

# ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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## Chapter 9

### THE SOUND OF RAIN

**"And Elijah said unto Ahab, Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain. So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees, and said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times. And it came to pass, at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand. And he said, Go up, say unto Ahab, Prepare thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not. And it came to pass, in the meanwhile, that the Heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the Lord was on Elijah; and he girded up his loins, and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel."**  
(I Kings 18:41-46)

**"THOU, O GOD, DIDST SEND A PLENTIFUL RAIN, WHEREBY THOU DIDST CONFIRM THINE INHERITANCE, WHEN IT WAS WEARY."** (Psalm 68:9) [128]

FROM the hills of Galilee; from the plains and valleys of Zebulon and Issachar, and the mountains of Ephraim;- thousands on thousands, we found in last chapter, were gathered on the heights of Carmel, to decide the great question whether Baal or Jehovah were GOD. The afternoon had closed with the signal discomfiture of the Phoenician priests; and Jehovah, by the loud shouts of the awe-struck multitude, had been owned and acknowledged as the GOD of Israel.

In consequence of this public renunciation of Baal-worship, and this equally solemn and public recognition of the GOD of their fathers, Elijah feels that he can now with confidence expect the removal of the drought which for three years and a half had cursed the land, and the return of blessings to the famine-stricken people.

The bodies of the false prophets are lying in ghastly heaps unburied on the margin of the Kishon. The king has gone up, amid the wooded slopes of the mountain, with his nobles and retinue, to feast themselves after these exciting hours. The multitudes are seen dispersing; some for repose and refreshment, others wending their way towards their distant homes.

But the Prophet feels that his mission is not yet fulfilled;- one grand sequel is still required to complete the most memorable day of his life. [129]

Quitting the terrible Aceldama on the river's banks, and again casting his sheepskin cloak over his shoulders, he ascends to a higher and remoter portion of Carmel, removed from the din alike of the multitudes and of the royal tents below.

From his elevation, the old familiar scene of barrenness and desolation met his eye;

- waterless channels at his feet;
- the noted verdure of Carmel turned into ashes;
- no living blade to relieve the dull monotony for miles and miles;
- so far as his vision could extend, the earth gasping at every pore.

Rest and refreshment he greatly requires, alike for his weary body and jaded spirit. He had tasted nothing since morning; and now the setting sun had gone down behind the western ridges of the mountain. But, like his great Antitype, "**his meat is to do the will of Him that sent him, and to finish His work.**"

In company with a young attendant, he resorts to this secluded spot in order that he may plead with Jehovah, (now that he had shewed himself unto Ahab,) to make good His faithful promise, "**I will send rain upon the earth.**"

He might well have urged the excuse of an overwrought and overtasked frame for postponement till the following morning; but if - like many earthly conquerors - he had failed to follow up his victory, it would have marred the completeness and grandeur of the day's transaction. Both king and people might have left the scene, and missed the great closing lesson.

Elijah, however, never hesitates. Whether it were by some intimation made by special revelation to his inner sense; - or whether, more probably, by some outward token, such as the gentle rustling on the tops of the forest-trees premonitory of storm, we cannot pronounce. But it was on [130] hearing "**the sound of abundance of rain**" that he himself ascended to his sequestered sanctuary; instructing his servant at the same time to proceed to a yet higher promontory or spur of the mountain, from which he could command a full view of the waters of the Mediterranean to the remote horizon.

The sun of that long day had already set; but, as is the case in Eastern evenings, a bright radiance lingered on mountain, plain, and ocean. The sky still preserved the same monotonous aspect it had worn during the years of drought. Its azure depths were undimmed with a cloud. The great sea beneath it, slept in quiet serenity.

Let us pause for a moment at this impressive point in the narrative.

What a place of hallowed calm after the exciting scenes and turmoil of that day of days! "ye who are engaged in the busy thoroughfares of life;- fevered and fretted with its anxieties;- from morning to evening your ears and your spirits stunned with the loud, never-ebbing tide; do you know what it is, when night is gathering its shadows as at Carmel, to ascend to some quiet oratory to be alone with GOD, and get your spirits calmed and refreshed amid this "Sabbath of the soul?"

Or ye, who, like Elijah, may have experienced, during the day, some eminent tokens of blessing in your worldly undertakings;- the fire coming down on your sacrifice;- Your fears disappointed;- Your fondest hopes and wishes realised;- some successful stroke in business, some unexpected deliverance from harassing anxiety and vexation,- the occurrence of some prosperous and joyful event in your family circles;- do you deem it alike your hallowed privilege and duty, to take the first opportunity of [131] owning the hand of the gracious Restorer of all good, and the gracious Deliverer from all evil; ascending the silent, lonely Carmel-height, that you may, like the Prophet, pour out your soul in fervent gratitude,- record your vow, and offer your oblation of thanksgiving?

Beautiful, indeed, is Elijah's humility.

He was undoubtedly the hero of the hour. He was more truly King in the sight of Israel than Ahab. As a prince he had power with GOD, and had prevailed.

- the keys of Providence seemed to hang at his girdle;
- his voice had rent the heavens;
- at his summons the flames had descended;
- the fiery sword had leapt from its cloudy scabbard, flashing vengeance on his enemies.

Had he sought it,- a triumphal procession might have borne him laurel-crowned and garlanded to Jezreel. The chivalrous songs and minstrelsy that welcomed the illustrious sovereign of the preceding age, might have been accorded to him also. But no vainglorious thought tarnished the splendour of the moral victory.

Never is he greater, on this illustrious occasion, than when,- the shouts of the multitude over,- he retires with his servant to a lone spot on the mountain; proclaiming, that, for all the deeds of that day of renown, he arrogates no praise, no glory to himself, but gives it all to the GOD whose legate he felt honoured to be.

He cast himself down upon the earth, and "**put his face between his knees.**" <sup>1</sup>

We scarce recognise the man; he seems for the moment to have lost his personal identity. A few hours before, he was "the Prophet of Fire;" the lightning flashing from his eye; or, standing by the Kishon, a girded homicide, the sword gleaming in his hands.

Now he is "**clothed with humility.**"

Bold and strong as a sturdy oak of Bashan in the presence of the dense human crowd; he bows his head like a bulrush in the presence of the Lord of hosts. 'Lord,' he seems to say, 'I am but sinful dust and ashes. I am but a man of like passions with that fickle multitude below. I am but a vessel, a lump of clay in the hand of the potter. Not unto me, not unto me, but unto Thee, the living Jehovah, before whom I stand, be all the glory!'

If we may imagine him, in these first moments of prayer, glancing back at the long hours of conflict which had terminated in the miraculous symbol;- and seeking, moreover, in the retrospect, to give utterance to a full heart of thanksgiving;- would it not be, if not in the words,

at least in the spirit of the sacred bard of his nation, "**Sing unto God, ye kingdoms of the earth: O sing praises unto the Lord; to him that rideth upon the Heaven of heavens, which were of old; lo, he doth send out his voice, and that a mighty voice. Ascribe ye strength unto God: his excellency is over Israel, and his strength is in the clouds. O God, thou art terrible out of thy holy places: the God of Israel is he that giveth strength and power unto his people. Blessed be God.**"

But it was for purposes of prayer, rather than praise, that the Prophet had ascended the slopes of the mountain.

While he himself remains in rapt supplication; <sup>2</sup> his servant seven [133] successive times hastens to the upper height to bring intelligence of the visible answer. <sup>3</sup> "**Go up now,**" was the command; "**look toward the sea.**" But six times did he return with the strange and disappointing intelligence, "**There is nothing.**"

Noble, however, was the Tishbite's undaunted faith;- unswerving his confidence in a prayer-hearing GOD.

He staggered not for a moment through unbelief He knew that Jehovah was not, like Baal, "**asleep or on a journey.**"

That what He had shortly before spoken,- not only was He "**able also to perform,**" but He would also perform. Though, therefore, the vision tarried, he patiently waited for it. He knew that "**at the end it would speak, and not lie.**"

As his attendant comes back, time after time, with the dispiriting announcement, it only seems to quicken his faith, and to strengthen within him the resolve of the old wrestler of Jabbok, "I will not let thee go except thou bless me." Moreover, he would not allow either this promise of GOD or the precursive indications of the storm - "**the sound of abundance of rain,**"- to supersede the duty of supplication.

When he heard the rustling in the tops of the trees - the low moaning sound - the harbinger of rain and tempest,- he might have reasoned with himself, as many are still inclined to do, "What need is there to cry to Jehovah, when I already hear the mutterings of His voice? Why need I call for rain, when every tree-top is already countersigning the faithful word given at Zarephath?" [134]

But how differently does he act!

These waving trees have poetically been spoken of, as so many bells summoning this lone worshipper to prayer. <sup>4</sup>

Nor was it in vain that Elijah sped him to his mountain oratory.

His servant descries, hovering in the western horizon, a tiny cloud, like a man's hand;- to an Eastern, habituated to the signs of the sky, a trustworthy token of approaching storm and rain. <sup>5</sup> He speeds down to the pleading Prophet with the longed - for intelligence.

It is enough. The Lord has given the word: He is about to send "**a plentiful rain,**" to refresh His inheritance "**when it was weary.**"

An urgent message is conveyed to Ahab to prepare his chariot and haste him to his distant palace, ere the Kishon be flooded with the waterspouts, and the dusty roads have been stiffened [135] into moist, tenacious clay, rendering them impassable. <sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, cloud after cloud rises, till the sky becomes a frowning battlement; and ere Elijah can reach the royal pavilion, every tree on Mount Carmel is wrestling with the storm!

The monarch has already started, amid pelting rain and howling wind; but, fleetier than his swift coursers, are the feet of the Bedouin Prophet. Strange close to the chivalrous proceedings of this high convocation; to witness Elijah, with pilgrim staff and girded loins;- weary in body, but with unchafed and unsubdued spirit;- running in front of the royal chariot until he gets in sight of the gate of Jezreel! <sup>7</sup>

As the stern reprover of Ahab's guilt, he had been brought till now into unwilling antagonism with his sovereign.

But, in consequence of the king's public renunciation of idolatry, and the overthrow of Baal-worship; he takes the earliest opportunity of displaying his deference and loyalty as a subject. <sup>8</sup>  
[136]

Perhaps there were joyous thoughts - alas! never to be realised - which were then filling his soul, regarding his sovereign, which imparted fresh fleetness to his limbs, and energy to his spirit. It would have been to him the noblest of the day's triumphs, if Ahab had become, from that hour, an altered man;- consecrating the remainder of his life and reign in undoing the fatal influences of an unhappy past; and, by the overthrow of abominable idolatries, inaugurating a new era of blessings for Israel.

Indeed, from the king's pliable, impressible nature, we may fairly surmise, that the marvels of this day in Carmel had, for the time, spoken to him with irresistible power;- that the Prophet had heard the sovereign's voice, mingling with that of the people, in forswearing the impostures by which he had been so long spell-bound, and in reasserting the supremacy of Israel's Jehovah.

Notwithstanding, therefore, the buffetings of the storm,- the wind sweeping along the plain, and the torrents falling on his head, and drenching his shaggy locks-on, with elastic step [137] and kindling eye, sped the seer, never pausing for breath until the charioteer drew rein in front of the royal palace.

True Arab, however, in extraction, though he probably was, and with all the marvellous physical endurance of his tribe, it is almost impossible to suppose that, after the unremitting toils of the livelong day, Elijah should have been equal to such an undertaking, had he not been endowed with supernatural strength.

But we read that "**the hand of the Lord was upon him.**"

That same GOD who had braced him with moral courage from morn to even, gifted him physically for the closing duties of that great occasion. He could emphatically echo the words uttered aforetime by joyous lips, after a similar season of deliverance and triumph: "**We went through FIRE and through WATER, but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place.**"

Never perhaps, before or since, was the unfailing Divine promise fulfilled on so vast a scale,- "**As thy day is, so shall thy strength be.**"

If, in speaking of this day's transaction in the preceding chapter, we beheld, in the fire coming down from Heaven and devouring the sacrifice, a dim but suggestive picture of the Divine acceptance of a nobler Propitiation: may we not still farther, in these water-floods which followed,- the sky sending down its refreshing showers,- see an impressive symbol of the great sequel in the Gospel dispensation, the descent of the HOLY SPIRIT.

And more especially on the Church of the latter day, when "**the dry land shall become springs of water;**" while in Elijah himself, prostrate in supplication, we have the representative of the Church herself, "asking **of the Lord rain in the time of the latter rain;**" - the GOD of [138] Elijah, moreover, uttering the challenge - "**Prove me now herewith . . . if I will not open you the windows of Heaven and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.**"

Other symbolic teaching, too, may be gathered from this scene, with reference to GOD's dealings with individual believers.

Is it their conversion?

It is first the fire of conviction; then the healing, comforting, refreshing influences of the Spirit,- bringing home the blessed sense of pardon and forgiveness through the blood of the cross.

Is it His method of procedure with them in their times of trial?

Comfort and solace follow affliction. First the fire, then the rain; first the wounding, then the healing; first the flames of the fiery furnace, then the refreshing comforts of the HOLY SPIRIT. First the mown grass laid low by the scythe, then the promised fulfilled - "**He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass, as showers that water the earth.**"

Let us, in closing, listen to the cheering word - "**Get thee up, for there is the sound of abundance of rain.**"

Glad and grateful must that moment have been to the many thousands of Israel,- when the gasping earth, that had for three long years suffered in dumb agony, drank in the refreshing full flood of GOD;- when the true Church, who had beheld in that sky of brass and these furrows of iron, the visible tokens of the Divine curse,- now witnessed the heavens unfolding their black, inky scroll, with the joyful tidings that the curse was removed.

Can we participate in this joy in a loftier spiritual sense? Do we see the curse of sin taken away;

GOD propitiated? and from the "rain" with which He is "**filling the pools,**" are we drawing all needful supplies [139] for our parched souls?

Can we say with the Prophet "**O Lord, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the Lord is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall we draw water out of the wells of salvation.**"

If we are drooping and desponding;- if our cry is, "**My flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is,**" we again echo Elijah's words - "**Get thee up, for there is the sound of abundance of rain.**"

Our privileges are many. The Spirit of GOD is ever and anon moving "on the tops of the mulberry trees." The small clouds have been rising, and copious showers have fallen. Go, get thee, like Elijah,- get thee to the oratory!- pray that the cloud may spread, that it may stretch across the heavens.

At present we may have only the drops before the shower. But there shall be "**abundance of rain**" - "showers of blessing," for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

But let there be a word of solemn warning to us also.

There is deep responsibility in that "**sound of the abundance of rain.**" If at any time in our individual experience we should hear the "**rustling on the tree-tops,**" let us not reject or neglect the monitory voice - "**Arise, get thee up!**" There is no one but can tell of such solemn seasons, when this rustling was heard,- "**the voice of the Lord God walking amid the trees of the garden.**"

Think of the past! That sick bed was a rustling sound of the coming rain;- when, from the long slumber of unbroken health, conscience woke up to a sense of the uncertainty of life, and the possible certainty and [140] suddenness of death.

That solemn bereavement was a rustling amid the tree-tops;- the moaning and wailing of earth's night-blast;- the sudden blackening and overcasting of the azure sky: oh, how solemnly did the warning voice sound amid the stillness of the death-chamber, or standing by the grave; "**Get thee up!**" - leave the din of the world behind thee; - Get thee up - prepare thy chariot - the deluge of wrath may be ready to overtake thee; "Escape for thy life!" - there may verily be but a step between thee and death.

That solemn sermon was a rustling on the tree-tops: do you remember it? When the word came home with irresistible cogency;- when the message (perhaps delivered with stammering lips) was like an arrow in the hand of the mighty, and went direct to your heart of hearts? Up,- at the sound of the abundance of rain,- go, like that importunate intercessor for Israel, and rest not till the little cloud have overspread the whole horizon of your being, and showers of heavenly blessing descend on your soul.

Yes, and amid your own vacillating feebleness, like that of the wavering crowd on Carmel, look

above, to Him,- the true Elijah,- who is pleading your cause on the mount of GOD; and in the gathering rain-cloud is fulfilling His own precious promise - "**And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever.**" [141]

<sup>1</sup> Travellers have observed the same attitude in prayer at this day among the Dervishes. [132]

<sup>2</sup> *Dr Stanley, in his interesting description of the celebration of the Samaritan passover on Mount Gerizim, speaks of some of the assemblage "kneeling or crouching with their faces wrapt in their clothes, and bent to the ground towards the Holy Place on the summit of the Mount." Lectures on Jewish Church, p. 515.*

<sup>3</sup> *The distance to that height must not have been great, for the passage runs- "Go again seven times." Now such is the position of El Mohhraka, that these circumstances might all quite well have been united there. On its west and north-west side, the view of the sea is quite intercepted by an adjacent height. That height, however, may be ascended in a few minutes, and a full view of the sea obtained from the top. - Van de Velde.*

<sup>4</sup> *Krummacher.*

<sup>5</sup> *Of several instances that occur to us, one of the most graphic is that given by Mr. Emerson in his letters from the AEgean. He is at sea in a Greek vessel in the Levant. One morning, which had opened clear and beautiful, it was announced that a squall might be expected. No sign recognizable by European landsmen appeared; but, on attention being properly directed, 'a little black cloud' was seen on the verge of the horizon, towards the south, which was every instant spreading rapidly over the face of the sky, and drawing nearer and nearer to the vessel. Order was immediately given to strike sail and to prepare the vessel for scudding before the hurricane. But scarcely an instant had elapsed ere the squall was upon us, and all grew black around; the wind came rushing and crisping over the water, and in a moment the ship was running almost gunwale down, while the rain was dashing in torrents on the deck. As quick as thought the foresail was torn from the yards, and as the gust rushed through the rigging, the sheets and ropes were snapping and cracking with a fearful noise. The crew, however, accustomed to such sudden visitants, were not slow in reefing the necessary sails, trimming the rigging, and bringing back the vessel to her proper course, and in about a quarter of an hour, or even less, the hurricane had all passed away; the sun burst out again through the clouds that swept in its impetuous train; the wind sunk to its former gentleness, and all was once more at peace, with the exception of the agitated sea, that continued for the remainder of the day rough and billowy. To this Mr. Emerson adds the interesting fact, that it is mainly the dread of such sudden bourasques as the present that compel almost every vessel in the Levant to shorten sail at the close of day, since in cloudy weather it would be next to impossible during the night to discern the cloud which announces the approach of the tempest, in time to prepare for its reception, and to a ship with all her canvas spread, the effect might be terrific." - Dr Kitto*

<sup>6</sup> *See Van de Vedde's travels, in loco.*

<sup>7</sup> *Jezreel is identified with the modern Zerain - a poor collection of twenty houses on a hill in the Esdraelon plain. - See Van de Velde and Robertson, in loco.*

<sup>8</sup> *"Elijah, as GOD's minister, had overwhelmed the king with shame and confusion in the*



*presence of his subjects. The natural tendency of this would be to lower him in their eyes, and lessen their respect for his authority. It was not the intention, however, to weaken the government, nor to encourage rebellion. The prophet was, therefore, divinely directed to give a testimony of respect and honour to the king as public and striking as from necessity had been the opposition and rebuke to his idolatry. The mode of doing honour to Ahab by running before his chariot was in accordance with the customs of the East even to this day. I was reminded of this incident, more than twenty years ago, at Jaffa, when Mohammed Ali came to that city with a large army to quell the rebellion of Palestine. The camp was on the sand-hills south of the city, while Mohammed Ali stopped inside the walls. The officers were constantly going and coming, preceded by runners, who always kept just ahead of the horses, no matter how furiously they were ridden; and in order to run with the greater ease, they not only 'girded their loins' very tightly, but also tucked up their loose garments under the girdle, lest they should be incommoded by them. Thus no doubt did Elijah." - Thomson's "The Land and the Book", p. 485.*

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