

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RENEWED MISSION

One of the most affecting and consoling narratives of the Old Testament, is that of the wonderful preservation of Moses in his infancy (Exodus 2:1-10). Lo, at the brink of the Nile, among the reeds, there floats a small ark or basket, made of bulrushes, and carefully secured from leaking by cement of slime and pitch. For a treasure indeed lies concealed in it—a goodly infant, acceptable to God, and dear and precious to its mother above everything in this world: she has therefore thus secured it, that in its floating cradle it might if possible escape the destruction which Pharaoh’s cruel sentence had denounced upon all the newborn males of Israel.

A mother’s love had prepared this infant’s couch, with many silent tears and unspeakable anxiety; and while it lies there, in peril on the waters, the sisterly love of Miriam fixes, her in sight of it to watch its fate. God’s providence brings the daughter of Pharaoh to the banks of the river, who, noticing the strange object, sends of her maidens to fetch it.

“And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews’ children. Then his sister to Pharaoh’s daughter, Shall I go and call unto thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee? And she said, Go. And the maid went and called the child’s mother. And Pharaoh’s daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages.”

Thus, by the divine disposal, were the mother and the child again brought together.

Much spiritual comfort is derivable from this narrative. We who belong to Christ are hidden as it were in an ark, which cruelty cannot penetrate, nor the floods of the ungodly submerge. But many of us, like the infant Moses, who lay in the ark and wept, know not how safely we are thus preserved.

Many of us float upon the waves of this troublesome world, in the region of the leviathan and the piercing serpent, amidst many anxieties and terrific apprehensions. But, remember who watches over thee, O Christian believer! If thou perish, the eternal love of God must perish too: for into that ark hast thou been received, and none shall pluck thee out of the Saviour’s hand. Nor shalt thou float upon the waters for ever.

Be of good cheer: though thou see nothing but night and death before thee, the providence of God, the Keeper of Israel, is nigh thee to watch over thee, as over all the Israel of God. The portion of sacred history now to be considered, will show how needless are all our distracting cares and anxieties.

“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? And he said, I have been very jealous for the LORD God of hosts: because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

“And the LORD said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus: and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria: And Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel: and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay” (I Kings 19:13-17).

This part of the narrative presents at first sight much that is strange. It seems to have no spiritual connection with the great event just before related, but rather to be at variance with it. Who, for instance, would have expected that the prophet should renew his former complaint, or the Lord should dismiss him with commissions and disclosures like these?

Yet it only requires a consideration of the matter, to elucidate most satisfactorily what thus is doubtful and obscure.

Let us,

- I. Take another glance at the manifestation on Horeb;
- II. Listen to the prophet's complaint;
- III. Pause and consider the instructions he received;
- IV. Inquire into the nature of those commissions with which the Lord dismisses him.

I. The majestic scene of wonders on Horeb has already passed before us, and its meaning has been in some degree developed

It depicted the character of the Old Testament dispensation, and the office of the law as our schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ; while, in the **“still small voice,”** we discern the gentle whisper of Gospel grace. Thus we are enabled to see these grand occurrences as taking place not for Elijah's sake only, but for ours also; and we must not leave them without at least a glance at their rich and general import.

The Lord often comes to those to whom he graciously reveals himself, as he came to Elijah on Horeb. Has your own experience furnished nothing similar?

Do you know nothing of the storm which he sends before him, as it were, rending the mountains; of the earthquake, which subverts everything within us, and casts down imaginations; of a fire of terror and dread which precedes the Lord of glory? Are your rocks still unbroken? Have your heights not yet been cast down, nor the deceitful ground of self-righteousness and self-sufficiency removed from under you? And yet you imagine you have heard the gentle voice of grace! You are not perhaps aware that the father of lies approaches men occasionally as an angel of light, and whispers smooth things in their ears.

This destroyer is able to pervert the promises of God into the snares of death, and he considers those secured as his prisoners, who suffer themselves to be caught by his false assurances of Divine favor! O tremble at the artifices of the old serpent; and remember, that the comforter who seeks to quiet your conscience without mortifying your flesh, is not the Lord, but the wicked one! For Jesus does not draw near with his still small voice, without first overthrowing every high thing that exalts itself against him, and subverting the power of the old man within us.

- **“Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life.”**
- **“Many shall Seek to enter in, and shall not be able.”**

Seeking is not sufficient here—it must be striven for. The new creation within us rises upon the ruins of the old and corrupt nature. Wherever grace builds, it first pulls down and it is by bringing to nought things that are, that God makes out of us what we by nature are not.

There was, some years ago, not far from this place, a very gifted preacher, who for several years preached with great earnestness and success the doctrine of the cross; but who, on that very account, was violently opposed. One of his opponents, a well-informed person, who had for a long time absented himself from the church, thought, one Sunday morning, that he would go and hear the man once more, to see whether his preaching might be more tolerable to him than it had been heretofore.

He went; and that morning the preacher was speaking of the narrow way, which he did not make either narrower or broader than the Word of God describes it. “A new creature in Christ, or eternal condemnation,” was the theme of his discourse; and he spoke with power, and not as a mere learned reasoner. During the sermon the question forced itself upon this hearer’s conscience, “How is it with myself? Does this man declare the real truth? If he does, what must inevitably follow from it?”

This thought took such a upon him, that he could not get rid of it amidst any of his engagements or amusements. But it became from day to day more and more troublesome; more and more penetrating; and threatened to embitter every joy of his life; so that at last he thought he would go to the preacher himself and ask him, upon his conscience, if he were convinced of the truth of that which he had lately preached. He fulfilled his intention, and went to the preacher. “Sir,” said he to him, with great earnestness, “I was one of your hearers when you spoke, a short time since, of the only way of salvation. I confess to you that you have disturbed my peace of mind, and I cannot refrain from asking you solemnly before God, and upon your conscience, if you can prove what you asserted, or whether it was unfounded alarm.”

The preacher, not a little surprised at this address, replied with convincing certainty, that he had spoken the Word of God, and consequently infallible truth.

“What then is to become of *us!*” replied the visitor. His last word, *us*, startled the preacher; but he rallied his thoughts, and began to explain the plan of salvation to the inquirer, and to exhort him to repent and believe. But the latter, as though he had not heard one syllable of what the preacher said, interrupted him in the midst of it, and repeated, with increasing emotion, the anxious exclamation, “If it be truth, sir, I beseech you, what are *we* to do?”

Terrified, the preacher staggers back. “*We!*” thinks he, “what means this *we?*” and, endeavoring to stifle his inward uneasiness and embarrassment, he resumed his exhortations and advice. Tears came into the eyes of the visitor; he smote his hands together like one in despair, and exclaimed in an accent which might have moved a heart of stone, “Sir, if it be truth, *we* are lost and undone!”

The preacher stood pale, trembling, and speechless. Then overwhelmed with astonishment, with downcast eyes and convulsive sobbings he exclaimed, “Friend, down on your knees, let us pray and cry for mercy!” They knelt down, and prayed; and shortly afterwards the visitor took his leave.

The preacher shut himself up in his closet. Next Sunday, word was sent that the minister was unwell, and could not appear. The same thing happened the Sunday following. On the third Sunday the preacher made his appearance before his congregation, worn with his inward conflict, and pale, but his eyes beaming with joy, and commenced his discourse with the uprising and affecting declaration that he had now, for the first time, passed through the strait gate.

You will ask what had occurred to him in his chamber during the interval which had elapsed. A storm passed over before him—but the Lord was not in the storm; an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake; a fire—but the Lord was not in the fire. Then came a still small voice on which the man enveloped his face in his mantle and from that time knew what was the gospel, and what was graced.

No sooner was Elijah favored with the still small voice, than he wrapped his face in his mantle. This is an emblem of the Christian’s state of mind, who veils his face with humility and overwhelming abasement before God. The law fills him with apprehension; the knowledge of sin casts him down to the ground; but the holy shame, the deep and silent contrition, which is so pleasing to God begins to be felt when the Lord has come with his still small voice.

Behold, it is said in Ezekiel 16:62, 63, “**I will establish my covenant with thee; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord; that thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy alarms when I am pacified towards thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God.**”

O yes, when such a whisper of the most unmerited mercy breathes upon us, our high looks are lowered—our lips are silent—we are overwhelmed with shame. But it is shame without distress; it is a trembling without slavish fear; it is a humiliation replete with love and blessedness.

O how well-pleasing is it to the Lord! We have already seen the prophet in various positions. We have seen him clothed with strength and intrepidity, contending like a lion with God's enemies; we have seen him in the tempest, with undaunted front, like a rock in the sea, unmoved by the winds and waves—but surely he never appeared more noble and amiable than here on Horeb, when at the still small voice of divine peace he bowed his mighty spirit, and, trembling with confusion and delight, wrapped his face in his mantle.

II. We further read, that he then went forth and stood at the entering in of the cave

He does not yet appear to have fully understood the meaning of these wonderful manifestations. And, while he stood there, **“behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?”**

This question, repeated the second time, seemed to direct him back to the scene of activity. We should have supposed that he would not have needed to be thus aroused again, but would, after such a gracious experience as had just before been given him, have hastened back, with winged feet, to the work of reformation. But instead of this, he breaks out again, to our astonishment, into his former complaint; as if the wonders God had shown him had been ineffectual.

“I have been very jealous,” he answered, **“for the Lord God of hosts; the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”**

The manifestations of God's grace to Elijah had been suited to convince him that his labors in Israel had not been in vain; but though he might now be ready to say, **“Lord, I believe,”** he had still to complain and cry, **“Help thou mine unbelief!”**

His anxious spirit would still gain further satisfaction, as to the manner *how*, the time *when*, and means *whereby* the Lord's intimation would be fulfilled: and no sooner do his thoughts recur to the grievous and desperate state of things in Israel, than a feeling of gloom returns, and he pours complaint as before.

Believing in darkness, on God's bare word, where nothing like a fulfillment of the promise is to be seen, is certainly a great and glorious thing, by which God is honored; and O that such a faith were more frequently found amongst us! Alas, even where true faith really exists, it is but generally in a state of conflict, and seldom triumphant and perfected.

You find yourself, for instance, in a critical situation; the cares of this life and domestic embarrassments press you down; you can see no outlet—every human prospect of help is vanished. You now get an insight into the promises of God; **“I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,”** **Fear thou not, I am with thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands!”** You know that He who thus speaks addresses *you*, and that his word is truth. You take the word, as a staff in your hand; you hope the best where, to all outward appearance, there is nothing to hope; you believe in the dark. This is believing on the Word of God. But have we generally such a faith as this?

III. Elijah is told to depart in faith

“Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus!”

He receives a threefold commission from the Lord, and with it strength to his faith, and provision for his journey.

“When thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria.” This is a reply to Elijah’s first complaint, **“The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant.”** **“I will appoint them a rod of correction,”** is the Divine answer.

“Hazael, the servant of the Syrian king, shall go through the briers and thorns for me. Go, and anoint him to be king over Syria!”

Hazael afterwards became king, and a severe scourge to the children of Israel. He did them great injury, burnt their fortified towns, slew their young men, and barbarously treated those whom nature in its most savage state might have pitied. He served the Lord as the staff of his indignation, and was one of the storms which were to go before the Lord, overturning the mountains and rending the rocks; and, when he had finished his work, he was laid aside.

Thus the Lord knows how to make use of the vessels of wrath; at one time as channels, through which he pours forth his indignation upon those who have not known him, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon his name; at other times he uses them as shepherds’ dogs, that only serve to keep his flock together, and to bring back the wandering sheep.

Brethren, who knows what our own churches have still to experience? We are at present evidently under divine forbearance; can any one of us say how long it will last? It cannot be expressed how much mercy has already been expended upon us. Yet how many are there who really thank God, and are heartily devoted to his Service? How would it be, if the Lord were suddenly to remove all his true children from the midst of us, and leave the impenitent to themselves. Would our population suffer a very perceptible decrease? Or is not the case with ourselves, as it is everywhere else; that the little flock of Israel amongst the Canaanites is like a drop in the ocean, and like the little stars, which, in a tempestuous night, twinkle only here and there among the black and stormy clouds.

Are not a great part of our people dead? Yes, though many of them hear the sound of the Word of life. This is very awful! For years together they have assembled in our congregations, but they seem only less and less sensible of the value of revealed truth. They have no hunger and thirst after it; no relish for it. Yea, neither the thunder of the law, nor the sound of its trumpet has any effect upon them; nor does the sweet melody of divine grace, and of the promises melt their hardened and worldly hearts. Many of our people are lukewarm—neither for nor against—neither cold nor hot; they hear the words of Christ, but they do them not. Surely, if they continue in this state, he will reject them with abhorrence. A great part of our people praise Christ and the world with the same breath; they bow themselves before God and mammon in the same ceremony.

They desire to be merry with the children of this world, and to be blessed with the children of God; they wish to possess Christ, but will not, for his sake, part with the world. Such is by far the majority of persons amongst us, whether high or low, rich or poor. What will be the consequence of all this? May the Lord have mercy upon us! For if we go on in this way, nothing but evil can be prophesied concerning us!

The patience of God has an object, but we are defeating it. Who knows whether it may not soon be said to some angel in heaven, "Go now, and appoint this or that man for an Hazael; and let this deceiver, or that son of deceit, be placed over such and such a church! Who knows, whether the preachers, who now stand in your pulpits, may not be the last who shall ever offer the Gospel of peace to our unthankful churches, and whether the destroyers are not already training under the hand of Satan, and only wait for our departure to take possession of our places with the torch of the false prophet in their hand, kindled from the bottomless pit!

Perhaps, in a few years, all prophesyings amongst you will be at an end; the people will have become foolish and dissolute; the Lord's flock will be taken away, and his fire extinguished to the very last spark. And when the righteous are removed from amongst us, and no holy hands bear up the ark any longer, its overthrow and ruin must be the result!

"O that thou hadst known, even thou in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace!"

Yet forty years, and perhaps our Ninevehs will be overthrown; and wherever **"the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together!"** Awake, therefore, and sit down in sackcloth and in ashes; let each turn himself from his evil way, and from the iniquity of his hands. Who can tell if God will not turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not!

Thus Elijah was to anoint Hazael, a stranger and foreigner, to be king over Syria, that he might become a scourge to Israel.

His second commission was to anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi, one of themselves, to be king over Israel. This was an answer to the prophet's second complaint, **"They have thrown down thine altars and slain thy prophets."** As if God had said, **"I will vindicate mine own glory; the house of Ahab shall be desolate, and Jehu shall be the axe to its roots!"** And it so came to pass.

Jehu was the man that rooted out the house of Ahab from the earth, so that neither stump nor stalk was left. He caused Jezebel to be thrown from the window of her palace, and suffered her carcass to be trodden down as mire in the streets. He slew the seventy sons of Ahab in one day, and caused their heads to be displayed in two heaps at the gates of the town of Jezreel; destroyed the priests of Baal in their own temple, cast the holy vessels belonging to it into the flames, and made an end of the worship of Baal in Israel.

Such was the end of Ahab's house; and similar instances have been seen in modern times.

Even in our days, there is no want of examples of the rooting out of entire houses and families, because they hardened their hearts against the Lords, and bitterly opposed his children and servants. Though these ungodly families may flourish for a season, like a green bay tree; and though they be permitted for a while to gratify their enmity against the people of God, who have done them no harm; yea, before they are aware, the scene is reversed, some destroyer brandishes the sword of vengeance.

One fails in business, and comes to beggary, with his whole house. Another, given up to the will of his flesh, sinks miserably into the filth of sin. One must flee away branded with ignominy; and another is brought, by degenerate children, with sorrow to the grave. One is smitten with madness; another is delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh; or, overwhelmed with despair, with his impious right hand destroys himself.

The babel of worldly prosperity cracks to its very foundations; and, where the Lord breaks down, there is no building up. An evil impenitent death—that awful finishing of temporal judgments—is only the first step to that sequence of terrors which no grave can close upon. The castaways go with Judas to their place, and their names are mentioned no more upon earth, or mentioned only with abhorrence. Has anything of this kind ever happened amongst us? Answer this question for yourselves, my friends!

One thing I know, that still many a house of Jezebel exists among us, which must one day have to give an account for their mockery at true piety, and their opposition to the children of God: and that, except they repent, they will in that day judge it more tolerable for them to have been bound to a millstone and drowned in the depths of the sea, than thus to have offended God's little ones.

The third commission which was given to Elijah, must have been to him the most pleasing of all. It contained the answer to his third complaint, that he Was left alone, and they sought his life; and it was as if God had said, “Be not cast down, Elijah, thou art not the only one that is left; and, if thou wert the only one on the field of battle, thinkest thou not that I could raise up prophets when I need them?”

“Go, and anoint Elisha the son of Shaphat, of Abelmeholah, to be prophet in thy room. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay: and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.”

Thus a great and strong wind, that should rend the mountains and break in pieces the rocks before the Lord, is announced against backsliding Israel in the person of Hazael; an earthquake in the person of Jehu; and, in the person of Elisha, a fire of the wrath as well as of the love of the Lord.

Elijah now sees the Keeper of Israel has not forsaken his vineyard. This instruction invigorates him in body and soul; and when, in addition to this, he hears from the Lord's mouth the surprising information that there are still seven thousand who had not bowed their knees to Baal, the gloomy cloud upon his mind is entirely dissipated, and nothing prevents him from joyfully setting out in faith to give glory to God.

My brethren, if a sword of the Lord be to pass through this congregation—and a sword will surely come—O that it may not be Hazeal's or Jehu's sword, but the sword of Elisha—the two-edged sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of the living God! This good sword, with which he takes the prey from the mighty, may the Lord sharpen more and more, that it may better do its office amongst us, and cut, and divide, and penetrate in a greater degree than it has hitherto done!

May it cast down the proud into the dust—drive the carnally secure from their refuges of lies—so cut away self-righteousness and so wound them that are whole, that they may resort only to Jesus for healing!

Gird then thy sword upon thy thigh, O Most Mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty; and in thy majesty ride prosperously, because of truth, and meekness, and righteousness; and by thine arrows let the people fall under thee! And may the people which are left of the sword find grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when thou goest to cause him to rest! Amen. Psalm 45:3-5. Jeremiah 31:2.

~ end of chapter 14 ~

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