

# ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

By

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN THE OLD COURAGE AGAIN

(II Kings 1)

IN order to understand the striking episode before us, we must think ourselves out of this dispensation, the main characteristic of which is gentle mercy; and we must imagine ourselves back in the age that ended at Calvary.

It is very important to have a right understanding of our times. We must not judge the past ages by our own high standards of forgiveness and love, learned in the life and death of Jesus Christ, the last and supreme revelation of God. And we must not import into our own age methods of thought and action which were once permissible and necessary, because cognate to the spirit of their times.

This lesson was once impressively taught by our Lord to His disciples. Fresh from the Transfiguration, He was on His way to the Cross. For some reason He did not take the usual route along the eastern bank of the Jordan; but chose the more direct course through Samaria. Traveling thus, they had probably reached the spot, of which we are soon to speak, which was once scorched and blackened by the cinders of Ahaziah's troops. Below them, in the ravine of the hills, lay a village, to which they sent a deputation, asking for entertainment in the night which was darkening over them. But religious bigotry triumphed over natural feeling; and the request was absolutely refused.

Oh, if they had known that He was about to purchase the redemption of a world, and to institute a religion in which there should be neither Samaritan nor Jew, but one great brotherhood in Himself - they would surely have bade Him welcome, and have pressed Him with hospitality, even though the mighty transaction was to take place within the limits of their hated rival, Jerusalem!

**“And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, Lord, wilt not Thou that we command fire to come down from Heaven and consume them, even as Elias did? But He turned and rebuked them, and said. Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. “**

It was as if He had said, “Remember that in Me you have passed into a new epoch; the affairs of the kingdom of Heaven will be managed on altogether different lines from those with which you are familiar. I shall not destroy the law and the prophets; but I am introducing a code which shall fulfill them after a new and diviner fashion. The new regime of mercy is already begun.”

Let us clearly define to ourselves the difference in the dispensations. This is after the Spirit of the Son, dwelling in the bosom of the Father; that was after the spirit of the servant, clad in ardent zeal for the glory of God. This glows with the lambent fire of the Holy Ghost; that with the devouring fire of destruction. The key-note of this is salvation; of that, vindication. The Old Testament brims with striking teaching of the holiness and righteousness of God.

God, our Father, was as merciful and long suffering then as now; and there were given many sweet glimpses of His loving heart, which became more numerous as the ages brought nigh the incarnation of the love of God. But men cannot take in too many thoughts at once. Line must be on line, precept on precept. And so each preliminary age had some one special truth to teach; and that truth was accentuated and brought into prominence by special proofs and episodes. The age of the Mosaic Law, which shed its empire over the times of Elijah, was pre-eminently the era in which those awful and splendid attributes of the Divine character - God's holiness, justice, righteousness, and severity against sin - stood out in massive prominence; as some of us, from the ancient capital of Switzerland, have seen the long line of Bernese Alps, rising above the plain in distant and majestic splendor, cold in the gray dawn, or flushed with the light of morn and eve.

It was only when those lessons had been completely learned, that mankind was able to appreciate the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Critics - who insensibly have caught their conceptions of infinite love from the Gospels which they affect to despise - find fault with the Old Testament because of its austere tones and its severe enactments; they point out many things inconsistent with the gentler spirit of our times. There is nothing surprising here. It could not have been otherwise, in a gradual unfolding of the nature and character of God. The holy men who lived in those days had never heard the gentle voice of the Son of Man speaking the Sermon on the Mount. They had, however, very definite conceptions of the righteousness and holiness of God, and His swift indignation on sin.

This inspired many of the Psalms in the hymnal of the Old Testament saints. This stimulated them to do deeds from which our gentler nature shrinks. But for this, Levi had never slain his brethren, or Joshua the Canaanites; Samuel had never hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord; and Elijah had never presumed to slay the priests of Baal, or call down fire from Heaven to destroy the captains and their men.

And, as we read these deeds, we may well sink into quiet self-questioning. We need not fall into the extreme of Cromwell and his soldiers, and introduce the speech or acts of those by-gone days into our dealings with the enemies of truth and God. But we do well to ask whether, granting that we forego the outward manifestation, there is the same hatred of sin; the same zeal for the glory of God; the same inveterate enthusiasm for righteousness - as there was in those days of force, and decision, and unswerving righteousness.

These considerations will help us to understand the narrative that awaits us, and will relieve the character of Elijah from the charge of vindictiveness and passion; so that we can consider, without compunction, the rising up again in his breast of something of his old undaunted courage and heroic bearing.

The story is as follows: Ahaziah, the son of Ahab, had succeeded to his father's throne and his father's sins. He shrank in cowardly fear from the hardihood of the camp and the dangers of the field, leaving Moab to rebel, without attempting its re-subjugation, and leading a self-indulgent life in his palace. But the shafts of death can find us equally in apparent security, as amid threatening dangers.

He was leaning on the balustrade that fenced the flat roof of the palace, when suddenly it gave way, and he overbalanced himself, and was flung to the ground. Many are the balustrades on which we lean in hours of peril, which fail us to our hurt!

When the first panic was over, the king was seized with intense longings to know how his illness would turn; and, in a strange freak, he sent messengers to one of the ancient shrines of Canaan, dedicated to Baalzebub, the god of flies, the patron saint of medicine, who had some affinity with the Baal of his parents. This was a deliberate rejection of the Lord; a daring choice of those ways which had brought the wrath of God on his father's house. It could not pass unnoticed; and Elijah was sent to meet his messengers, as they were speeding across the plain of Esdraelon, with the announcement of certain death: "**Thus saith the Lord, thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up; but shalt surely die.**"

The servants did not know the stranger. They may have been imported Tyrians, who had never mingled in the life of the nation, and who, therefore, were ignorant of the mighty prophet of God. Years also had probably elapsed since his last public appearance. However, they were so impressed by that commanding figure and authoritative tone, and so awed by that terrible reply, that they determined to return at once to the king. They found him lying on the divan, the raised platform, covered with cushions, to which he had been carried from the scene of his accident. And they told him the reason of their speedy return.

Ahaziah must have guessed who he was that had dared to cross their path, and send him such a message. But, to make assurance surer, he asked them to describe the mysterious stranger. They replied that he was "**a hairy man.**"

Long and heavy tresses of unshorn hair hung heavily down upon his shoulders; his beard covered his breast, and mingled with the unwrought skins that formed his only dress. It was enough; the king recognized him at once, and said, "**It is Elijah the Tishbite.**"

Two emotions now filled his heart. He wanted, in exasperation, to get Elijah in his power, to vent on him his wrath; and he, perhaps, cherished a secret hope that the lips which had announced his death might be induced to revoke it. He therefore resolved to capture him; and for that purpose sent a captain and a troop of fifty soldiers; and when they were struck down in death, another captain and his band.

These men exceeded their duty; instead of simply acting as the tools and instruments of the royal will, they spoke with an unwarrantable insolence. "**Thou man of God, the king hath said. Come down!**" Either they did not hold him to be a prophet, or they gloried in putting the power of their master above that of the Lord.

In any case, the insult was less against Elijah than Elijah's God.

There was no personal vindictiveness in the terrible reply of the old prophet. I do not suppose for a moment he considered the indignity done to himself. I believe he was filled with consuming zeal for the glory of God, which had been trodden so rudely under foot, and which he must vindicate in the eyes of Israel. **"If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume thee and thy fifty."**

And in a moment the fire leaped from its scabbard, and laid the impious blasphemers low. That there was no malice in Elijah is clear from his willingness to go with the third captain, who spoke with reverence and humility. **"And the angel of the Lord said, Go down with him; be not afraid of him. And Elijah went down with him unto the king."**

*(1) A thought is suggested here of the meekness and gentleness of Christ.*

How wonderful it is to think that He who by a single word could have brought fire from Heaven to destroy the bands that came to take Him in Gethsemane, left that word unspoken. He threw them on the ground for a moment, to show them how absolutely they were in His power; but He forbore to hurt one hair of their heads. It was a marvelous spectacle, which the legions of harnessed angels, who in mid-air waited for a word to bring them to His rescue, must have beheld with speechless amazement. The explanation is of course found in the fact that He was under the compulsion of a higher law - the law of His Father's will; the law of self-sacrificing love; the law of a covenant sealed before the foundation of the world. The only fire He sought was the fire of the Holy Ghost. **"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and what will I if it is already kindled."**

He strove not to avenge Himself, or vindicate the majesty of His nature.

- **"He endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself."**

- **"He was led as a lamb to the slaughter; and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth."**

- **"When He was reviled. He reviled not again; when He suffered. He threatened not; but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously."**

Oh, matchless meekness! Oh, wondrous self-control! Oh, glorious example of the spirit of His own teaching! May grace be given to each of us. His unworthy followers, to walk in His steps, and to emulate His spirit; not calling for the fire of vengeance, but seeking the salvation of those who would do us hurt; dealing out not the fire of Heaven, but those coals of fire, heaped on the head of our adversaries, which shall melt them into sweetness, and gentleness, and love.

*(2) There is also suggested here the impossibility of God ever condoning defiant and blasphemous sin.*

We have fallen on soft and degenerate days when, under false notions of charity and liberality, men are paring down their conceptions of the evil of sin, and of the holy wrath of God, which is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

It is quite true that God yearns over men with unutterable pleading tenderness.

**“He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”**

As there is not a dying sparrow in the recesses of the deepest woods over whose last agonies the Almighty does not bend with sympathetic interest and alleviating tenderness, so there is not one waif of humanity excluded from the warm zone of His infinite compassionateness and tender pity.

- In every outbreak of human sin;
- In the lot of every lost man and woman;
- Over every street fight;
- At every public-house doorstep;
- Amid the blasphemous orgies of every den of impurity and shame
- That love lingers, full of tears, and longings, and entreaties. **“God so loved the world.”**

And yet, side by side with this love to the sinner, there is God’s hatred to his sin.

This longsuffering lasts only so long as there is a possible hope of the transgressor turning from his evil ways. **“If he turn not. He will whet His sword.”**

The wrath of God against sinful men, who have definitely elected their sin, slumbereth only; it is not dead. It broods over them, held back by His desire to give everyone the chance of salvation. They may be thankful, therefore, that their lot has fallen in this parenthesis of mercy. But **“because sentence against their evil work is not executed speedily, therefore their hearts are fully set in them to do evil.”**

Yet the time of forbearance will end at last, as the waiting did in the days of Noah. Then fire will fall, of which the material flame that fell on these insolent soldiers is a slight and imperfect symbol. And it shall be discovered how bitter a thing it is to encounter the wrath of the Lamb, **“when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”**

We need more proclamation of this side of the Gospel.

There is an alarming lack amongst us of the sense of sin. Our vast populations are indifferent to the message of mercy, because they have not been aroused with the message of the holy wrath of God against sin. We need again that one should come, in the power of Elijah, to do the work of John the Baptist; and to prepare men by the throes of conviction for the gentle ministry of Jesus Christ.

The crying need of our times is a deeper conviction of sin. And if this shall be ever brought about, it must be by the religious teachers being led to study the law as well as the Gospel, and to realize for themselves, as they can only do through the teaching of the Holy Spirit, the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

Then when Elijah's fire of conviction has smitten human confidences low in the dust, there will be room for an Elisha to bind up broken hearts with the message of mercy.

(3) *We are also assured of Elijah's full restoration to the exercise of a glorious faith.*

In a former time, the message of Jezebel was enough to make him flee. But in this case he stood his ground, though an armed band came to capture him. It was as if he were able to repeat the familiar words without exaggeration-- "**Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though wars should rise against me, in this will I be confident.**"

And when he was bidden to go down with the third captain to the king, he did not hesitate; though it was to go through the streets of a crowded capital, and into the very palace of his foes.

We are reminded of the entrance of Luther into Worms; and of the remonstrance of Ambrose to the mightiest emperor of his time. Do you ask the secret, and why he was able to stand so calmly beside the couch of the dying monarch, delivering his message, and retiring unharmed? Ah, the answer is not far to seek. He was again dwelling in the secret of the Most High, and standing in the presence of the Lord. His faith was in lively and victorious exercise. He was able to gird himself with the panoply of God's mail, invulnerable to the darts of men and devils. And thus might he have spoken with himself, as he passed through the threatening perils of that crisis: "**By Thee have I run through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall. As for God, His way is perfect. He is a buckler to all those that trust in Him.**"

Is it not beautiful to behold this glorious outburst of the faith of Cherith, Zarephath, and Carmel?

The old man, nearing his reward, was as vigorous in this as in his first challenge to Ahab. He bore fruit in old age, like one of God's evergreens which are full of sap. Glory be to Him who restores the soul of His faltering saints; and brings them up from the grave; and sets them again as stars in His right hand; and deigns to use them once more in His glorious service!

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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