

# ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### RAISING THE WIDOW'S SON AT ZAREPHATH

The portion of the narrative which we have now to contemplate, is a striking exemplification of the saying of our blessed Lord, **“Every branch that beareth fruit, He purgeth it that it may bring forth more fruit.”**

**“And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him.**

**“And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?**

**“And he said unto her, Give me thy son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into a loft, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. And he cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?**

**“And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again. And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, See, thy son liveth. And the woman said to Elijah, Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth” (I Kings 17:17-24).**

Here we have another specimen of God's manner of guidance, and one of those ways which, though wonderfully dark and mysterious, lead us ultimately to a clearer experience of the Divine goodness and faithfulness.

Come, and let us behold a remarkable work of the Lord, with its glorious results. Here is,

- I. The pruning of a branch that bore fruit;
- II. Its bearing more fruit;
- III. The satisfaction and joy that ensued.

## I. We still find the prophet Elijah in the peaceful and humble dwelling of the widow of Zarephath

He has now passed several months in this quiet retirement. Praise and prayer, holy discourse and offices of kindness, contemplation of God's Word and Works, occupied his swiftly-gliding days; and these were blessed with renewed manifestations of divine lovingkindness and tender mercies.

Now, we are certain that many among ourselves would be ashamed of what they would consider such an inactive, quiet sort of life, made up of nothing but receiving and enjoying, so that they would reproach themselves for it, and seek again, as soon as possible, the scene of labor and activity.

Elijah was not so intent upon laboring for the meat that perisheth. He had long ago renounced, as vain and absurd, the notion that any value can attach to cares merely human, whether for laying up treasure upon earth, or for acquiring a treasure in heaven by our own supposed meritorious services! He knew that all which men can receive out of God's treasure is a simple and free gift of the most unconditional favor; and therefore he left it entirely with his Lord, whether he would appoint him a goodly heritage in the land of Goshen, under the vine and fig tree, or station him in the desert, or in the midst of militant hosts; all that he desired was to spend and be spent in his service.

**"The will of the Lord be done,"** appears ever to have been his watchword. Whether called to public activity and conflict in his cause, or shut up in privacy, as at Zarephath; and comparatively laid aside, as to all outward respects, he knew with the psalmist, It is vain to rise early and sit up late without God, eating the bread of worldly carefulness, for that he gives to his beloved when they are sleeping?

Thus did Elijah feel cheerfully resigned to spend his appointed term of quietude at Zarephath, to whatever length it should please God to protract it. O that we all had learnt this childlike disposition. Whoever is circumstanced, as it were, like Elijah at Zarephath; whoever is precluded from outward activity and usefulness in the world by want of means and opportunities, or of gifts and influence by weakness or age, let him think with Elijah, that it is the Lord's hand which has laid him aside; and, instead of inwardly repining, let him keep the noiseless tenor of his way with thankfulness to God. And if indeed he lean on the bosom of the Lord Jesus, and can rejoice in the blessings of God's house, let him sit under his shadow with great delight, and be only the more thankful for it.

Let us not think it necessary to the evidence of our sincerity, that we should be sad and sorrowful, much less gloomy or desponding. Continue at Zarephath, fellow Christian, as long as God pleases. Rejoice whilst the bridegroom is with thee: when once he shall be taken from thee, then the time of fasting will come.

Let us pause a moment upon the perpetual miracle experienced in the widow's dwelling: **"The barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail."**

By whose care was this? By the care of Him who ruleth in the armies of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth. He it was who replenished the cask and the cruse every morning; and thus blessed his children while they were asleep, and before they could have time to say, “**Give us this day our daily bread!**” And are not his mercies equally renewed every morning to ourselves?

How graciously does he, in every respect, provide for us; and how minutely does his providence condescend to our meanest wants! Yes, he is the Saviour of all men, specially of them that believe. What he did at Zarephath, thousands daily experience still, though not just in the same form and manner. And how truly do the children of God experience, in a spiritual way, supplies analogous to those temporal ones which were granted to this Widow! However pressingly their necessities may be felt, still the bread of life is not spent, neither does their spiritual refreshment fail. He takes care “that thy faith fail not. Mark the words—that it fail not. We do not read that whole sacks of meal were brought into the widow’s house, nor that her oil cruse ran over: all we are told is, that “**the meal wasted not;**” she daily received as much as she needed; “**Neither did the oil fail**”

So, perhaps, thou, Christian, wilt not receive any superabundance of believing joyfulness, so as to be enabled to shout for joy in the furnace of affliction: too much would not be good for thee. But rest assured of the faithfulness of thy God, that he will uphold thy faith; this thy compassionate High Priest has implored for thee, as well as for his apostle Peter; and he will daily supply thee with so much patience by daily renewing it, that although thou may occasionally doubt and droop, thou never shalt despair or perish.

A pious writer says, truly and beautifully, “We require just as much patience to wait, as oil is required for our lamps, until the day shall dawn, and the daystar arise in our hearts.”

Delightful, undoubtedly, was the situation of Elijah and the devout widow at Zarephath. But is not usually good that a man’s life should continue flowing on in one and the same easy manner. A long state of prosperity might leave his corrupt nature to become presumptuous and forgetful of its meanness and poverty. Perpetual quietude serves to nourish a false spirit of independence. Long seasons of rest, for sacred musings, are too much open to the intrusion of self-complacency; and therefore, generally, a condition subject to no interruptions or changes is not good for us. Our gracious God knowing this, appoints vicissitude of some kind or other for his children, and pours them, as it has been said, out of one vessel into another, that they may not settle on their lees which would only sour and corrupt them. A change of this sort now awaited the favored family at Zarephath. The immediate reason of it is known to God only.

Unexpectedly, in the midst of cheering blessings, a heavy cloud darkened the peaceful cottage. Alas! The widow’s son, her only child, doubly dear to her in consequence of his wonderful preservation from imminent death by famine, “fell sick.”

The sickness increased every hour, and the distress of the poor mother was extreme; but her tears prevailed not. Her delight and hope, the dearest object she had on earth, lay extended in the arms of death. How hard! How severe, according to outward appearance! And yet there was nothing but mercy in this event.

Our gracious God intended that this bitter medicine should produce the most salutary effects. It is true that **“No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them that are exercised thereby”** (Hebrews 12:11).

## **II. For what general purpose, then, was this painful visitation sent?**

We may ask such a question, though we must never pry too minutely into the reason of every thing that befalls us; for now we can know but in part. We cannot interpret all God’s dealings at Present. His way is in the sea, and his path in the great waters. Clouds and darkness to us are round about him, but of this we may be assured, that **“all his works are truth, and his ways judgment,”** Or righteousness; and we shall see this more clearly in a better world. At present, we must simply believe and trust in our faithful God, in the midst of our obscurity and darkness.

Yet, in this visitation at Zarephath, his gracious intentions may be guessed at. The widow, we may well believe, was a person of real piety; but then, as it would seem, as in the manner of Lydia, before the Lord opened her heart; or like Cornelius the centurion, and some others. They were acquainted with God in a partial and too superficial manner: they held communion with him, but not enough upon the true foundation. They served the Lord, but more in the way of Martha than in that of Mary. They knew something of God’s lovingkindness, but not enough of his grace; not being sufficiently convinced of their own sinfulness, the corruption of their own hearts, and of the immensity of that grace which the Lord had bestowed upon them.

Their religious feelings were probably more natural than spiritual: yet they possibly regarded such feelings with too much confidence, as a proof of their piety; and when we do this, we are hindered in self-knowledge, we deceive ourselves, and remain injuriously ignorant of the relation in which we stand to the God of all grace. In short, they were well affected to godliness in general, but still too far off from God, ignorant of a Mediator and Intercessor, and not enough broken and contrite in heart.

Now, it is a mercy not to be suffered to remain in this condition, for it partakes more of self-deception than of truth. In order, therefore, that this good widow might enter fully into the kingdom of God, it was necessary that the Holy Spirit, who had prepared her heart already, should enable her further to see that God’s love is grace—unmerited grace, for the sake of another’s work—another’s merits. But how could this salutary and humble self-knowledge be conveyed to her heart; and how could it be formed into a vital principle? Two invisible guests break in upon her: the Lord and the Spirit.

- The one visits the widow’s house, the other her soul.
- The one inflicts the blow, the other expounds it.
- The one slays her son, and the other makes her sensible of the reason why, namely, that she may know more of herself.

Hence her language to Elijah,

**“O thou man of God! art thou come to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?”**

See what an overthrow takes place in her spirit. **“Thou art come unto me, that my sin might be remembered.”** It seemed to her as if God had now for the first time looked into her heart:(and indeed it is good to be sensible of his discernment of our inmost souls—to be sensible how entirely all things belonging to us are naked, opened, and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do. But many a one, alas, when convinced of this, will still endeavor to make the best of himself in his own eyes. And if he succeed not in so doing, yet he will seek to escape from self-reflection amidst the diversions of surrounding vanities: still, however, he finds no true repose of mind. Thus affliction upon affliction is often necessary for bringing sin to remembrance, that sinners may be effectually awakened, and made alive unto God.

That something of this kind was seen necessary by the God of all grace for the poor widow at Zarephath, seems pretty evident from her exclamation under his chastening hand; **“What have I to do With thee, O thou man of God? Art thou come to me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son?”**

This is certainly strange language; but, as the language of her heart and feelings, it is very significant. Is it not as if she had said, “Why didst thou come to me? I have reaped this from thy visit that my sins are brought to remembrance and a sense of them overwhelms me. Thou art such a holy man, that neither I nor my house were worthy to entertain thee. Hence God has seen it necessary to punish me for being so bold, and for acting so familiarly with thee, as if we had been thy equals. Surely it is thy coming that has brought all this upon me. A merciful God would not have scrutinized so strictly a poor woman and an insignificant worm like myself, if he had not found me in thy society—if thy abiding with me had not drawn his attention upon me. Ah, why shouldst thou have come unto me! Surely the Lord would not have approached so near to such a poor sinner as I am, if thou hadst not brought his awful presence into my house; for he is always with thee.”

She intended to express something of this kind. Alas, what absurd ideas! And yet, with all this foolishness, what genuine feeling—what self-annihilation—what humility! God’s object is gained—The triumph of truth is won!

### **III. And now behold the bereaved parent, bowed down with grief and misery**

She is sitting with the dead child at her bosom, as if she would again warm his stiffened limbs at her throbbing heart. She weeps at one time for her bereavement, and at another for the multitude of her sins, and knows not which of these distresses her most. Pitiably indeed is her condition! And the prophet we may be sure is touched with heartfelt compassion and sympathy. He probably perceived the design of this visitation, and perceiving also the good effect of it, he delayed not to make preparations for allaying her anguish. He said unto her, **“Give me thy son.”**

This composure on the part of the prophet must have been impressive to the distressed widow. Surely a ray of hope must have gleamed within her. But will Elijah be able to gratify the hopes he is exciting?

The prophet is sure of the thing in his own mind. He takes the little corpse from the mother's bosom, hastens boldly with it up into his bedchamber, which no doubt was also his closet for retirement and prayer, lays it upon his own bed, shuts the door, falls on his knees, and applies himself to prayer and to communion with the Lord!

And now, listen! What a prayer it is which he pours forth! It is a prayer that certainly would not pass uncensured by us—that certainly would not escape the criticism and the condemnation of our wisdom, had we heard it from the mouth of any other than such a one as Elijah.

**“O Lord my God!”** cries he, **“hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?”** What! Does Elijah speak before the living God, of bringing evil; and does he venture to approach God's throne with such a question, and with such a complaint? Yes: he speaks as his heart dictates; and if he speaks foolishly—he does it in simplicity, and in faith; and if he pleads too familiarly with God—He does so, encouraged by the blood of the Lamb and the promises of God. It is not for us to censure him, for his prayer was accepted of the Lord. Yet what was its purport? **“Lord! Didst thou care to slay this child? Impossible! Thy purpose was to lead the mother through affliction to repentance. This, O Lord, having been accomplish, must the child continue dead? Look, O blessed God, upon this widow graciously, and remember thou that I am her guest. She has shown much kindness unto thy servant: I would gladly recompense her. Do thou recompense her, for I am poor and have nothing. And O! Remember also am thy prophet. If I am reproached, thou art approached also. Therefore, that thy name may be hallowed, and thy praise magnified upon earth, now, O Lord, hear my prayer.”**

And having thus expostulated, as it were, with the Lord God, he arose, threw himself upon the dead child, and stretched himself upon it three times, as though he would say, **“I will not leave the child, but will await God's answer to my prayer;”** and he cried unto the Lord and said, **“O Lord my God! I pray thee let this child's soul come into him again;”** a prayer you perceive quite positive and unconditional. And what followed upon this holy boldness in prayer? **“The Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived.”**

But how does this agree with our notions and maxims concerning acceptable prayer? Here we have, as I have said, an unconditional prayer—a prayer too for something temporal—a prayer for a miracle—a prayer without limitations; yet the Lord heard and answered it. Yes, our gracious God does not bind himself to our maxims, suffer himself to be limited by our rules.

**“O Lord my God!”** cried Elijah in his upper chamber, **“let this child's soul come into him again!”**

**“I will,”** was virtually the answer he received. And the soul of the child came back; the child began to breathe, and lifted itself up and left the couch of death. And Elijah—with what feelings you may readily imagine—took the child down from his chamber and delivered him to his mother, and in one sentence, short and sweet, as his manner was, said, **“See, thy son liveth!”** He left it to the Holy Spirit to say to her the rest. But how shall I attempt to describe the feelings of the poor widow?

She sees heaven as it were opened to her, and this not merely in the restoration of the child, who was now alive again in her arms, but also quite in another way. Indeed she cannot yet speak of her child.

“**Now by this I know,**” she exclaimed, “**that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth.**” The Word of the Lord! What Word of the Lord was it that Elijah had spoken to her?

This may be easily conjectured. We find here, at the close of the narrative, a new key to the whole. It would seem that Elijah had said something to her, during their acquaintance, which she had hitherto been unable to comprehend or believe, it is not difficult to suppose what it may have been. Elijah had probably soon perceived that the woman, with all her piety, was still not resting upon the true foundation; and he had doubtless availed himself of the peaceful days at Zarephath to make her acquainted with the counsel of God for the salvation of sinners—with the doctrine of the promised Messiah—with the merit of his redemption which he should one day accomplish—with the necessity of faith in him, and with other matters of holy living and conversation connected with it.

These were, it would seem, strange things to her ears, which she knew not how to appreciate, but put them aside, because she as yet felt no need of them. A sense of this need of a Mediator, and of an atonement, was now powerfully awakened in her heart after she had become, through sanctified afflictions, convinced of her sinful and guilty condition; and Elijah’s word concerning the atonement and pardon extended to sinners through the merits of the promised Surety, had now, by this renewed testimony to Elijah’s prophetic commission, become unquestionably assured as Divine truth to her soul, so that she could heartily yield herself up to it, and rejoice and be glad in it. And this new faith, confidence, joy, and blissful hope she expressed in the words, “**Now I know that thou art a man of God and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth.**”

“I know, I feel, I see, I taste, the true and faithful saying.” Henceforth she stood upon other ground; from being a devout person, she was now evinced to be a daughter of Abraham’s faith. And at the moment when Elijah said to her, “**See, thy son liveth,**” her heart was fitted to say something greater still— “**I know that my Redeemer liveth!**” Here was repose after a storm.

Natural self—that which is born of the flesh—is heir only to wrath and condemnation. All our labor expended upon ennobling the “**old man with his deeds,**” is labor thrown away. However corrupt nature may set itself off, however devoutly it may conduct itself, it remains corrupt nature still; and it is outlawed by the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. It is the accursed thing which must be put away. It must be slain at the foot of the cross. No amendment of it will save us from condemnation. God’s eye regards not its form, but its nature. Nothing can be approved in his sight but the new creature in Christ Jesus.

The wise builder commended to our imitation by our Great Teacher, digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock. That rock is Christ. They who are taught by him, and led by his Spirit, are taught and led to rely only on his meritorious obedience unto death, as the all-sufficient atonement for their sins, and to open their ear and their heart to all his instruction and discipline.

And upon this sure foundation is raised the superstructure of all their earnest expectations and blessed hopes of everlasting life.

Ye, therefore, my brethren, who have set yourselves to build, take heed that ye thus build upon Christ the sure foundation. He that with the heart believeth on him, shall never be confounded; but, remember, he purifieth our hearts by faith, and our own lives must give proof of this, to the praise of the glory of his grace, to whom be all glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

**~ end of chapter 4 ~**

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