

ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

By

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

LOVING-KINDNESS BETTER THAN LIFE

(I Kings 19)

THE holy Apostle, whose earliest lessons of the love of God were conned as he leaned on the bosom of Christ, tells us, in words deep and simple as some translucent lake, that **“we have known and believed the love that God hath to us.”**

They are wonderful words for mortal to utter. A life-time would be well spent if, at its close, we could utter them without exaggeration. But alas! many of us have learned some of our deepest lessons of the love of God in having experienced its gentle kindness amid shortcoming and failure, like that which marred Elijah's course.

That failure, as we have seen, was most disastrous.

- It inflicted lasting disgrace upon Elijah's reputation.
- It arrested one of the most hopeful movements that ever visited the land of Israel.
- It struck panic and discouragement into thousands of hearts which were beginning to gather courage from his splendid zeal.
- It snapped the only brake by which the headlong descent of Israel downward to destruction could have been prevented.
- It brought discredit and rebuke on the cause and name of God.

A choir of angels might well have gathered around the truant prophet as he lay upon the desert sand, and recited some such mournful words as those with which the sweet Psalmist lamented the death of Saul and Jonathan on Gilboa's fatal field: **“How are the mighty fallen in the midst of battle! O man of God, thou hast tripped to thy fall upon thy high places; we are distressed for thee; how are the mighty fallen; and the weapons of war perished!”**

If ever it were befitting for a man to reap what he had sown, and to suffer the consequences of his own misdeeds, it would have been so in the case of Elijah. But God's thoughts are not as man's. He knew all the storms of disappointment and broken hope which were sweeping across that noble spirit, as gusts of wind across an inland sea. His eye followed with tender pity every step of His servant's flight across the hills of Samaria.

He did not love him less than when he stood, elate with victory, hard by the burning sacrifice. And His love assumed, if possible, a tenderer, gentler aspect, as He stooped over him, whilst he slept. As a shepherd tracks the wandering sheep from the fold to the wild mountain pass, where eagles, sailing in narrowing circles, watch its faltering steps, so did the love of God come upon Elijah, as, worn in body by long fatigue, and in spirit by the fierce war of passion, he lay and slept under the juniper tree.

And God did more than love him. He sought, by tender helpfulness, to heal and restore His servant's soul to its former health and joy. At His command an angel, twice over, prepared a meal upon the desert sand, and touched him, and bade him eat. No upbraiding speeches; no word of reproach; no threats of dismissal; but only sleep and food, and kindly thoughtfulness of the great journey which he was bent on making to Horeb, the mount of God. It makes us think of Him who, in after days, prepared in the early morning, upon the shore of the lake, a breakfast such as wet and weary fishermen would love - there was a fire, and fish laid thereon, and bread. And He did this for those who, following the impulsive lead of Peter, had apparently determined to wait no more for His coming, but to return to the boats and fishing-tackle, from which He had called them three years before.

It may be that these words will be read by those who have failed.

You once avowed yourselves to be the Lord's, and lived for a little on the uplands, where the golden light ever shines upon the happy spirit; or you professed to enter the blessed life, and you did taste its joys, and experience its liberty and victory; or you have stood up to teach others, stirring them to deeds of heroic courage and daring. But all that is over now.

You have fallen, as Milton's Archangel, from Heaven to hell. We need not now discuss the cause of your failure: you were overtaken in some sudden temptation; or you neglected communion with God; or you refused to live up to your light. But the sad fact remains, that you have failed; and perhaps failed, as Elijah did, where everyone expected you to stand. And you are ashamed; you want to hide yourself from all who knew you in happier days; you have given up heart and hope, and lie dejected and dispirited on the desert sands; you account yourself forsaken by God and man.

But remember, though forsaken by man, you are not forgotten of God. He loves you still, and pities you, and yearns over you; and waits beside you, with loving tendance and provender, in order to restore your soul, and give you back the years that the canker-worm and caterpillar have eaten.

We have then, in this incident, four thoughts of the love of God which must be a comfort to us all, and especially to those who have fallen from Carmel's height to the level of the desert sands.

I. GOD'S LOVE IN ITS CONSTANCY

It is a fact which we all admit, but which we seldom realize in the moments of depression and darkness to which we are all exposed.

It is not difficult to believe that God loves us when we go with the multitude to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, and stand in the inner sunlit circle; but it is hard to believe that He feels as much love for us when, exiled by our sin to the land of Jordan and of the Hermonites, our soul is cast down within us, and deep calls to deep, as His waves and billows surge around.

It is not difficult to believe that God loves us when, like Elijah at Cherith and on Carmel, we do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word; but it is not so easy when, like Elijah in the desert, we lie stranded, or, as dismasted and rudderless vessels, roll in the trough of the waves.

It is not difficult to believe in God's love when with Peter we stand on the mount of glory, and, in the rapture of joy, propose to share a tabernacle with Christ evermore; but it is well-nigh impossible when, with the same Apostle, we deny our Master with oaths, and are abashed by a look in which grief masters reproach.

Yet we must learn to know and believe the constancy of the love of God. We may not feel it. We may deem it shut up and gone forever. We may imagine that we have forfeited all claim to it. We may think of it as Arctic travelers, dying in the icy darkness, dream of the summers of early childhood, which they shall never see again. But nevertheless, it has not altered; staunch as the affection of a friend, true as the love of a mother, the love of God abides unchangeable as Himself. Mists, born of the swamps and marshes of your own sin, obscure the light of that sun: but it is shining yet as brilliantly as ever; and will shine on till it has dispelled all shrouding veils, and bathes you again in its warm and blessed glow.

O man of God, lying amid the wrecks of what might have been, take heart! hope thou still in the love of God; trust in it; yield to it; and thou shalt yet praise Him, who is the health of thy countenance and thy God.

II. GOD'S LOVE MANIFESTED IN SPECIAL TENDERNESS BECAUSE OF SPECIAL SIN

We do not read that an angel ever appeared to Elijah at Cherith or Zarephath, or awakened him with a touch that must have been as thrilling as it was tender. Ravens and brooklets, and a widow woman, had ministered to him before; but never an angel. He had drunk of the water of Cherith; but never of water drawn by angel hands from the river of God, which is ever full of water. He had eaten of bread and flesh foraged for him by ravens, and of meal multiplied by miracle; but never of cakes molded by angel fingers. Why these special proofs of tenderness? Certainly it was not because God took any pleasure in His servant's sin, or condoned his grave offense; but because a special manifestation of love was needed to convince the prophet that he was still dearly loved; and to soften his spirit; and to lead him to repentance.

Where ordinary methods will not avail, God will employ extraordinary ones. There is one memorable instance of this, which has afforded comfort and hope to multitudes who have sinned as Peter did, and who will bless God forever for the record of the Master's dealings with His truant servant.

The Lord sent a general message to all His disciples to meet Him in Galilee. But He felt that Peter would hardly dare to class himself with the rest; and so He sent to him a special message, saying: **“Go tell My disciples, and Peter.”** It is thus that JESUS is working still throughout the circles of His disciples. So eager is He to convince the fallen of His unaltered love, that He will go out of His way to show it.

- He will invent new and unwonted surprises.
- He will employ angels with their gentle touch; and bake special cakes on desert stones.
- He will send special messages, entwined about the backslider’s name.
- He will take the wandering sheep on His shoulder to bring it home;
- He will kill the fatted calf and call on the angels of His presence-chamber to make merry and be glad.

It may be that you are sleeping the sleep of insensibility or of despair; but all the while the love of God is inventing some unique manifestation of its yearning tenderness. He hates your sin, as only infinite holiness can. He yearns over you as only infinite love can. He wants to convince you of what He feels; to touch you; to soften you; to win you back to Himself. All the while that you are grieving Him, and wandering from Him, He is encompassing you with blessings. Be conquered! Yield to Him! Take with you words, and turn again unto the Lord. He will receive you graciously.

III. GOD’S LOVE IN ITS UNWEARIED CARE

It is most likely that it was evening when the angel came the first time and touched him, and bade him arise and eat; for we are told that he went a day’s journey into the wilderness before he sat down under the juniper bush. Night was spreading her temporary veil over the scorched sands; and the sun was sinking, like a ball of fire, on the unbroken rim of the horizon. And when the angel of the Lord came the second time, it would probably be as morning was breaking over the world. And thus, through the intervening night, the angels of God kept watch and ward about the sleeping prophet. None of us can measure the powers of endurance in the love of God. It never tires. It fainteth not, neither is weary. It does not fail, nor is it discouraged. It bears all things; believes all things; hopes all things; endures all things. It clings about its object with a divine tenacity until the darkness and wandering are succeeded by the blessedness of former days. It watches over us during the hours of our insensibility to its presence; touching us ever and anon; speaking to us; and summoning us to arise to a nobler, better life, more worthy of ourselves, more glorifying to Him.

IV. GOD’S LOVE ANTICIPATING COMING NEED

This always stands out as one of the most wonderful passages in the prophet’s history. We can understand God giving him, instead of a long discourse, a good meal and sleep, as the best means of recruiting his spent powers. This is what we should have expected of One who knows our frame and remembers that we are dust, and who pities us as a father pitieth his children. But it is very wonderful that God should provision His servant for the long journey that lay before him: **“Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee.”**

That journey was undertaken at his own whim; it was one long flight from his post of duty; it was destined to meet with a grave remonstrance at its close: **“What doest thou here, Elijah?”** And yet the Lord graciously gave him food, in the strength of which he could endure the long fatigue. The explanation must be again sought in the tender love of God. Elijah’s nature was clearly overwrought. Without doubt he had steadfastly made up his mind for that tedious journey to the Mount of God. Nothing would turn him from his fixed purpose. And therefore, as he would go, God anticipated his needs, though they were the needs of a truant servant and a rebellious child. In wrath He remembered mercy, and prevented him with the blessings of His goodness, and imparted, through a single meal, sufficient strength for a march of forty days and forty nights. Let us pause here for a moment to adore the wonderful love of God; which gives men life and breath and all things, even when He knows that they will be used for selfish ends, and in direct opposition to His revealed will.

Surely these thoughts of the love of God will arrest some from pursuing any longer the path of the backslider. You have failed; but do not be afraid of God, or think that He will never look on you again. In thinking thus of Him, you grieve Him more, and aggravate your ill-behavior. Rather cast yourself upon His love, as a swimmer flings himself upon the buoyant waves, which immediately close around him, and bear him up, and carry him upon their sunlit bosom. Tell Him how deeply you mourn the past; ask Him to restore you, give yourself to Him again; resume the forsaken work; retake the abandoned post; and believe that God will again use you as a chosen vessel, and pour through you His tides of blessing, as an ocean may pour its flood through one narrow strait.

And as we close this precious narrative, may we not all receive instruction concerning those meals which Heaven prepares for us, each evening and morning, during our journey across the sands of time? At night, when we come home wearied with the day’s toil, before we fling ourselves into deep slumber, the angels bid us arise and partake of that living Bread and Water, on which alone can spirits become strong. And morning by morning their gentle touches awake us from overdue slumbers, as they whisper: **“Arise and eat, lest the journey be too great for thee.”** Their neglect to obey the heavenly summons is the true cause of so much failure in the lives of Christian people. They do not feed enough on Christ. They slumber on, heedless and insensate, till the morning sun is high, and the angels, with their provisions, have faded away.

May we be amongst the happy number who never need twice calling; but who rise each morning, as the first cadence of the angel-voice breaks upon their ears, to eat of that flesh which is meat indeed, and to drink of that blood which is drink indeed. Then shall we be able to withstand all assaults, to endure all fatigue, and to abide perpetually in the realized presence of God. **“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.”**

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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