

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 6

OBADIAH AND THE SEARCH FOR PROVENDER

"And it came to pass after many days, that the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, shew thyself unto Ahab; and I will send rain upon the earth. And Elijah went to shew himself unto Ahab: and there was a sore famine in Samaria. And Ahab called Obadiah, which was the governor of his house: (now Obadiah feared the Lord greatly; for it was so, when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord, that Obadiah took an hundred prophets, and hid them by fifty in a cave, and fed them with bread and water.) And Ahab said unto Obadiah, Go into the land, unto all fountains of water, and unto all brooks; peradventure we may find grass to save the horses and mules alive, that we lose not all the beasts. So they divided the land between them to pass throughout it: Ahab went one way by himself, and Obadiah went another way by himself." (I Kings 18:1-6)

"NEITHER THEIR SILVER NOR THEIR GOLD SHALL BE ABLE TO DELIVER THEM IN THE DAY OF THE LORD'S WRATH: BUT THE WHOLE LAND SHALL BE DEVoured BY THE FIRE OF HIS JEALOUSY . . . SEEK YE THE LORD, ALL YE MEEK OF THE EARTH, WHICH HAVE WROUGHT HIS JUDGMENT; SEEK RIGHTEOUSNESS, SEEK MEEKNESS: IT MAY BE YE SHALL BE HID IN THE DAY OF THE LORD'S ANGER." (Zephaniah 1:18; 2:3. [84])

ELIJAH had come to the lowly dwelling where still he tarries - a homeless Jewish prophet - an unbefriended stranger. Now, we have good reason to suppose, he was regarded, alike by mother and son, as an angel of GOD - a Heaven-sent messenger of mercy,- who had **"delivered their souls from death, their eyes from tears, and their feet from falling."**

We know not how long he continued at his adopted home after the miraculous raising of the child. But be the time long or short, he quietly waits the Divine will regarding his departure. As we have already noted, in speaking of the place of his former seclusion at Cherith, so still more on the present occasion might he have been disposed, with his ardent impulsive spirit, to fret under this long withdrawal from active public work.

Three of the best years of his life spent in inaction! He who could exercise (as we shall find afterwards) an almost magic power over multitudes, why should he be pent up for this protracted period in a cottage of Gentile Phoenicia, when he might have been doing mighty deeds amid the many thousands of Israel?

Why should so noble a vessel be left lazily sleeping on its shadows in the harbour, when, with all

sail set, it might have been out wrestling with the storm, conveying priceless stores to needy hearts? But it was enough for Elijah, now as formerly, to feel assured [85] at it was part of the Divine plan.

He felt that he was glorifying his GOD,- just because he was occupying his assigned and appointed place for the time,- as much in that humble habitation as he did on the heights of Carmel. The Christian poet represents those angels in Heaven who "only stand and wait," as "serving," - doing their Lord's will,- as truly as the swift-winged messengers who carry to and fro the behests of His pleasure: and of the Church militant on earth, "**Thus saith the Lord,**" by the mouth of His prophet, "**In returning and rest shall ye be saved: in quietness and confidence shall be your strength.**"

We can serve GOD in rest and in quietness,- in the noiseless tenor of an uneventful existence,- as well as in the feverish bustle or prominent position of an active one.

Let this be the comfort of those whose may be lowly, obscure, uninfluential. They are accepted according to what they have, not according to what they have not.

- The domestic servant in her kitchen;
- the mechanic with begrimed hands at his daily toil;
- the weaver at his shuttle;
- cobbler at his stall;
- the ploughman at his team;
- the lone sick one on his or her couch of languishing;

These being each in the way of duty, or necessity, may, in their peculiar sphere and work, as truly glorify their Maker and Redeemer, as the philanthropist at his desk solving great social problems, or minister of the Gospel in his pulpit, swaying thousands by words!

Elijah, however, did not love for its own sake inglorious ease. So long as it was his Lord's will, he remained seated under this pleasant vine and fig-tree. But, like a true soldier, he was prepared at the bugle note to start from his pillow, assume his armour, and rush into the fight.

That summons in due time was heard. "**After many days [86] the word of the Lord came to Elijah in the third year, saying, Go, shew thyself unto Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.**"

He did not hesitate. With cheerful alacrity he grasps his pilgrim staff, flings the hermit mantle once more around his shoulders, and crosses into the valleys of Samaria.

How his spirit must have been bowed with sadness as he traversed the famine-stricken land! Wherever he looked, the scourge of GOD - the scourge of sin met his eye. The green pastures and the still waters, of which the great Hebrew poet sang, gleamed no longer under the joyous sunshine.

Hushed were the notes of the shepherd's pipe, and the bleatings of the flocks. The sickles hang rusting on the closed granary doors. A hundred skeleton forms flitted with glazed eyes across his

path;

- the vintage shoutings had ceased;
- the fig-tree no longer blossomed;
- there was no fruit in the vine;
- the labour of the olive had failed;
- the fields yielded no meat.

Oh, what a comfort, amid these scenes of misery, to repose on the word of the living Jehovah, "**I will send rain upon the earth;**" knowing that what the Lord had spoken he would faithfully perform; that perhaps but a few brief days would elapse, ere the funeral pall should be rolled aside, and the shadow of death turned into the morning.

But a new character here reveals himself in the sacred narrative in the person of *Obadiah*, the prime minister or steward of Ahab's palace. We are called to witness in him another wondrous instance of GOD's sovereign grace. We have had occasion, in a recent chapter, to refer to a signal example of that sovereignty in the case of a heathen widow - a votary of Phoenician Baal. We have now a miracle and monument of divine mercy in the court of a wicked and [87] licentious king of Israel - for "**Obadiah feared the Lord greatly.**"

How, we may ask, could a worshipper of Jehovah reside in the midst of so much degeneracy, idolatry, and crime? How could the lily rear its head amid these thorns - this sheep of the fold survive in the midst of ravening wolves?

We answer - just in the same way as divine grace, in the earlier part of this century, moulded and quickened and sustained such men as Wilberforce, Fowell Buxton, and others, in the midst of the lax, irreligious society, and the dissolute, licentious court - life of England.

Ay, and just as, in the midst of much obloquy and derision in the present day, there are those in the high places of the land, who are able boldly to take up their cross, and who count this the brightest gem in their coronets - "**We serve the Lord Jesus.**"

The natural influence of the corrupt moral atmosphere of Ahab's court, would be to rear, in the person of the chief officer, a cruel, unscrupulous tyrant - the creature and myrmidon of Ahab and Jezebel - who would climb to power and favour by his severity against the prophets of the GOD of Israel.

If Obadiah had been a base time-server, his life aim would have been to second and stimulate the diabolical designs of the royal persecutors. But the grace of GOD and the fear of GOD were in his heart, and he knew no other fear. Under the insolence of oriental rule, he might well have dreaded the combined influence of the queen and the idolatrous priests on the despot's will, in compassing his degradation and ruin; but, sustained by the power of religious principle, this righteous man was bold as a lion. He gave one specially unmistakable proof of his heroism and true moral chivalry: [88] for when Jezebel was involving the prophets of Jehovah ¹ in an indiscriminate massacre, Obadiah hid and sheltered them by fifties in a cave, and fed them on bread and water.

It is easy for us, in an age of fashionable profession, to espouse the Christian name, and subscribe the Christian creed, and call ourselves worshippers of the Lord GOD of Elijah. But it was no ordinary test of spiritual courage to stand alone, a witness for Jehovah in the midst of a godless palace;- to rear a solitary altar - a solitary protest on the side of insulted Goodness - when polluted incense was rising from Baal's shrines all around, and the very people of the land were in guilty accord with their monarch, ignoring their great heritage - the truth bequeathed to them in sacred trust - "**The Lord liveth!**"

Obadiah, moreover, is a remarkable testimony to that singular respect which sterling character and worth command, even from irreligious men.

Uprightness, purity, consistency, honesty of purpose, have always an irresistible influence and charm even to base natures. Bloated vice stands rebuked and abashed in the presence of virtue. The wretched slave of sin and pollution respects the purity which degrading habit forbids himself to practise.

Herod - the parallel of Ahab in the Gospel history - hated John's religion and that of his Master; but he could not help admiring and respecting his honesty, self-sacrifice, self-denial, and boldness. "**When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh his very enemies to be at peace with him.**"

As it was with Joseph in the court of heathen Pharaoh, or Daniel in the palace of heathen Babylon, Obadiah's piety, worth, and goodness exalted [89] him to the highest honours which his sovereign had in his power to bestow. Ahab may have hated from his heart the Jehovah-worshipper;- but he revered and revered the faithful counsellor, with his stainless honour and unblemished life.

But Obadiah is brought before us in connection with a mission in which he was engaged in conjunction with his royal master;- a mission which, oriental writers tell us, is frequently still undertaken in seasons of temporary drought by chiefs and petty kings in Syria, Persia, and Hindostan.

Fountains of water - so precious in pastoral districts, and specially in the desert - are spoken of in the figurative language of the East as "eyes;" and when these eyes - these fountains - in a season of great scarcity are closed, it seems to be considered a sort of royal prerogative to visit them in person; as if some charm or talismanic power were possessed by the chiefs of the land to reach or bribe their locked-up treasures.

It was in accordance with this immemorial usage that Ahab said unto Obadiah, "**Go into the land, unto all fountains of water, and unto all brooks: peradventure we may find grass to save the horses and mules alive, that we lose not all the beasts. So they divided the land between them, to pass throughout it. Ahab went one way by himself, and Obadiah went another way by himself.**"

We shall conclude this chapter by drawing two lessons from the conduct of Ahab as here presented to us.

Let us note *the meanness and cruelty of a selfish nature*. How terrible - how appalling must have been the scenes which presented themselves to the eye of the king in this strange journey! But what are we told was his object in [90] thus traversing his dominions, either all alone or probably with his staff of followers?

Noble would it have been to minister consolation to the dead and dying, even by his presence and sympathy, or to devise means in the desperate circumstances to ameliorate the condition of his famishing subjects. But he has no higher, no other object than to save his stud - his mules and horses!

Let the horses and mules,- let the royal herds browsing in the park of Jezreel,- let them be saved. Let the coursers be fed and kept alive which grace his cavalcade or draw his chariot,- let fountains and brooks and patches of verdure be diligently sought for them; but let the people be left to their miserable fate!

Has this intense selfishness, this guilty squandering on personal pleasure, to the exclusion of the claims of human misery and woe, been confined to Ahab or his age?

Alas! may not the conduct of Ahab be seen in many still, who lavish a fortune on the beasts which perish, while they withhold the humblest mite from the starving orphan or the perishing brother or sister?

Do we then condemn these or kindred luxuries? By no means. In this mighty country, wealth was given to be enjoyed, as well as employed. Whatever a man's tastes may be, if innocent and ennobling, let these, within due limitation, be cultivated and gratified. Only, (and here is the qualification) the pampering of self must not be at the expense of the prior and pre-eminent claims of the destitute and needy.

A man is entitled to turn, like Ahab, to his stables; to his horses and mules,- his carriages and equipages; only after he has resolved this question in the sight of GOD, and of his own conscience, "Have I [91] done my duty to the poor? Have I answered, according to my means, the calls of distress? Have I given my proportion to that languishing mission cause? Have I helped as I ought that starving charity!" Yes! Then, have your luxuries as you like, and enjoy them with satisfaction.

When one goes,- shall we say, to see some country seat, with its lordly demesne;- some modern park of Jezreel with its antlered children of the forest feeding in picturesque groups, or bounding through the glades;- or when, leaving the park, you enter the ancestral halls which wealth has been permitted to enrich with rare works of art,- walls glowing with lavish decoration, hung with the priceless creations of genius,- how is the pleasure of gazing on all enhanced, when you are told that the owner scatters with princely liberality the gifts of fortune; that he is known for miles around as the benefactor of the poor; and that missions abroad and charities at home would feel terribly the blank of his name and generosity!

Or, how a new sunshine seems to light up hall and corridor within, and landscape without;- as, from some oriel window, you gaze on school and church amid the village trees, which Christian munificence has reared, or on smiling cottages, which the open hand and the large heart have built for the aged and infirm to spend the evening of life!

But take another case.

How the dream of delight and satisfaction vanishes, when you enter the drawing-room which wealth has furnished with lavish costliness;- enter it with the roll or subscription-paper in your hand - headed with the urgent claim of a starving neighbourhood, or, it may be, a starving empire;- and from the jeweled hand to which you consigned it, you have it returned with the answer, "I [92] cannot afford it!" Cannot afford it!!

The grotesque figures on wall and tapestry, on slab and pedestal, silently refute the lie. The dumb creations of genius smile blushing and incredulously from their gilded heights. The pampered dog on his velvet couch glances up with reproachful look. The horses standing at the door, fling the foam from their polished bits in sympathetic sarcasm and scorn!

This is not an overdrawn picture.

Such extreme instances may be rare; but such could be photographed from real life. There are such houses with this splendid, selfish misery;- gilded dungeons with cold icicles for their tenants; frigid themselves, and freezing all around; who have abundance to lavish on self, but nothing to spare for their brother man - or the cause of the Divine Brother-man who died for them!

Wealth is an awful trust!

How solemnly will the thought of misspent wealth confront many on a death-bed.

What would Ahab, if time for reflection had been allowed him at the hour of his death,- what would he then have thought of this saying of his manhood - manhood in its prime and glory? - **"Go into the land, unto all fountains of waters, and unto all brooks: peradventure we may find grass to save the horses and mules alive, that we lose not all the beasts."**

We may learn yet farther, *the terribleness of unimproved warnings.*

What a mournful picture have we here. For three years GOD had tried this monarch with sore judgments. He had shut up Heaven, closed the fountains of the land, decimated his people with famine. The voice seemed too loud, too solemn and awful to be disregarded. We might have expected to see Ahab, like the heathen king of Nineveh, put sackcloth on his loins and dust on his head, calling his [93] people to humiliation and repentance.

But, alas! the Divine monition seems utterly disregarded.

GOD has emptied His quiver upon him: but arrow after arrow has bounded back from that heart of adamant. He has neither tear for his own guilt, nor tear for his suffering subjects. So far as we are told, the one miserable, petty thought which fills that narrow soul is, to get provender for his stable, and save his mules and horses.

Ah, terrible, indeed, it is, when judgments thus lead to an open defiance and resistance of the

Divine will; a mocking of His hand, a laughing to scorn of His righteous reproofs: no penitence, no remorse; but rather a more intense selfishness. This miserable king fought against his trial - fought against God,- rushing against the bosses of the Almighty's buckler!

Let those on whom chastisement has been laid remember that affliction itself is no blessing unless it be improved.

It is the reverse. An unsanctified trial becomes a curse. It indurates if it does not soften. It is like the heat of the sun, which melts the wax, but hardens the clay. Affliction never leaves us as it finds us. If it does not bring the soul nearer to GOD, it sends it farther from Him. If the result is not amelioration, it is deterioration. And what then? When the Divine patience has been wearied and exhausted, the irrevocable doom must go forth - "Ephraim is joined to his idols, let him alone!"

For the space of three years GOD had spoken to Ahab by severe judgment; for three years He had blighted his land, and arrested the fall of rain and dew. It was for the same period, the husbandman, in the Gospel parable, waited for fruit on his cumbering fig-tree,- **"Behold, these three [94] years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree and find none; cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground!"** Three years!

Far, far longer than this, may He have been dealing with many of us! dealing by mercies - dealing by chastisements.

What has been the result? Has it been, as in the case of Ahab, only a stouter-hearted rebellion - an intenser selfishness - a deeper love of the world - a life of pleasure, which is a life of death? the guilty cumberer - a cumberer still; robbing the ground of space which others would more worthily occupy;- drinking in dews and sunshine for its own useless existence, which might load other boughs with plenteous fruit, and make the world better and happier.

Can such expect always to be borne with?

Can such dream of continuing to presume on the Divine forbearance? The voice of the Intercessor, in the case of such, may even now be heard, for the last time, pleading with despised and injured Mercy:

"Lord, let it alone this year also: and if it bear fruit, well,- and if not, then, after that, thou shalt cut it down!" [95]

¹ *These were probably "the sons of the prophets"* - or those taught in the prophetic schools or colleges; of whom more hereafter.

~ end of chapter 6 ~
