

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER TEN

FLIGHT INTO THE WILDERNESS

“He that cometh from heaven is above all,” was the testimony of John the Baptist to the Messiah: and the course of our Lord’s ministry confirmed this testimony. Wherever we see the Saviour appearing and acting, in the narrative of the Gospels, the impression irresistibly forces itself upon us: “Here is one greater than Moses and all the prophets and apostles—here is one, who is separate from sinners, and above every creature— one, who came down for a short time to our world, as into a strange country; but whose peculiar residence is on the throne of glory and majesty.”

We are convinced that no mere man could have acted as he did, however divinely commissioned. Miracles as great as his were wrought by the apostles and prophets; but the manner in which they were wrought by him, and by them, exhibits an immense distinction between the one and the other. They, with all their derived powers, showed themselves to be but men . Christ evidently acted by his own independent power and authority: he raised the dead, cast out devils, healed the sick, controlled the elements, fed the assembled multitudes with a few loaves; all by his own inherent will, without any appearance of that dependence which constituted the very strength of his servants who wrought miracles in his name.

His very prayers were expressions of his will; and we see him on every occasion as the Holy One of God, entirely distinct from all created beings. Yes, he is above all: and, great as was the prophet Elijah, his infirmities serve to remind us how infinitely inferior everyone is to the all-perfect Prophet, Priest, and King, our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword.

“Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time. And when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers” (I Kings 19:1-4).

The man of God is again called away from public activity and reformation, and his path loses itself once more in the solitudes of a wilderness. What now befell him served for spiritual exercise to himself. The torch is shaken, that it may afterwards glow the brighter, and the refiner of Israel must himself undergo additional trial and purification.

We have here to notice,

- I. Elijah's persecution;
- II. His flight;
- III. His dejection.

I. Our imagination can picture Ahab now arrived at his palace at Jezreel, which appears to have been his summer residence, on account of its agreeable situation.

We are certain that Jezebel, his queen, could not have been indifferent as to the issue of the great contest at Carmel; and we may well suppose that she was expecting, with impatience, the return of the king.

We have seen that he returned at full speed, in a violent rain; and it is easy to imagine him hastily alighting from his chariot before the palace, and hurrying into the apartments of his imperious consort, to announce to her the wonderful occurrences he had just witnessed.

Elijah meanwhile remains in the neighborhood, awaiting the issue of the great events which had been brought to pass. His hopes were probably at this time raised high; perhaps he even promised himself an immediate return, both of prince and of people, to the God of their fathers.

Ahab, full of the tidings of these strange events, **“told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword.”**

We can imagine with what emotions he would enter her apartment, and say,

“The Tishbite has triumphed! Fire from heaven has confirmed his word. Upon his prayer, with my own eyes I have seen flames fall from the skies, consume the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and lick up the water in the trench. All the people can bear witness to it. They fell on their faces, and cried out, as with one voice, that the Lord is God. The priests of Baal were slain; Elijah and the people have destroyed them, and their blood is flowing in the brook Kishon. They were laughed at as liars and impotent deceivers. Their authority and their worship is gone forever. There is universal enthusiasm for Elijah. He is a prophet of the living God. The miracle on Carmel has placed it beyond a doubt, and these heavy rains completely confirm it. At his command they fall; he closed heaven, and he has now opened it again.”

In some such manner as this we may suppose the king communicating the tidings to Jezebel and then breaking off in the midst of his narrative, as if he had been thunderstruck. On what account? Alas, he sees the features of his queen gather blackness like a storm.

The weak king, as one **“whom Jezebel his wife stirred up,”** for thus the sacred historian speaks of him, is evidently completely under her influence; and when he perceives the effect his narrative has upon her, his opinion is quite changed; he begins to take another view of the wonders at Carmel, as also of Elijah himself. Jezebel resolves to gratify her blood-thirsty revenge, and she is the adored mistress of Ahab’s affections.

The deluded monarch appears not to have dared to think differently from Jezebel his wife. He appears as a lamentable instance of one who, though not totally insensible to the voice of truth, continues a wretched slave to the father of lies. His heart was given to Jezebel, and her affection is the price to which everything else was to be sacrificed. On her behavior to him was all the happiness of his life suspended. He was the sport of her tempers, and she exercised over him the most unlimited control. Pliant, like clay on the potter’s wheel, and capable of taking any form, he was always ready to be what she was pleased to make of him. Sold by affection, under her influence he soon lost the last remains of manly steadfastness; and, before he was aware, his own individuality was so much sunk in that of his own proud and imperious mistress, that he heard only her ears, saw with her eyes, and felt and thought only with her.

A great many persons, in every age, are thus led blindfold by human influence. The claims with which the prince of darkness binds mankind to his yoke and banner, are not always the grosser vices and lusts: he secures thousands of souls to himself and to hell, by attaching them with the silken cords of a tender affection to persons who have taken a decided part with the enemies of the cross of Christ.

Now, whatever the bond may be, whether paternal, filial, conjugal, or social, the effect is the same. The influential person or persons rule with irresistible power, and the poor captive soul thinks not for itself, has no firmness or independence; friends and party govern it altogether, and this in spite of the most distressing convictions. Nor is it by perverted human affection alone that men are kept back from the truth. There are others, and not a few, who are equally far from the kingdom of God, by reason of the homage they pay to human intellect, either in themselves or others.

The corrective of all these different sorts of error would be a heartfelt belief of those plainest declarations of the Gospel:

- **“Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s”** (I Corinthians 6:19, 20).
- **“He that cometh from heaven is above all”** (John 3:31).
- **“I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life”** (John 8:12).
- **“I am the way, the truth, and the life”** (John 14: 6).

And you who exercise influence over others, take heed that you prove not, in this respect, the agents of the great enemy of souls; for if through you any **“weak brother perish,” “his blood will be required at your hands.”** Remember, that whoso destroyeth a soul, **“Him will God destroy.”**

Woe, then, unto those men of talent and acquirements, who, with revolting ingratitude, transmute the gifts and abilities which God has vouchsafed to them, into weapons of darkness; who, under the influence of the great deceiver, assault the most sacred things of God.

Woe unto those much admired rulers of literature, who, in wicked self-deification, use the power they possess over the minds of men, to rivet more firmly the bonds of infidelity and hostility to Christ upon the neck of the present generation; and who exert their genius in preparing those intoxicating notions and antichristian systems which delude themselves and others to their destruction.

Woe unto those brilliant heads in laurel crowns, that cover the kingdom of sin with fantastic enchantments, and overturning every sacred restraint, implant the horrible delusion in the mind, that he sinneth not who only contrives to sin poetically and elegantly.

Woe to those whose voices give the tone to the world, who have sufficient means for becoming the Ezras and Nehemiahs of their time, but who are a pestilence to the age they live in, by darting forth their wit in seductive and blasphemous falsehoods; and abuse the weak understandings of those who hang in admiration upon their lips, in order imperceptibly, under the pretence of superior light, to scatter sparks of rebellion against the Lord and his Anointed.

Woe, woe unto these betrayers of mankind! Their part will soon be acted. A time is coming, when, from their very lips that now satiate them with their plaudits, only the dreadful thunder of furious execrations will meet their ears; and when the very hands which now crown them with laurel, will be extended towards heaven against them, to draw down upon them the lightning of an eternal curse. Be not deceived! mistake not the present course of things for the final decision.

That decision will be pronounced by Him whose eyes are as a flame of fire, and who weighs with other scales than those of the deluded world, which only pays homage to external glitter. Your glory has its season and its period, like the flower of the grass. **“All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away”** (I Peter 1:24).

But to return to Jezebel. The fire of hell is kindled within her; James, 3:6; she thirsts to avenge the blood of the priests of Baal. In her judgment, better would it have been that the whole nation had perished with hunger and drought, than that such a triumph should have been prepared for the prophet and his God. The showers of blessing that now returned to soften the clods of the field, cannot soften her obdurate spirit.

Well would it for the world if no such characters still remained in it: but consider, my brethren, in how many Peaces the triumph of the Gospel increases the opposition of unbelievers. What scoffing and ridicule at the outpouring of the Spirit; and what contempt of piety and conversion to God are vented by many their writings and discourse! The voice of Jezebel is virtually regarded by many as the voice of truth; and this in our accredited journals in our refined circles and assemblies, in our poetry and philosophy, nay, in the chairs even of divinity professors, and in many, very man pulpits. But Woe unto the spirit of Jezebel age!

That Woe has been pronounced Christ himself, and is recorded in the last book of the sacred volume. **“Behold, I will cast that woman Jezebel into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, and I will kill her children with death”** (Revelation 2:22, 23). This is their end.

Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, has now sworn by her gods that Elijah shall die. But the Lord, who can bind the unicorn with his band, and can put a hook in the jaws of the leviathan, will now interpose to preserve Elijah. **“He who taketh the wise in their own craftiness,”** and “infatuates the counsel of princes,” has only to leave Jezebel to the madness of her own evil passions, and, lo! she so imprudently forgets herself, as to send and apprise the prophet of her murderous intention against him. This was, of course, the very defeat it. **“Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time!”**

Elijah hears the message. What means it? Does it mean indeed that all his labors and conflicts are to issue in his own disappointment and death? Is this the conversion of Jezebel, and Ahab, and of Israel, which he had hoped for? Alas, what a bitter draught for the soul of this man of God! Who shall comfort him at this lamentable turn of affairs? Certainly he had never received a more painful stroke upon his spirit than this and if his faith steers clear amid such rocks without shipwreck, it must be owing to the support and guidance of an Almighty hand.

But does the Lord take any pleasure in frustrating our hopes, and leading us to despondency and doubt? O no; far be it from him! **“He will fulfill the desire of them that fear him.”** The hopes he raises in us he will fulfill; only we must not think to prescribe to him the time or the manner in which he shall do it. He will never suffer his servants really to “spend their strength for nought and in vain.”

When therefore they seem to be frustrated for a time, it is only that they may learn that their success is not **“of him that willeth nor of him that runneth.”** He finishes all his works and crowns them all, but he does it in his own “mysterious way.” He suffers discouragements and impediments to arise, that his wisdom and power may be hereby the more manifest, and that the creature may learn that **“this is the Lord’s doing.”** Nothing, therefore, which we engage in for his glory, shall be eventually unsuccessful; but then **“the Lord alone must be exalted.”**

Behold, my friends, such are the ways of God! Set then your minds at rest respecting all present difficulties; only keep in the way of duty, and commit yourselves to God. He will be able, at the proper time, to solve every difficulty. Reserve your judgment for the final issue, and remember that **“the beauty of a thing,”** as a primitive father observes, “appears at the moment its maturity, which God waits for.

He that tastes the blossom instead of the fruit, will pass a wrong judgment upon it. He that would limit his idea of the beauties of vegetation to their appearance in the winter season, would judge very blindly.” Yet how often do we conclude thus hastily as to the ends of God’s providential government and disposal of human affairs!

II. Let us now follow Elijah in his proceedings upon receiving this alarming message

“When he saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah!”

In this instance, Elijah’s faith appears in some measure to have failed him. The very words of the sacred narrative seem to give us a significant hint respecting his state of mind just then. For the words are, **“When he saw that.”** What did Elijah see? Not God’s promises, aid, power, and faithfulness; these at least only dawned upon him in the background, with broken and feeble rays. But in the foreground very different things did he see: namely, the infuriated Jezebel threatening his life, and all the horrors of a cruel death. Instead of soaring above these as on eagle’s wings, and looking down upon them with sublime composure as on former occasions, the pressure of human terror seems to have been too strong for his mind, especially as backed by the disappointment of his public spirit on Israel’s account.

So **“he arose and went for his life:”** or, as others have paraphrased it, “he arose and went *whither he would;*” which serves further to intimate the obscurity of his course and the uncertainty of his steps. He had at this time no express divine direction as to whither he should go. Hitherto his way had always been marked out for him most distinctly by his Lord; but not so now. There was no particular divine word to serve him for a staff on this journey; no distinct commission, Remove hither or thither; do this or that! shining before him like a lamp, giving wings to his feet and firmness to his steps.

He went forth into the wide world in uncertainty, distracted by doubts, and unaccompanied by the consoling consciousness that he was taking this road for God; since he went it only for himself, and for the sake of his own life; and verily this thought was not much calculated to relieve his oppressed mind.

How pleasant and comfortable is it to pursue those paths, however rough and thorny, in which we feel assured the Lord has commanded us to walk! How joyfully is everything undertaken, begun, and accomplished, that comes to our heart by a Divine commission! We then run, and are not weary; we walk, and are not faint. But to have put to sea without knowing if we had not better have remained at home—how painful is the thought!

The mind of the prophet appears to have been in this painful state, when, perplexed about the ways of God, and grievously disappointed at present appearances, he left Jezreel without any consciousness of the Lord’s direction. The strange circumstance that the queen had thus imprudently disclosed to him her murderous intentions, might indeed have led him to conclude that the Lord thus warned him to flee for his life; but this was only a human inference, and no clear divine declaration.

But though the Lord may thus permit us, like Elijah, to go whither we will, without giving us any plain intimation by his providence, yet this is only a procedure of his wise and tender love. For hereby we come the better to learn what a blessed thing it is to know we are in the service of our God, and to walk at all times in the light of his guidance; like Israel, resting at his word, and at his Word striking their tents and advancing.

And the more we learn to appreciate this happy state by experience of its contrary, the easier to us is the petition, “**Thy will be done!**” and the more earnestly shall we hearken to what the Lord God will say concerning us, and ask beforehand his counsel and direction in everything. Again, though God’s children seem to go “**whither they will,**” in uncertainty and doubt whether the Lord is pleased with them or not, still their faithful God accompanies them as before, even while he often keeps himself long concealed. He never leaves them, but he leads them, though by secret guidance, always to a happy end. This Elijah experienced. The Lord was with him on the way, however little the prophet was conscious of it. Let us only have patience, and before we are aware, the clouds will pass away, and it will be seen, as in the case of Elijah, that we have not gone in every respect whither we would, but that God has all along been leading us.

After Elijah had traveled for many days, and gone through a great part of Samaria and the whole of the land of Judea, he came at length to Beersheba as it were by chance; for he had as little to do at Beersheba as at any other place. Here, however, he could not remain; his spirit was too afflicted for common society. Even the company of his faithful servant was burdensome to him. What could the servant do for him? He could not enlighten the darkness of his afflicted spirit, nor explain the mysterious providence which had disquieted it. Therefore, leaving him at Beersheba, he went alone into the solitary wilderness, into the very heart of it, a whole day’s journey, until the sun went down. He then threw himself upon the heath under a juniper tree, and sank down under the load of his melancholy thoughts.

III. Thick darkness hung over the prophet’s soul.

This is shown by his whole conduct. His close reserve, his desire for solitude, his planless wandering into the gloomy wilderness, all indicate a discouraged and dejected state of mind. Perplexed with regard to his vocation—nay, even with respect to God and his government—his soul lies in the midst of a thousand doubts and distressing thoughts. It seems tossed on a sea of troubles, without bottom or shore; and there appears but one step between him and utter despair.

There he sits, like an exile in the midst of the fearful solitude, as if cast out by God and the world; with his eyes fixed; full of gloomy and painful thoughts, in spirit, he is in the land of Israel, and in the midst of idolaters, the children of better forefathers. Oh the melancholy images which pass before him! the heart-rending scenes which are portrayed upon the tablet of his memory! He sees the people reeling on mount Carmel in their idolatrous orgies; in Samaria one idol temple rises up before him after another; the streets of Jezreel resound with blasphemies against the living God and his servants; and Jezebel is drunk with the blood of the few believers who fell as victims to her revenge. Such are the images which vividly and dreadfully present themselves to his mind. And wherever he turns his eyes amidst the horrible scene is no herald of God—no voice of a single prophet is lifted up against it. Perhaps now he thinks, “Why did I not remain? Why did I flee and forsake my poor people?” And if the distress of his spirit had not been already excited to the utmost, surely such thoughts as these must have tended to that effect.

The pious servant of God has had enough of this vale of tears. He is heartily weary of painful conflicts and fruitless labors; his soul longs for its rest. “**It is enough!**” sighs he to heaven, his eyes glistening with tears.

“It is now enough, O Lord! Take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.”

Ah! who could have thought that Elijah could ever have become so weak and fainthearted—the man who seemed invincible in the armor of his faith, and superior to every storm! But to us it is consoling that even such an one as Elijah sat under the juniper tree, and thought in his despondency that he was unable any longer to bear the burden of life. “It is enough, O Lord! Why should I remain longer in this land of travail; My existence is useless. If my labors in Israel, in the midst of so many signs and wonders, have missed their aim, where shall they be of any service! It is enough! Why should I remain here any longer to witness the decline of thy kingdom? Therefore take me now, O Lord, my poor and troubled soul from me; for I am not better than my fathers. Certainly I hoped to see what many kings and prophets have desired to see; but I too have been disappointed. But who am I, that I should venture to desire such great things at thy hand; who am I that with presumptuous hope could promise myself a preference, for which saints, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear, have longed in vain? It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life!”

Thus spoke Elijah, distressingly excited in mind. It was from a strange mixture of feelings that his prayer arose. His soul was not in a state of harmony; and yet, in the midst of the discord, the sweetest tones arose which could be breathed from a human soul. His prayer was not like the peaceful and cheerful language of Simeon, “**Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace!**” nor like that clear, considerate, and calm expression of Paul, “**I have a desire to depart and to be with Christ!**” But yet it was not the same as that of Jeremiah, “**Cursed be the day in which I was born!**” nor as that of Job, “**Let that day perish; let not God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it!**”

Elijah’s state of mind was more subdued, gentle, and therefore not so wretched as theirs. The discordant groans of vexation at fruitless labor and disappointed hopes, certainly sound too audible through his sighs; but at the same time his words breathe an affectionate sorrow for the poor people, and a holy grief at the apparent decline of the kingdom of God. It must be confessed that there is something in his prayer that looks like a complaint against the Lord himself; but we perceive, at the same time, that tears of regret are already pouring out to quench it in his heart, and that the very moment when the complaint escapes him he feels the sinfulness of it, and on this very account is filled with grief.

It cannot be denied, that in the expression, “**It is enough!**” we behold the anguish of a soul which, disappointed in its fairest expectations, seems to despair of God and weary of the world, and is impatient and weary of the cross; a soul which, like Jonah, is dissatisfied with the dealings of the Almighty; and by desiring death, seeks, as it were, to give him to understand that it is come to such an extremity that nothing is left but the melancholy wish to escape by death, from its suffering. Nevertheless a divine and believing longing accompanied even this carnal excitement in the soul of Elijah, which, thirsting after God, struck its pinions upwards to the eternal light; yes, the keynote of this mournful lamentation was the filial thought that the heart of his Father in heaven would be moved towards him, that his merciful God would again shine forth upon his darkness, and comfort the soul of his servant.

Thus we see, in the prayer of our prophet, the elements of the natural life and of the spiritual life fermenting together in strange intermixture. The sparks of nature and of grace, mutually opposing each other, blaze up together in one flame. The metal is in a furnace, the heat of which brings to light much impurity; but who does not forget the scum and the dross at the sight of the fine gold?

“Lord, it is enough!” Ah, this little prayer is known also amongst us! How many a workshop, how many a chamber and bed of sorrow do I know, from whence this aspiration is almost incessantly ascending to heaven, in the midst of many tears and pangs!

- Many of these supplicants are mistaken, just as Elijah was. It is not enough yet.
- Many a faithful laborer has yet to learn that his labor is by no means in vain in the Lord, although he thinks it is.
- Many a righteous one shall yet see light arise here below, which, contrary to the express promises of God, he thinks is forever extinguished.
- Many a broken instrument will the Lord use again for his work, before he takes it away into the land of rest.
- Many a troubled sufferer, before he departs, shall again take his harp from the willows, and sing thanksgivings to Him whose counsel is wonderful and his ways mysterious, but who doeth all things well.

And then it will indeed be **“enough.”** Ah, who is warranted yet in saying, **“It is enough!”** It is only enough when the Lord saith it. And if you have still to remain for years in the furnace of affliction, be assured that you will eventually acknowledge, with joyful acclamations in heaven, that then only was it enough, and not a moment earlier, when the Lord stripped you of the garments of your pilgrimage and took you unto himself.

One word more. If at any time you feel disposed again to say, **“It is enough,”** and that you can bear the burden of life no longer, do as Elijah did, flee into the silence of solitude, and sit under—not the juniper tree—but under that tree whereon the incarnate Son of God was made a curse for you. Here your soul will assuredly find sweet refreshment; yes, from Christ’s acceptable offering to God. He is a hiding-place from the storm, a covert from the tempest, a shadow from the heat, as rivers water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Whether it be true or not which is related of the juniper tree, that no serpent ventures near it, we can say this in a better sense of that **“tree of life”** under which we encourage you to take refuge. Here the viper of discontent will not fasten upon you, nor the **“old serpent”** inject the poison of murmuring against your soul.

At the sight of the cross, you will no longer think of complaining of the greatness of your sufferings; for here you behold sufferings, in comparison with which yours must be accounted a light affliction, which is but for a moment: here the righteous One suffers for you—the just for the unjust. In the view of the cross, you will soon forget your distresses; for the love of God in Christ Jesus to you, a poor sinner, will absorb all your thoughts.

Under the cross, you are prevented from supposing that some strange thing is happening unto you; **“the disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his Lord;”** and as the kingdom has been bestowed upon the Head, so will it also be upon the members.

At the foot of the cross you are preserved from impatience; for you cannot but rejoice exceedingly that what you are enduring is only a temporal suffering, and not the curse which fell so dreadfully upon your Surety.

At the foot of the cross, your grief will soon be lost in that joy and peace of God which drops from this tree of life into the ground of your heart, and the foretaste you will here obtain of heaven will sweeten the troubles of this life as with the breath of the morning, and before you are aware, will bring over you, as over Elijah, the feeling of a heavenly repose; yea, the cross itself will be transformed into such a medium between heaven and earth, that the most comforting thoughts shall descend into your soul, and the most grateful thoughts shall ascend from your soul to heaven, like those angels of God seen in a vision on the plains of Bethel by the solitary and benighted patriarch Jacob.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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