

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

J. R. MacDuff, D.D.

Copyright © 1864

Chapter 13

THE SEVEN THOUSAND

"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 Abel-meholah, 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. Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him." (I Kings 19:13-18)

"AND THE ANGEL OF THE LORD APPEARED UNTO HIM IN A FLAME OF FIRE OUT OF THE MIDST OF A BUSH; AND HE LOOKED, AND, BEHOLD, THE BUSH BURNED WITH FIRE, AND THE BUSH WAS NOT CONSUMED." (Exodus 3:2)

"FOR I, SAITH THE LORD, WILL BE UNTO HER A WALL OF FIRE ROUND ABOUT, AND WILL BE THE GLORY IN THE MIDST OF HER." (Zechariah 2:5) [186]

THERE is a striking analogy between GOD's proclamation to Moses in a former age, when He spake to him out of the cloud on the top of Sinai, and that made to Elijah now, in this sequel to the manifestation in Horeb.

In the former, the revelation of the Divine attributes, as "**merciful, gracious, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and in truth,**" was followed by the solemn averment of Jehovah's unsullied rectitude and holiness, as "**the Punisher of Sin,**" - "**and that will by no means clear the guilty.**"

The similar revelation of "**the still small voice,**" made to Elijah from the same stupendous Rocky Oracle, is succeeded by a like declaration; only, not enunciated, in his case, as a general truth or principle; but in the form of a commission, as "**the Prophet of Fire,**" to prepare the two human instruments for the infliction of Divine vengeance on a guilty people and their reigning monarch.

He was commanded to anoint one of these to chastise the nation by the sword; the other, to be

the uprooter of Ahab and Jezebel's iniquitous throne, and the exterminator of their gross idolatries. "**Anoint Hazael to be king over Syria, and Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel; and it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay.**"

GOD is a GOD of love - the utterer of "**the still small voice;**" - but it is a love tempered by justice and unswerving hatred [187] of iniquity. While "**mercy and truth go continually before His face,**" "justice and judgment are the habitation of His throne."

We shall, however, in the present chapter, confine ourselves to the comforting assurance vouchsafed to the Prophet regarding the present, which accompanies the message of wrath; reserving the assurance regarding the future, for a separate chapter.

His own sorrowful plaint respecting that present was, "**I, even I only, am left.**" "**Nay - not so!**" says the living Jehovah, before whom he stands;- "**Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.**"¹

Erroneous as Elijah's conclusions were, let us, nevertheless, try to realise his emotions at this moment of his history, as he is still but half-awake from his dream - only partially as yet roused from his fit of hypochondria. He was haunted by that depressing feeling, which hundreds know so well, of utter loneliness and isolation in entertaining heart-convictions of truth;- misapprehended, misunderstood, vilified, with no kindly human voice to cheer him in his hopeless task.

It was this, among other things, which made the pillow under his juniper tree, a few weeks before, moist with bitter tears,- that there was no eye to weep with him and no heart to comfort him;- "**I, even I only, am left,**" a solitary pillar amid the crumbling ruins - a solitary bird, wailing in the desert with plaintive note, without one responsive echo!

There is a yearning, in every human heart, for sympathy. This is specially the case in the prosecution of a great [188] cause or arduous work; and all the more so if it be a holy work.

How Paul in the midst of his gigantic labours longed for it, and how he valued it when received!

- How he mourns the absence of Titus, and how, until he finds this young brother, "**his Spirit had no rest!**"
- How he welcomes the sympathizing convoy at *Appii-forum*;
- how the gloom of his prison hours is cheered and lightened by the loving presence and loving words of Epaphroditus, Onesiphorus, and, above all, Timothy!

Nay, see how a Greater than Paul yearned for human companionship in his unsolaced hour. See, in Gethsemane's Garden, with what earnest tones the Divine Redeemer charges the disciples - "**Tarry ye here and watch with me?**"

If we read the annals of many a missionary in pagan lands, we shall be able to estimate somewhat of Elijah's heavy burden at this time. Again and again, in their instructive diaries, do

these self-denying soldiers of the cross tell us how awful and oppressive - nay, (the word is not too strong,) how agonizing often to their spirits is the thought of feeling and standing alone amid these millions of benighted heathen; no one to share the crushing load of anxiety, to cheer their faith and help their prayers - "**I, even I only, am left!**"

In the case of our Prophet, GOD tells him his conclusions were false.

Seven thousand earnest spirits were in Israel, linked with him in bonds of hallowed sympathy;- seven thousand who were in secret sighing and crying over the abominations of imported heathenism - ready, as he was, to die a martyr's death, rather than do homage at the shrine of the Sidonian god.

We may learn from this declaration of GOD to Elijah, in [189] reply to his complaint, never to take too gloomy or desponding a view of the position and prospects of the Church. However reduced in number and influence and piety the Church of GOD apparently may become;- however feeble the spark, it cannot be quenched - it cannot die.

The true Israel often and again have been reduced to the lowest ebb; - the bush burning with fire ready to be consumed; but the living GOD was in the bush, and defied the destroying flames.

Witness, in the days of Noah, when all "**the remnant according to the election of grace,**" was contained in an ark of Gopher-wood;- eight souls, all that linked the antediluvian and patriarchal believers. Yet that ark (true symbol of the living Church within) rode triumphant through tempest and storm.

Witness the Church in the apostolic days, when a handful of trembling hearts met for prayer in an upper chamber in Jerusalem;- their influence nothing; their Master gone;- the world against them. Yet the stone "**cut from the mountain,**" gathered strength as it bounded along, crushing in its course the venerated idolatries of centuries, and establishing itself into a kingdom that shall never be destroyed!

Witness the Church of the middle ages,- hunted down, persecuted, "**destitute, afflicted, tormented,**" driven to one small asylum amid munitions of rocks, in the Alpine Valleys of the Vaudois. Or in a later century, when the darkness was deeper still, and when one brave, outspoken man, previously alluded to as "the Elijah of his times," - denounced with trumpet-voice the abounding corruptions, and awoke Europe from the slumber of death into new and glorious life!

In these ages, as in our own, and in every age that is to come,- however sad the [190] degeneracy, and apostate the faith,- there was, and there will ever be, a pious remnant, a blessed leaven that will preserve the mass from corruption and decay.

Elijah, in his moody, moping melancholy, had no memory to recall Obadiah and the fifties he had been hiding in the caves of Israel; pious, lowly, humble ones, who were weeping in secret over the abominations of the land. Besides, he had been judging of the power and progress of true religion by a false standard.

He had been taking his estimate from the jubilee of Carmel; just as many now do, from loud Shibboleths - flaming zeal - display of party.

GOD forms His, from the lowly faith and love of His own hidden ones;- those seven thousand whose hearts are open and known only to Him who seeth in secret. Let us not, then, be among the number of those who, like Elijah, would take too gloomy a view of the times; who can see nothing but the exterminating sword of Hazael and Jehu;- the disastrous demolition of all churches, and the breaking up of all creeds; who, anticipating such lawless times, would leave in despair churches to decay and perish,- just as they would leave a wrecked, vessel to go to pieces on the sands or rocks where it has drifted,- instead of using every effort to get it disentangled,- restore its shattered hull, replace its shattered timbers, and set it once more afloat on the waters.

"Uproot! - destroy!" - that is too often man's gloomy, destructive policy,- man's cure and panacea for evil;- fling the reins on the courser's neck;- abandon the steam engine to its mad, unchecked career,- to carry terror and destruction in its course."

"Nay," says GOD, "mine is a nobler conservative philosophy":- "**be watchful and strengthen the things that remain that are ready to die!**"

Despite of [191] all ominous and threatening signs of the times,- though infidelity with flaunting banners, and philosophy with skeptic pride, and profligacy with brazen brow, and crime with stained dagger, and Mammon with his hydra-head, holding all classes spell-bound with imperial sway; - though all these singly and combined should bode evil and disaster,- threaten to bring our altars into jeopardy, and cause many an Eli to be seated on the wayside trembling for the ark of GOD:- yet, fear not; that ark is in safe custody.

There are ever, and there are now, faithful hands to guard it;- a holy leaven permeating the mass of society;- the true gold, undiscernible in the dross, but which will come to light in the time of refining;- true filings of steel, which, from the bed of dust, will leap to the attracting magnet. Even though witnessing in sackcloth, GOD will have His witnesses still.

Oh, amid the sickening, harrowing tale of the world's corruptions and miseries, and the Church's lukewarmness and apostasy,- let us ever think of the loyal seven thousand who are keeping the fires of judgment in check,- arresting the angels in the outpouring of the prophetic vials. And even should darker days come, as come they shall,- when iniquity shall abound, and the love of many wax cold;- there will ever be a breakwater of "living stones," that will prevent an utter overflow of the destroying flood and subversion of the old landmarks.

The Church of CHRIST, ransomed with His blood, cannot die. "**God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved, the Lord shall help her, and that right early.**" "**I have left Me,**" says He;- that is the guarantee of the Church's indestructibility;- He will not suffer His own work to perish. [192]

And to individual ministers of CHRIST there is a comforting and encouraging lesson, too, in all this,- in their relation to their individual flocks, as well as to the Church universal; never to despond in their work. It may be growing, when they know it not. They may be mourning in secret that all they do is vain and ineffectual.

They may go home from their pulpits with aching and saddened hearts; feeling that their words are powerless,- their success marred,- their usefulness impeded,- their congregations pulseless - lifeless - dead. Not so. There may be work, unseen and unknown to them, going on in many a heart.

- Souls arrested, stricken, comforted;
- humble hidden ones wrestling for them and their work in secret;
- characters moulded through their teaching;
- noble resolves made and registered in the sanctuary under the words of eternal life.

The sermon they thought least powerful,- (perhaps aimless and purposeless) - lo! some dying lip whispers with its latest breath - "These words were the first that went like an arrow to my heart, and taught me to think and to pray."

They may have no Carmel heights, with their pomps and splendours. It matters not. Give them rather the lowly seven thousand scattered in the caves of Israel; holy hearts - simple faith - obedient lives. "**Who hath despised the day of small things!**"

Arising from the lesson just drawn, and suggested by it, we may farther learn to *beware of harsh judgments on our fellow-men and fellow-Christians.*

There was unwarrantable self-sufficiency in Elijah - so boldly averring, "**I, even I only, am left!**" It was not for him, ("**the man of like passions**") to make so sweeping and unqualified an assertion,- repudiating [193] the faith of others, and feeling so confident of his own.

The worst phase which self-righteousness can assume, is when we constitute ourselves religious censors; and on the ground of some supposed superior sanctity say, with supercilious air, "Stand back, for I am holier than thou."

Elijah's feeling has developed itself in modern times in denominational exclusiveness;- sect unchurching sect.

- One saying - "**I alone am left.**" I alone am "the Church," because of apostolic descent and sacramental efficacy.
- Another, "**I only am left,**" because I am joined in a holy and scriptural alliance with the State, and Caesar is my friend.
- Another, "**I only am left,**" because I am independent of all State control, and have no friend in Caesar.
- Another, "**I only am left,**" for congregations around me are asleep, and mine only has undergone revival and awakening.

Nay, nay; hush these censorious thoughts and hasty party-judgments. "**Who art thou that judgest another?**"

Who art thou so ready to spy out the mote in thy brother's eye, and seest not the beam in thine own? We believe the judgment of GOD in this, as in other things, is in accordance with truth.

- He penetrates beneath all this narrow sectarianism.
- He sees His seven thousand clustering in the varied caves throughout Israel.
- He sees them in the cave Episcopalian, and the cave Presbyterian, and the cave Independent;
- He sees the High Church cave, and the Low Church cave.
- He sees some of these seven thousand in places visited by outward and visible signs of awakening.
- He sees some in the calm, unexcited throng of ordinary worshippers.
- He sees some under the fretted aisle of cathedrals.
- He sees others in the lowliest and least adorned of village sanctuaries.
- He sees some carrying the music of Heaven [194] in their souls, "amid dusky lane and wrangling mart."
- He sees others in cottage homes of lowly obscurity, or on beds of lingering pain and sickness.
- He sees one in the hoary-headed saint, waiting for his crown.
- He sees another in the little child lisping its evening prayer by its mother's knee!

There has ever been, and ever shall be, "a hidden Church." "**The kingdom of God cometh not with observation.**"

There is often pure gold in the coarsest-looking ore;- there is often the rarest pebble in the most rugged rock;- there are often the loveliest flowers in the most tangled brake or remotest dell We have the less ground for pronouncing harsh and severe judgments, when we think of the variety in mental temperament and constitutional character: this diversity prompting, in some cases, to loud expression on the subject of Christian experience; others, with undemonstrative reticence, keeping, like the lowly virgin mother of Nazareth, all these things locked up in their hearts.

In a garden, we cannot refuse the epithet of "beauty and fragrance" to the violet, because it buries its head in its own lowly leaves; while the pretentious rose or lily at its side, is standing upright, and flinging a less delicate perfume on the passing winds.

We cannot unchristianize a man, because he prays when others talk; and because, when he gives, he charges the left hand to keep the right in ignorance of its doings,- while others are tossing their ostentatious gift into the treasury.

The dark murky clouds and weeping skies, muffle and obscure many a bright and beauteous star. So the dingy clouds and mists of our own censorious and false judgments lead us often to think dimly and darkly of many a true Christian.

"When we come to Heaven," says good Matthew Henry, in commenting [195] on this passage, "as we shall miss a great many whom we thought to have met there; so we shall meet many whom we little thought to have met there. GOD's love often proves larger than man's charity, and more extensive."

Doubtless, when Elijah, leaving Horeb, went forth on his return journey, he did so with bitter reproach for his own self-sufficient ignoring of others as faithful as himself GOD had assured him that he was not the solitary hero he imagined himself to be. He had brought him down from his pedestal of pride, and shown him seven thousand pillars supporting the roof, of which he had

thought he was the single column and monolith.

The time was when he might have been offended by such plain speaking. He would have been so, perhaps, had the fact been told him as he slept on his pillow of self-sufficiency under the juniper tree. But he is now a humble, softened, altered man. The "**still small voice**" has taught him to hear and to bear anything. If his GOD only be glorified and Israel bettered, he cares not whether he be alone, or his faith be shared by thousands. Would that all of us could imbibe the meek spirit infused by the "still small voice" of Gospel love;- "**In lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than themselves!**"

Let us gather yet another lesson from this comforting assurance of GOD to Elijah;- it is the first time we have drawn it from the Prophet's past history,- the influential power of a great example.

Elijah's feeling was, that he was alone; that he had toiled, and witnessed, and suffered in vain; that in vain he had uttered his high behests; borne publicly his testimony to the living Jehovah; lived his life of [196] faith, and self-denial, and prayer.

His saddening thought was, that he was now going to end a useless, fruitless, purposeless existence; that, for all he had done in the cause of Divine truth, he might still have been roaming a freebooter, or pasturing his flocks as a Shepherd in his native Gilead. 'Nay,' says GOD, to this mighty harvest-man, seven thousand souls have been reaped mainly by thy sickle.'

His silent prayers had not ascended from his rocky oratory at Cherith in vain. The bold protest uttered by "the Prophet of Fire," before Ahab, denouncing the court idolatry, had kindled the smouldering embers of hope, and courage, and piety, in many a Hebrew household. His heroic example had put fortitude into many a faint heart. Ah! how many amid the thousands of Israel, could have repaired to his Horeb cave, to give the lie to his saying, "**I, even I only, am left!**"

Wherever there are brave, bold, honest, upright, God-loving hearts in this world, there is sure to emanate (there must emanate) a silent, it may be,- but yet a vast influence for good.

"No man liveth to himself." What may not a word do! - a solemn advice! - a needed caution! That youth, coming for the first time into town, fresh from the hallowed precincts of home, and from the incense of the domestic sanctuary, to grapple with unknown temptations;- what may not a kindly word, a kindly deed, a kindly interest effect, in snatching him from the edge of the precipice, and confirming his moral and religious principles for life!

And here too, lies one of the vast powers of the pulpit.

There are words sown there (little seeds wafted to many a heart-plot,) which take root and grow for ever. Talk of the great Painters! [197]

GOD's ministers are these;- mighty limners of the truth, decorating the halls and walls of the immortal spirit with frescoes for eternity. Ay, and this page in Elijah's history tells us that there is no such thing in the case of the Great and the Good as failure!

Great heroic deeds may, for the time, be eclipsed, overborne; but, like the river of Egypt, lost in

the sands, they will emerge, in due season, to roll on in an augmented volume to the ocean. That was apparently a grand failure at Carmel - that bold hero-deed.

It ended in crushing disappointment. The brazen gates of Jezreel were ignominiously shut on the champion Prophet; an insulting message was hurled at his honoured head; he fled discomfited, panic-stricken, weary of life, to the bleak desert! - Nay, not a failure: cheer thee, O Prophet of Fire! for seven thousand brave, and good, and true, are in these distant hills of Samaria, thanking GOD for thy bold heart and example!

That was apparently a grand failure, as we see a prisoner in the Mammertine dungeon of the world's old capital,- his limbs cramped with the chain, his body shivering in the winter's cold,- his lips sealed in silence!

That was apparently a grand failure at the Colline gate of Rome, as we see this feeble, decrepit missionary, led along to the place of execution; and, with one stroke of the fatal axe, the head of the hapless victim rolling dishonoured in the dust! - Nay, not a failure: cheer thee, O Paul of Tarsus!

Thy glorious life has stirred the pulses of the world;- these footmarks on the sands of time, no wave of oblivion can ever obliterate;- the echoes of thy mighty voice shall circulate and reverberate to time's latest day!

Let us each strive to do our duty in our varied spheres, [198] nobly, usefully,- with an eye to GOD's glory and the good of others;- and then, though life should seem at times to be a failure,- our plans crossed, our purposes thwarted, the bright sunset of vermillion and gold all at once blurred and obscured in drizzling mist and rain;- we shall not, we cannot have lived to no purpose!

Some of the seven thousand we have aided by our counsels, or prayers, or example, will gather round our grave, and let fall the unbidden tear.

One of the great and the good of modern Elijahs,- an illustrious minister - who was wont to declare the truth with all Elijah's power; but who, with Elijah's temperament, as life's shadows were closing around him, was bewailing want of success,- glad to leave the scene where his work seemed discouraged - motives misapprehended - all a failure: would that he had seen the sequel; when the skeptic and the infidel of the town, who had trembled under his faithful words, came forth to bear his coffin on their shoulders to the tomb!

"**I, even I only, am left.**" Hush, hush the thought. You may not have even seven, of But, O man of GOD! that one converted skeptic, in humble attire, wiping the drops of labour from his brow, and the tear from his eye, as he bears thee to thy last long home! Oh, this - this forbids the word "failure" among thy dying utterances.

The presence of that one mourner proves:- thou hast not lived, thou didst not die in vain! [199]

¹ *Kissing the idol on the mouth and chin was usual in the worship of Baal.*
~ end of chapter 13 ~