

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 11

THE ANGEL'S VISIT

"And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold, then an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. And the angel of the Lord came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee. And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah!" (I Kings 19:5-9)

"AND THE LORD SAID UNTO SATAN, THE LORD REBUKE THEE, O SATAN; EVEN THE LORD THAT HATH CHOSEN JERUSALEM REBUKE THEE: IS NOT THIS A BRAND PLUCKED OUT OF THE FIRE? . . . AND THE ANGEL OF THE LORD STOOD BY." (Zechariah 3:2, 5)

"MAN DID EAT ANGELS' FOOD." (Psalm 78:25) [158]

WE return to the lonely prophet, sitting sullen and dejected under the bush of the desert.

"Lo," he had said in his despondency, "**I will wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. I will hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest.**"

Jaded in body and racked in spirit, sleep-nature's great restorer,- "the chief nourisher in life's feast:" overtakes him. He had prayed that he might die; and as his eyes were now closing, he might have wished it were the last long slumber that knows no waking.

But GOD's thoughts are not man's thoughts. "**He giveth his beloved sleep.**" He rocks this petulant child to rest in his desert cradle; but he is to wake with tearless eyes, refreshed, invigorated, gladdened. "**Weeping may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning.**"

Leaving the Seer wrapt in slumber, let us pause and note GOD's tender interest in His people. And this especially in seasons, when we might have imagined they had forfeited all claim on His care and compassion. "He considers their soul in adversity."

As this fugitive from duty is stretched under the juniper tree, with his sheepskin mantle for a covering, lo, a bright angelic being,- probably during the darkness of night - is seen approaching

the sleeper's couch, bending [159] over his sun-browned face, furrowed with fatigue and sorrow.

It is one of those spirits to whom has been assigned the lofty mission of '**ministering to those who are heirs of salvation.**' It may have been one of the very throng who had encamped around the hero-prophet in the day of his triumph. With what mournful sympathy and interest would he now steal to his side, in the hour of his humiliation!

The personal and visible ministry of angels was no strange occurrence in Hebrew history.

In this same wilderness, a thousand years before, Ishmael's cries and Hagar's tears were answered by an angel's directing voice and presence.

A century later, another houseless fugitive from Beersheba had laid him down, like the prophet, amid heaps of rough stones, to sleep. Angelic beings were sent to guard the pillow of the wanderer, and convert the rudest of couches into the gate of Heaven.

Generations after Elijah had been borne to Heaven in his flaming car of victory, a lowlier chariot was seen moving along the neighbouring desert of Gaza.

A dejected but earnest soul was seated in it reading his Bible, and longing to know "**the better way.**" An angel from Heaven comes to the city of Samaria, and instructs Philip the Evangelist to intermit his work and hasten far off to the wilderness to minister comfort to that one lone traveller.

Yet again - in the sea of Adria, an Alexandrian vessel has been overtaken by storm. For days the crew seem abandoned to their fate, drifting along the trough of the maddened sea. GOD has one loved, treasured soul in that ship, and for his sake, lo, an angel from the upper sanctuary is commissioned to speed at midnight; to whisper a word of peace and comfort to the apostle-prisoner. [160]

"**There stood by me that night,**" said Paul, "**the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve.**"

Did the Church need these celestial protectors and guardians only during the period of her infancy and nonage; and did the ministry of angels lapse with the Old Testament dispensation?

Nay; we believe,- though unseen to mortal eye,- though we cannot trace their footsteps nor hear the rustling of their wings,- it is a thoroughly scriptural and comforting truth, (and never more so than in our seasons of trouble), that we are still environed by these bright sentinels from the spirit-land,- hovering, now, over a sick-bed, now, smoothing a pillow of suffering, now, gathered amid the hush of our solemn assemblies, now, mingling with the weeping mourners at a couch of death, and bearing the ransomed soul in its arrowy flight to the upper sanctuary.

It is interesting to think, that no sooner are the gates of the morning opened, than these glorified "**ministering ones**" are abroad on earth on their errands of love and mercy to its waiting crowds. Here is a sorrowing spirit to heal; there is a body of pain to soothe; here is an aged pilgrim struggling in the Jordan, they go to help him through; there is an infant on its tiny couch of

death, they hasten to pluck the bud, to gather the lily, and carry it to the garden above.

But to return to the sleeper. A gentle hand touches him, a gentle voice speaks to him, "**Arise and eat.**"

Partially roused, yet almost unconscious of the angel's presence, the Prophet raises himself from his pillow, and sees placed at his head - (all the provisions which to this day a Bedouin needs)- "**a cake baked on the coals, and a cruse of water.**"

He seems scarcely to have partaken of the provided food [161] when sleep again overtakes him; and then a second time,- probably when morning dawned,- the gentle touch and heavenly voice are heard and felt, accompanied by the additional words- "**because the journey is too great for thee.**"

Now broad awake, the strange celestial form appears before him; and, more impressive and touching to his spirit, the celestial voice falls on his ear.

It must have been like a ray of light breaking through a storm-wreathed sky, this bright messenger giving him the assurance that his GOD still cherished him;- took a tender, loving interest in his well-being;- and, notwithstanding his miserable coward flight, had delegated a special envoy from Heaven to spread a table for him in the wilderness, and whisper to him accents of comfort!

His soul, like that of aged Jacob, revives. 'God cares for me,' is the simple thought which rekindles the smouldering fires on his heart-altar. It is to him better than all the miraculous provision.

He envies not the prophets of the groves, with their dainties at Jezebel's table. He has meat to eat which the world knows not of. The living Jehovah of Cherith and Sarepta is still his.

He has "**found him also in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness,**" keeping him "**as the apple of His eye.**"

The Prophet can make his waking song that of the sweet psalmist of Israel,- "**If I take the wings of the morning and flee to the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.**"

It is the goodness of GOD which still leadeth to repentance. Let every trembling backslider, whose eye may fall on these pages, know the unwearied love with which that GOD follows you, even when, sadder far than in the case of Elijah, [162] you can tell of weeks and months and years of guilty alienation.

He finds you in the deep slumber of spiritual indifference under your juniper-tree;- some miserable, false, delusive, worldly shelter which you have deliberately preferred to "**the shadow of the Almighty.**"

How righteously might He have left you to be a mark for the poisoned arrows of the tempter, and

to have slept the sleep of death!

But He sent His angel of mercy,- some solemn providence, shall we say, that with angel-touch woke you, and with angel-whisper bade you 'arise.' The warning voice was heard; but the warning was but for a moment.

The old drowsiness supervened;- you were locked, as ever, in the dream of spiritual callousness and unconcern. Has He abandoned you to your fate? Has He given His angel the commission, 'Let him alone; let him sleep on now and take the final rest of despair?' Nay, that angel of the Lord, whether wearing the bright shining wings of prosperity, or the sable wings of sorrow, has come, like the messenger sent to Elijah, the second time, and "**touched you;**" -assured you of the loving interest your GOD has in your restoration;- addressed the monitory word, reminding you of the solemn journey before you, but, pointing you to the blessed Gospel provision He has made, it you will only awake and arise!

Yes, "believe, only believe" in the reality of GOD's compassion and tenderness towards the erring;- that no father ever loved his prodigal and desired his return more, than your Heavenly Father desires yours.

The divine Shepherd leaves the ninety and nine, that He may search out the one, truant, wandering sheep; and He goes after it "**until He finds it.**" [163]

Mark farther, not only GOD's interest in Elijah, but His considerate method of dealing with His servant.

He gives him first food for the body. He recruits his wasted, shattered, hunger-stricken frame, before He offers spiritual guidance or counsel. The angel stands by in silence, till the restorative refreshment had been partaken of; and then, but not till then, he speaks to him; gives him directions as to his journey, work, and duty.

There is nothing more striking, did we carefully observe it, than GOD's wise and appropriate adaptation of His dealings to the peculiar state, circumstances, and necessities of His people.

He knows the journey that is before each of them; He knows what storm, in leaving the harbour, the vessel will encounter. And as the best of commentators says on this passage, "He that appointeth what the voyage shall be, will victual the ship accordingly." ¹

Reader, take no thought, no overanxious, fretting, disquieting thought for the future. God will lead you by "**the right way.**"

If the journey be great, the strength needed will be vouchsafed,- "**Thy shoes shall be iron and brass; and as thy day is, so shall thy strength be.**"

Conscious of Jehovah's kindly and beneficent care, and rejoicing in it, Elijah is himself again! He springs from his couch;- and as we behold him, with pilgrim staff in hand, strong in body, and brave in soul, once more speeding along the dreary wastes,- do we not seem to hear the solemn stillness of the desert air broken by the inspired melody of his fatherland! - "**The angel**

of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him and delivereth them. O taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed is the man that trusteth in him."

It was, observe, his at once partaking of the God-given food, which enabled him to set out on his journey.

To us there is a spiritual lesson in this.

Many sit at the foot of their juniper-trees, moping and in despondency:

- musing on their weakness,
- fretting themselves over their past sins,-
- the difficulties and trials of the spiritual journey,-
- and in this presumptuous despair,
- settle down in their old sleep of indifference,
- and perish miserably - the victims of their own unreasonable doubts.

Their inward disquieting thought is, 'How can we possibly live out these desert privations: that simoom by day, these drenching dews by night? Where can we get food in these dreary leagues of arid sand, or drink amid these barren rocks and waterless channels?'

The angel message to all such is, "**Arise!**" - take the provided food; accept the offered Gospel-terms, and trust GOD for all the rest.

He who has provided food, will provide strength for the journey.

Arise! Do the will of GOD, and ye shall know of the doctrine!

This is true Christian philosophy. Act up to GOD's directions - seek to fulfil His will, and in the very doing of that will, unbelieving torturing doubts shall take flight, and by the most convincing of all evidences - the inward, subjective, experimental,- you will be brought into captivity to the obedience of CHRIST.

"**Why liest thou on thy face!**" said the Divine voice to Moses, when he crouched a skeptic at GOD's feet, pointing to the barrier mountains behind and the raging sea in front - "**Speak to the children of Israel, that they go forward!**" - Up, do my bidding; and thou shalt see how I can make my way in the sea, and my path in the mighty waters.'

"**Forward!**" said the rebuked hero, clasping [165] the rod of faith which had been lying forgotten at his side, and rising in the might of Jehovah. Forward they did go; and what was their confession and anthem on the opposite shore? - "**Thy right hand, O Lord, is become glorious in power; thy right hand, O Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy.**"

"**At Thy rebuke, O God of Jacob, both the chariot and horse are cast into a dead sleep.**" "**O Lord God of hosts, who is a strong God like unto thee? Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them.**"

On the Prophet journeys for a long hundred and eighty miles; forty suns rise and set on the desert sands, before he fixes on any resting-place.

Various and conflicting motives, doubtless, had induced him to undertake this lengthened pilgrimage, and ultimately to select the spot where he now takes up his abode. While unquestionably guilty of a lamentable dereliction of duty in thus prolonging his flight; and while fear - unworthy fear and distrust, as we shall presently see - still clung to him and mingled with the better convictions of his newly-awakened soul,- yet he betrays also, in the very selection of his place of retreat, evidence of the recent revival of his faith in GOD, and of the depth and reality of his religious feelings.

His predominating motive, we are inclined to believe, in directing his footsteps to Horeb, was to secure an opportunity of uninterrupted repose, meditation, and prayer; and thereby recruit alike his physical and spiritual strength.

Where could he have discovered a more befitting temple?- where, (with the exception of the sacred city of solemnities - Mount Zion itself) - could he find a nobler oracle of holy thought, than among the [166] hallowed solitudes of Sinai? - those mysterious cliffs which, ages before the Exodus, the wandering shepherds - the Amalekite Arabs - had invested with awful sanctity as "**The Mount of God,**" and, according to Josephus, forbade their flocks to trespass on its luxuriant pastures. ²

But subsequent ages and events had made these haunts more consecrated still. The vivid emotions which we in modern days experience in visiting the Holy Land, must have been shared by the Israelites of Elijah's time with reference to the Sinai desert. It was the Holy Land of that age.

The Exodus and forty years' wandering formed the grandest [167] epoch of their historical annals. The miraculous passage of the Red Sea had been sung and celebrated by inspired minstrels in their psalms, and by inspired seers in their prophetic rolls. Elim, Marah, Rephidim, and, above all, Sinai and Horeb, (Gebel-Mousa and Gebel-Attaka), were names and scenes of imperishable interest.

Imagine the Prophet's feelings, as he approached, in evening light, the majestic summits of "**the mount of God,**" reddened with the fiery glow of the descending sun;- each peak a hoary rugged giant, compared with the old familiar mountains of northern Palestine - in themselves not devoid of grandeur - Ebal and Gerizim, Tabor and Hermon, Carmel and Lebanon.

He wends his way, up the frowning steep, to the cave which to this day bears his name,- probably the same from which his great predecessor saw the "**glory of God.**"

He enters the cavern,- spreads his mantle on the rocky floor, with the determination, probably, to make it for some considerable time his place of abode. He may have uttered in spirit the plaintive prayer of Jeremiah, "Oh that I had in the wilderness a hiding-place of wayfaring men, that I might leave my people and go from them, for they be an assembly of treacherous men."

And if such were his longing wish, it is now fulfilled: he has reached the sacred spot hallowed by

the footsteps of Moses and the voice of GOD.

He would be well content to say, "**This is my rest; here will I dwell, for I have desired it.**"

But his GOD will not leave him long undisturbed in his lonely grotto and in his willful flight. The silent echoes of his retreat are awake as with the voice of thunder, "**What doest thou here, Elijah?**" [168] [page 169 left blank]

¹ Matthew Henry. [164]

² See *Sinai and Palestine*, p. 46; *Dr Bonar's Desert of Sinai*, p. 394. - The following is the extract from Josephus: - "This is the highest of all the mountains thereabouts, and the best for pasturage, the herbage being there good: and it had not been before fed upon, because of the opinion men had, that GOD dwelt there, the shepherds not daring to ascend it."

And again - "He (Moses) ascended up to Mount Sinai, which is the highest of all the mountains that are in that country, and is not only very difficult to be ascended by men on account of its vast altitude, but because of the sharpness of its precipices also; nay, indeed, it cannot be looked at without pain of the eyes, and, besides this, it was terrible and inaccessible on account of the rumour that passed about, that GOD dwelt there." - *Ant.*, b. iii., ch. 5, sect. 1.

I add a note from Dr Bonar's appendix, which he gives in the form of a query, and which is interesting in connection with our Prophet's special mission as the Destroyer of BAAL, the fire-god: "Sinai seems to have been the mountain of Jehovah's true worship; and over against it rose Serbal, the mountain of Baal's worship - long before Israel entered the wilderness. After the '**God of Glory**' (the Shekinah) appeared to Abraham and led him out of Chaldea into Canaan, did He withdraw that glory to the desert, and take up His abode on Mount Sinai, (the hill of Jehovah,) and there gather round that Sanctuary a band of worshippers, of which Jethro was the representative? And did BAL the fire-god (the imitator of the Shekinah) take up his abode on Serbal and gather his worshippers around him there? Was thus the glory of the false worship set up right in view of the glory of the true!" - *Desert of Sinai*, p. 395.

~ end of chapter 12 ~
