

# ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE MANIFESTATION ON MOUNT HOREB

The children of God in this world are in close and wonderful connection with Christ, their head, and with each other. This connection consists not merely in the unity of their sentiments, faith and conduct; the communion of saints is a deep and blessed mystery, and is very properly distinguished as one of the articles of the Christian faith.

Our blessed Lord speaks of believers as one, in a unity like that which subsists between the Father and himself as man. In various places of Scripture they are represented as composing one body, united to their glorious head, Christ Jesus. Thus Paul says, First Corinthians 12:26, 27, **“Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” “If one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it.”** He also extends this representation further still, and calls the union amongst them a mystery.

Now those to whom this mystery is in any measure unfolded, find it an invaluable treasure, O it is one of the most consoling, one of the most refreshing truths of the Gospel, that all who believe are one. Let the consciousness of this mysterious unity and fellowship accompany us to the scene which we are now about to contemplate, and lead us to rejoice in the glorious and gracious manifestation of God granted to the prophet Elijah upon mount Horeb, as an exhibition of kindness vouchsafed not to him alone, but to us also, as members of one body in Christ.

**“And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?”** (I Kings 19:11-13).

Need I say, my friends, that it is a majestic scene to which we are now approaching? It is an event as richly significant, and as abundantly consolatory as any we meet with in the annals of God's servants.

Let us then,

- I. Consider it in its historical course;
- II. Inquire into its immediate object.

**I. “Go forth,” it had been said to Elijah, “and stand upon the mount before the Lord”**

The prophet hears it, and leaves his cave; and no sooner is he gone forth, than signs occur which announce to him the approach of the Almighty. The sacred historian here, indeed, depicts in simple language a most sublime scene.

The first sign was a tremendous wind. Just before, probably, the deepest silence had prevailed throughout this dreary wilderness; all is now in the most dreadful uproar about him. The mountain tempest breaks forth, and the bursting rocks thunder as if the four winds, having been confined there, had, in an instant, broken from their prisons to fight together. The clouds are driven about in the sky like squadrons of combatants rushing to conflict. The sandy desert is like a raging sea tossing its curling billows to the sky. Sinai is agitated, as if the terrors of the law-giving were renewed around it. The prophet feels majesty of the Lord; it is awful and appalling. It is not a feeling of peace, and of the Lord’s blissful nearness, which possesses Elijah’s soul in this tremendous scene—it is rather a feeling of distressing distance; **“a strong wind went before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind.”**

The terrors of an earthquake next ensue. The very foundations of the hills shook and were removed. The mountains and the rocks, which were rent by the mighty wind, threaten now to fall upon one another. Hills sink down and valleys rise; chasms yawn, and horrible depths unfold, as if the earth was removed out of its place. The prophet, surrounded by the ruins of nature, feels still more of that Divine majesty which **“looketh upon the earth, and it trembleth.”** But he still remains without any gracious communication of the Lord in the inner man. The earthquake was only a second herald of the Deity. It went before the Lord, **“but the Lord was not in the earthquake.”**

When this had ceased, an awful fire, no common fire, passes by. Elijah, lost in adoring astonishment, beholds the awfully sublime spectacle, and the inmost sensation of his heart must have been that of surprise and dread; but he enjoys as yet no delightful sense of the divine nearness; **“the Lord was not in the fire.”**

The fire disappears, and tranquility spreads gradually, like the stillness of the sanctuary, over all nature; and it seems as if every hill and dale, yea, the whole earth and skies lay in silent homage at the footstool of eternal Majesty. The very mountains seem to worship; the whole scene is hushed to profound peace; and now he hears **“a still small voice.”** And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, in token of referential awe and adoring wonder, and went forth, and stood at the entrance of the cave.

**II. If, now, we inquire into the peculiar signification and primary intention of this Divine manifestation at Horeb, we can hardly remain long in doubt about it**

It seems that the Lord intended thus to lead the prophet out of a variety of doubts and sorrows in which he had lost himself. Outward events had appeared to him quite enigmatical; and his inward thoughts were very confused and painful. He had lost his clue to Providence in the unexpected turn of events which the kingdom of God in Israel had suddenly taken.

It was in God's name, and by his commission, that he had forsaken his native mountains of Gilead, and had gone to Samaria to recover backsliding Israel to the faith of their forefathers. The means for such a work had been placed in his hands by God himself. It was given him to shut heaven and to open it again. He had performed signs and wonders, such as had not been done in Israel for centuries, and had labored as abundantly as any saint before him. From such exertions Elijah expected to witness effects produced; and he probably hoped for nothing less than a penitent return of the whole people to the Service of the Lord. The fervent man of God, however, erred in his calculation.

The result of his faithful labors, which had been wrought in God, corresponded not with his hopes, but proved just the opposite to them. At the very moment when He had hoped to lead back the regenerated people with psalms and hymns of rejoicing, to the altar of the living God, he sees himself exposed to danger in every direction, and his labor appears to have been in vain. Such things were too mysterious for him, and he could not reconcile them with his present ideas of God.

This doubting state of mind had been augmented in the solitary cave at Horeb, and had now attained its height; when the majestic signs—the wind that rent the mountains—the earthquake and the fire—passed before him, but the Lord was not in them, nor in any one of them. Elijah did not derive from them those spiritual blessings which are mentioned by Paul, in First Corinthians 10:1-4, as having been given to the fathers who **“were baptized the cloud and in the sea; who did all eat the same spiritual meat, and did all drink the same spiritual drink; for they drank of that spiritual Rock which followed them; and that Rock was Christ.”**

None of these blessings were typically expressed or conveyed in the tremendous manifestations given to Elijah. He did not, nor was it intended that he should obtain from them a single crumb of that spiritual food, or a single drop of that spiritual drink. They were not the means of any sweet union between his soul and his God, or of any gracious communication. He only felt himself overwhelmed, in an awful manner, by the greatness and majesty of God, and by a sense of his own infinite distance from him; and all this wrought neither love nor peace in his spirit, but served rather to make it shrink into bondage, and to produce that state of mind which Isaiah and Job felt, when the former said, **“Woe is me! I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips;”** and the latter, **“Thine eyes are upon me, and I am not.”**

But how very differently did the prophet feel, when, after this tumult of the elements, he heard that small still voice which gave to his terrified spirit a taste of the gracious lovingkindness of his God! His experience surely must then have been like that of the seventy elders, who saw the God of Israel in the very same desert, and in the same place, Exodus 24:10, 11, and on whom **“he laid not his hand.”** His presence did not destroy or consume them, but only refreshed and delighted them.

A happiness so ineffable seems now to have been given to Elijah. The Lord now “**loosed his hands;**” his oppressed heart was “**set at liberty.**” All within him rejoiced at God’s gracious nearness; he felt the tender mercy of the Lord; he covered his face with his mantle, and was willing to lay himself down at the feet of his God, and to give himself up more decidedly than ever to him.

He had heard in the strong and mighty wind an echo, as it were, of the dreadful reproofs and words of thunder with which he had struck the consciences of the people of Israel. The earthquake represented the plagues and judgments which he had inflicted upon the country. The fire would remind him of the flames of Carmel, and of the bloody exertion of which it had been the signal.

In this way Elijah appeared as another Moses with the burning torch of the law—a herald of God who is not to be mocked. But the zealous prophet was mistaken in promising himself, from this procedure, results which never accompany the thunders of the law, but are only wont to be coupled with the still small voice of the Gospel.

What had he expected? Nothing less than an immediate penitent return of all Israel to the God of their fathers. In this hope he went too far. He was not justified in cherishing such expectations; and it was this that was to be brought to his mind, in a convincing manner, on Horeb. Amidst the terrible phenomena which passed before him, he was to be taught, in a lively manner, that the manifestation merely of the power and majesty of God, where its burning brilliance was not tempered by grace, might certainly inspire the sinner with anxiety and terror, but could not really humble and convert him.

He was to become conscious by it that the demonstration of infinite holiness, unassociated with “**the kindness and love of God, our Saviour,**” can only overawe and repel; but is by no means adapted to produce contrition, or penitential confession, or to incline the heart to the Lord with fervent affection. He now better learnt that what especially softens, melts and converts the soul, is only grace and the enjoyment of it; and that the blessed results, which he had anticipated from the thunders of the law and the divine judgments, could only be produced by the lovingkindness and tender mercy of the Lord.

In the significant occurrences on Horeb, the pleasing prospect was further to be unfolded to him, that the Lord, who had not yet finished his work of reformation in Israel, would, in due time, after the earthquake, storm and fire, come also with the voice of the gentle whisper, which the hearts of men would then be unable to resist, and which would bow down the mighty; and with what joy must Elijah have laid hold of this promise!

But was his labor in Israel a lost labor? Had it been superfluous and useless? By no means! The prophet was to learn that, just as the terrible signs he had seen on Horeb had not been unavailing to himself, but had made him more susceptible of the gracious and gentle whisper that followed them, and increased his desire for the manifestation of the lovingkindness of God, so in like manner, the Lord would point out to him that his prophetic exertions in Israel had not been without salutary consequences.

They had prepared the hearts of the people for impressions of another kind; and thus he was taught that his peculiar vocation, generally speaking, consisted in ploughing up the hardened soil of their backsliding minds; in presenting the forgotten law in all its majesty before their eyes; in awakening the sleepers, and terrifying the secure with the thunders of the law, and thereby exciting amongst them an earnest desire for the Gospel, and a hunger and thirst after the righteousness which is by faith, that it might be by grace.

Thus Elijah had his scruples and difficulties cleared up; and in what a wonderful and glorious manner! By this single divine act, the ways of God were fully justified to his mind; the mystery was brought, in a gentle but most convincing manner, to a sense of his mistakes; and whilst on the one hand the honor of God was gloriously vindicated, the prophet on the other hand was deeply humbled, and constrained with all his heart to confess, **“Thou, Lord, art righteous; but unto me belongeth confusion of face!”**

And even though Elijah, soon after, repeated the complaint, it was then in a totally different spirit from that in which he uttered it before. It proceeded then from a humbled mind. The gloomy vexation, the disturbed temper, the inward strife and murmuring, had all disappeared. The jarring discords of his beclouded mind were dissolved, and harmony was restored in his soul.

Thus, my friends, I have endeavored to give you some explanation of those mysterious events which took place on Horeb, at least with respect to their immediate meaning and object. That this history has remained enigmatical to so many readers, may probably arise from the excessive, or rather let me say, improper ideas they formed of the sanctity of our prophet. They viewed him as a being that was no longer liable to human errors, and incapable of deviating from the path of divine simplicity, and of humble, filial, and unreserved submission to his Lord.

But Elijah was a man **“subject to like passions as we are”** (James 5:17). He was also not yet entirely free from what we all inherit from Adam; and the key to the wonderful conduct of the Lord towards him on Horeb, is to be looked for, not in the prophet’s perfection, but in his infirmity.

Yet, after all, how great must Elijah have been, that for his reproof and instruction, heaven and earth are moved, as it were; the rocks rend, and the mountains fall; and how must the mighty God have loved him, to make him an object of condescension!

Thus we find here a trace, and a beautiful one it is, of evangelical instruction in Horeb, in the vicinity of Mount Sinai itself.

Though the office of Elijah was rather secondary to that of Moses, than (like that of his illustrious antitype, John the Baptist), precursive of Christ, still it comprised the elements **“of good things to come.”** And could this holy prophet have unbosomed himself fully, according to the tenor of that evangelical character which shines through the veil of his awful severity, and according to the tenor of that **“still small voice”** which he heard, doubtless he had enough within him to have cheered the hearts of thousands.

But the time for such things was not arrived. The people among whom he resided were not ripe for such disclosures; hence he had to keep his faith almost to himself before God, and to merge the office of an evangelist in that of a terrible reprove.

Here then we leave Horeb, not without refreshment and blessing. May the Lord God, who is good and gracious, faithful and ready to forgive, incline to us all with the still small voice, and may our whole life be, in one sense, like the standing of Elijah before him with his face wrapped in his mantle! Amen.”

**~ end of chapter 13 ~**

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