way to gain an answer to our prayers. However much you may excite yourselves, the Lord has no pleasure in such sacrifices. Mere solemnity of countenance, bowing down our bodies, praying ourselves hoarse, spending whole hours in mere will-worship, are not the things to propitiate God: and as long as you think so, you receive no answer from him.

III. This unavailing cry of the idolaters was continued from the morning until the time of the evening sacrifice

Then Elijah stood forth in simplicity and uprightness, without pomp and show, with a tranquil countenance and a firm deportment; so that everyone might well presume that he was a prophet of the true God. **“And Elijah said unto all the people, Come near unto me. And all the people came near unto him,”** both priests and people: the former in utter dismay, the latter in eager expectation.

On the top of Carmel lay the ruins of an altar, here called the altar of the Lord. It had probably been built there in better times, and had been thrown down by the idolaters. This altar Elijah now repaired; as if he meant to say, “May God restore thee, O Israel! May God restore thee, thou mournfully dilapidated sanctuary of the Lord!” For what Elijah now did had a significant meaning. He took twelve stones, according to the number of the twelve tribes of Israel, in order to rebuild with them the altar in the name of the Lord. This was figuratively to say, God will perform his promise to Jacob, and will keep his covenant with him whom he surnamed by the name of Israel.”

About the altar Elijah cast a trench—and then prepared the wood, dressed the bullock, and laid it upon it. And might not he who afterwards spoke of Christ’s decease, which he should accomplish at Jerusalem, now have sighed “O that thou wouldest soon prepare thy sacrifice, thou Priest of God, that offering which perfects for ever them that are sanctified!” He commanded that water should be poured on the wood, and on the sacrifice, in order that the miracle might be the more unquestionable, and no one be able to object, as if fire had been secretly applied, **“Fill four barrels with water,”** said he, **“and pour it on the burnt sacrifice, and on the wood. And he said, Do it the second time. And they did it the second time. And he said, Do it the third time. And they did it the third time. And the water ran about the altar; and he filled the trench also with water.”**

The preparations are now completed. A secret awe thrills through the assembled multitude: deep silence prevails. **“And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice** (which with us about three o’clock in the afternoon, a solemn and important hour, the ninth hour, as it is called in the evangelists) **that Elijah the prophet came** (near to the altar) **and said, Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that, people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again!”**

Elijah calls God by his name, Lord God, which he had given himself in the beginning, to denote his condescending and compassionate love to fallen man; he calls him **“the God of Abraham, Isaac and of Israel,”** that he might excite in the hearts of this backslidden people a stumbling remembrance of all the good which the Lord had shown to them and to their fathers from ancient times, by his own grace.

Elijah prays, **“Let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at by word.”**

The honor of God is his supreme desire. He would also have his own mission confirmed in the eyes of the people, and he added, "**Hear me, O Lord, hear me;**" expressive of the fervency and earnestness of his spirit, "**that this people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again.**"

The glory of God and the salvation of the people— these two things formed the entire object of all that the prophet did and said. And what shall we admire the most in this prayer—the prophet's zeal for God's glory, or the ardor of his love for the degraded house of Israel—his astonishing boldness in asking such great things, or his firm confidence in not doubting that God would testify to his own cause? No: we wonder most at the unspeakable grace of God, which teaches a handful of dust and ashes, as man is, thus to believe, love, and pray, to him be the glory.

And now, what ensues? Mysterious moment! The whole revelation of God is at stake. If no answer follows, the whole fabric falls in, and the ground of our hope is gone. Then all that Elijah has testified—all that the prophets have spoken before him, and which Elijah has confirmed—will be accounted a delusion; and the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Israel will be no longer regarded! The prayer is uttered. The silence of death reigns in the assembly—every heart beats high— in every face is the extreme of expectation; when lo! The answer comes; the Amen is given; the fire of heaven descends, in the sight of every one, directly upon the altar, consumes the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth, and licks up the water in the trench. "**And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, the Lord, he is the God; the Lord, he is the God.**" Elijah's faith is crowned, the foolish priests are put to shame, and all the gods, which are not the God of the Bible, are confounded and annihilated.

Ah, what has not the merciful God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Israel performed, to bring us to the knowledge of himself, and to faith in him! Has he not spoken to us without end, in nature and in the Scriptures; by creation, providence, and revelation; by arguments and figures; by prophets, apostles, and ministers; by signs and wonders of every kind, in the most intelligible manner, condescending to our weak capacities, as a most merciful Father; and yet, how few are there that really know him! how few give him glory!

O ye untoward and perverse generation of this world, come near—come near! Behold not only the testimony by which the Lord answered Elijah upon Carmel, but likewise all the testimonies in which the Lord has made himself known.

We will place some of them before you, so that you may once more see and remember them. He has given living testimonies of himself, by thousands; and that which he gave in these last days, when he spake unto us by his Son, was not the last. Look at the altar of his church built upon himself as pillar and basis, and on the twelve living stones of the apostles. Look at the sanctuary of God, its ability, its age, its extent, where the life and light of the Holy Spirit, that fire of the Lord, never goes out day or night; is not this spiritual temple an abiding proof that the Lord liveth?

Look at every stone of this building— every converted sinner.

- Here was also a ruined altar; but see, it is restored:
- Here was also a surrounding trench of thousandfold sins, ensnarements, connections, and obstacles, which closed the entrance against the Lord; but lo! His fire has penetrated.
- Here were also stones—a hard heart and an unteachable mind;
- Here was also wood and earth— deadness, carnality, and darkness;

But the flame of the Lord has consumed the earth, the wood, and the stone, and dried up the floods of ungodliness; and the desolated ruin is become a memorial of the glory of God.

Yet how few believe our report; and to how few is the arm of the Lord thus revealed in the present day! Nevertheless, whether men believe it or not, they shall be surrounded with the testimonies of Israel as with a wall, so that only two things will remain to them—either to cry, **“The Lord, he is the God!”** or, as real children of Belial, to declare that they will have nothing to do with the Lord. It will thus at least come to a decision. Whosoever this day returns home from mount Carmel, without caring to have it said in his heart, **“The Lord, he is the God!”** let him hesitate no longer to take his place in the ranks of those who are of their father the devil, the god of this world, who blindeth the eyes of them that believe not.

The people on mount Carmel gave glory to the God of Israel; but the priests having hardened their hearts from his fear, and remaining still prophets of Baal, were therefore ripe for destruction. And Elijah said unto the people, **“Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.”** The people are ready enough to do it; for they perceive the abominable deception which these destroyers of souls had practiced upon them. They fall upon them, drag them down, at Elijah’s command, to the brook Kishon, and assist the man of God in destroying them. However painful this execution must have been to the tender and compassionate heart of the prophet, and how many thousand times soever he would have preferred being God’s instrument of these men’s conversion rather than of their destruction, yet, because the honor of God demanded it, he could deny his human feelings, and be obedient, notwithstanding natural tenderness and gracious compassion. I say, *obedient*; for in the law of God, given by Moses, Deuteronomy 13: 6, 9, it is expressly said, **“If any one will entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers; thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people.”**

This express command of the Lord, the prophet was obliged unhesitatingly to obey, however much his feelings might rise against it; for he was appointed of God to contend zealously for the law, to reestablish the statutes of the Lord in Israel, and to restore the tables of mount Sinai to their ancient honor. And it is not fit that a servant of the Lord should in such a case confer with flesh and blood. **“Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth,”** is the language the obedient spirit.

Christ has introduced another dispensation under the New Testament; and the summary punishments of the Old Testament have been exchanged for longsuffering. Hence the righteous and the wicked grow on together until the harvest; but were the same mode of procedure adopted now as in the days of Moses and Elijah, there would be no end of the slaughter; so numerous are the votaries of Baal, even in the midst of a church which is called protestant and evangelical.

But the Woe pronounced against them “**will surely come, it will not tarry**” beyond “**the appointed time.**” He from Bozrah, traveling in the greatness of his strength, who is red in his apparel, will come, in his holy providence, and put in motion the winepress of his wrath. His glittering sword is bathed in heaven, he hath bent his bow and made it ready for the overthrow and destruction of all seducers.

Go on, ye hirelings and grievous wolves, in your thousand places of concourse, and persuade your poor flocks to sacrifice unto other gods than Him whom Abraham called his Lord, and whose goings were heard on the mountains of Israel. Go on, ye corrupters of youth, ye blind leaders of the blind, and, amidst the plaudits of the ignorant and ungodly, despise the sovereignty of the Ancient of days, that may imagine on his throne a being of your own defining, that ye may dream the Almighty to be such a one as yourselves. Go on, ye people of rank and fashion, and proudly sneer at the true incarnate Jehovah of the Bible, and pay your worship to the wisdom of the day!

Alas! The angel is already flying through the midst of heaven, and crying, “**Woe! Woe! Woe! To the inhabitants of the earth!**” The sword is already drawn to slay you, the pile of Tophet ordained of old is already erected, on which forsaken by your imaginary gods, you will become flaming monuments forever of the divine justice, and of all holy vengeance.

Oh, it is fearful indeed to fall into the hands of the living God; for he is a consuming fire. I beseech you, lay it to heart; he is a jealous God and a consuming fire!

But thou, Israel, take the harp, rejoice and be glad; thy God liveth! Carmel and Golgotha, heaven and earth, vie with each other in showing forth, “**Thy God liveth!**” Join in the song, O Israel! and cry aloud as with the voice of a trumpet, laying one hand on thy heart and lifting up the other on high, “**My Lord, he is the God!**” the everlasting King! This shall be known in all the earth! Amen.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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