

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 18

THE SECOND ANSWER BY FIRE

"Then the king sent unto him a captain of fifty with his fifty. And he went up to him: and, behold, he sat on the top of an hill. And he spake unto him, Thou man of God, the king hath said, Come down. And Elijah answered and said to the captain of fifty, If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And there came down fire from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty. Again also he sent unto him another captain of fifty with his fifty. And he answered and said unto him, O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly. And Elijah answered and said unto them, If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And the fire of God came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty. And he sent again a captain of the third fifty with his fifty. And the third captain of fifty went up, and came and fell on his knees before Elijah, and besought him, and said unto him, O man of God, I pray thee, let my life, and the life of these fifty thy servants, be precious in thy sight. Behold, there came fire down from heaven, and burnt up the two captains of the former fifties with their fifties: therefore let my life now be precious in thy sight. And the angel of the LORD said unto Elijah, Go down with him: be not afraid of him. And he arose, and went down with him unto the king. And he said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Forasmuch as thou hast sent messengers to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron, is it not because there is no God in Israel to enquire of his word? therefore thou shalt not come down off that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die. So he died according to the word of the LORD which Elijah had spoken. And Jehoram reigned in his stead in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah; because he had no son. Now the rest of the acts of Ahaziah which he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Israel?" - II KINGS 1:9-18.

"FOR, BEHOLD, THE LORD WILL COME WITH FIRE, AND WITH HIS CHARIOTS LIKE A WHIRLWIND, TO RENDER HIS ANGER WITH FURY, AND HIS REBUKE WITH FLAMES OF FIRE." (ISAIAH 66:15).

"AND I WILL GIVE POWER UNTO MY TWO WITNESSES, AND THEY SHALL PROPHECY A THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED AND THREESCORE DAYS, CLOTHED IN SACKCLOTH. AND IF ANY MAN WILL HURT THEM, FIRE PROCEEDETH OUT OF THEIR MOUTH, AND DEVoureth THEIR ENEMIES: AND IF ANY MAN WILL HURT THEM, HE MUST IN THIS MANNER BE KILLED."- REVELATION 11:3, 5. [266]

IN last chapter, we considered the account given of the messengers who were sent by Ahaziah,

from his sick-bed, to consult the oracle of Baal-zebub, the fly-god at the Philistine city of Ekron. While hastening on their journey, we found them suddenly arrested by none other than Elijah himself. We followed them as they returned to the chamber of their sovereign, bearing to him the Prophet's doom of death, - the merited retribution for so impious a deference to an idol of the heathen, and so insulting a rejection of the GOD of Israel.

We shall now pursue the narrative, and note how the message of these heralds of evil tidings was received by the prostrate king.

The unexpected intervention of Elijah was calculated to fill Ahaziah with dismay. He knew that the words and threatenings of the stern Prophet carried with them a terrible significance. That never-to-be-forgotten day on Carmel - the fire, the slaughter, the blood - must have engraven itself deep in his young memory. He might well have deemed it the height of madness to trifle with the sayings of one who could unlock the armoury of Heaven, and inflict summary vengeance on the adversaries of the GOD he served.

Therefore, as a doomed man, we half expect, half hope, to see the tear of penitence trembling in his eye, and messengers forthwith [267] dispatched along the plain of Esdraelon, to endeavour to avert or modify the awful denunciation. But the blood of his mother Jezebel flows in this sick man's veins. The message of the Prophet rouses him only to wild and frenzied exasperation. He resolves that the Tishbite shall forfeit his liberty or his life for his bold presumption.

How sad when affliction, in whatever shape it comes to us, whether it be sickness, or bereavement, or worldly loss, is not accompanied with the humbling effects of resignation, penitence, submission! Outward trials, as we have remarked before, in speaking of Ahab, if they be not sanctified for softening the heart, must have the opposite result of leading to a deeper hardening and impenitency. So it was now with Ahaziah.

We might have expected that his sickness would have proved a salutary monitor - a rousing messenger of rebuke and warning to his soul, humbling him in godly sorrow and tears, and leading him to cry for mercy. But instead of being like oil poured on the troubled waters - calming their fretfulness, - that sickness proved rather like oil thrown into the flames, feeding their fury. The dying man presents a picture of what, alas! is not infrequently seen, though the saddest of all spectacles, - a scorner and spurner of the most solemn providential warnings at the very last gasp of life, - contending with his Maker - lifting his soul in proud defiance against GOD.

It is evident, from the troop of soldiers the king summons, that he deems the Tishbite no mean prey.

An officer, with fifty men, is sent in hot haste to bring him dead or alive to the palace of Samaria. Elijah has meanwhile retired to "**the top of an hill**," - supposed with [268] every probability to be Mount Carmel. There he once more manifests in all its integrity, his old hero-spirit, - the truest of all bravery - that of unflinching faith and trust in his GOD.

Seated on the summit, watching the armed band approaching, he would at once conjecture their

hostile intent. Had he been the panic-stricken Prophet we so lately found wandering in the desert of Beersheba, he would have girded up his loins, and with the fleet foot which, on a previous occasion, nigh this same place, had outstripped the coursers of Ahab's chariot, he would have evaded the vengeance of his pursuers, either by distant flight, or by taking refuge in one of the many caves of Carmel with which he was familiar.

But his old watchword and motto again rises to the ascendant. Nay, under the consciousness of the presence and nearness of the Covenant Angel - the Divine, mysterious Personage, whose voice had a few brief hours before addressed him - he could say, with a special emphasis, "**The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them. O taste and see that the Lord is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.**"

If one wavering unworthy thought might for a moment have obtruded itself, we may imagine him rebuking it in the words of the Psalmist King: "**The LORD is my rock and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower.**" Indeed, the lessons of [269] Horeb were now too indelibly written on his inmost soul to be forgotten.

The time was when he might have been tempted to succumb before the storm, and in coward unbelief to utter the desponding plaint, "**My heart and my flesh faileth.**" But since the Lord had "**passed by,**" and spoken in "**the still small voice,**" he had been taught that "**The LORD was the strength of his heart and his portion for ever.**" Though an host therefore should now encamp against him, his heart does not fear.

The officer or captain of the troop approaches within speaking distance, and exclaims, "**O man of GOD, the king hath said, Come down!**"

"**Man of God**" - this appellation may have been uttered in profane irony; - as if this godless captain of a godless king, would make stern proof of how bootless was the name, when fifty gleaming swords were ready to leap from their scabbards should resistance be attempted. But even had no such arrogant sarcasm been implied, it was crime and presumption enough to order thus summarily a prophet of Israel, who had done nought but deliver a message on his Master's authority, to surrender himself captive at the bidding of a recreant and apostate monarch. It was not so much contempt of Elijah, as insult to Him whose messenger and servant he was. Woe betide the earthly power that would dare dish on our an ambassador of the Most High!

Elijah, resolute and unmoved, majestically answered, "**If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from Heaven and consume thee and thy fifty.**" Grandly does the Tishbite appear at this moment, - not in anger, but with the calm dignity of conscious POWER, as the divinely-appointed [270] minister of vengeance. He vindicates his mission and magnifies his office.

He remembers that his own name signifies "*GOD the Lord:*" to rise up therefore against him, was to insult and desecrate the awful character he bore, as the representative and vice-regent of Heaven. That captain and his fifty, as the delegates of an earthly sovereign, had dared to defy and outbrave the warning of the King of kings, "**Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm.**"

As THE PROPHET OF FIRE, Elijah gives the word. The lightning leaps from the cloud. At one flash, the captain and his fifty lie scattered on the green sward of Carmel - a mass of smouldering ashes - a silent, terrible testimony to the truth, "**THE LORD LIVETH.**" "**The Lord reigneth; let the people tremble.**" "**A fire goeth before him and burneth up all his enemies round about; the heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory.**"

The king, meanwhile, has been waiting in the vain expectation of the return of his soldiers with the captured Prophet. He cannot brook delay. Another captain with fifty are commissioned to go forth on the same embassy; and bearing a still more urgent and imperious message.

Unappalled by the spectacle of his smitten comrades, the leader of this second band delivers the summons, "**O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly.**" But vain is the arrogant demand. Again the artillery of Heaven opens, the volleyed lightning speeds, - and the second fifty share the terrible fate of their predecessors. "**The Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the Highest gave his voice; hailstones and coals of fire. Yea, he sent out his arrows, and scattered them; and he shot out lightnings, and discomfited [271] them,**" (Psalm 18:13, 14.)

Ahaziah could not fail, by this time, to be fully cognisant of these appalling judgments.

He might possibly have ventured to put an atheist construction on the death of the first fifty, - that they had been the victims of unhappy and untoward accident, - that the lightnings - the capricious shafts from the quiver of nature - had, by sad mishap, fallen on the slopes of Carmel where his soldiers were.

But now that the very same catastrophe had overtaken the second relay, there could surely be little debate that a Higher hand had put the bow on the string and made ready the arrows.

Blinded indeed must that dying monarch be, if he still refuse to desist from his mad, impotent rage. If there be no reprieve from the merited doom pronounced on his own head, surely, at all events, ere the retributive sentence be executed, he will with his dying breath do homage to the Almighty Being he has insulted and provoked, and confess that the Jehovah of Elijah is the only true GOD.

Alas! how much it takes to humble the proud heart. Apart from divine grace no outward trial can do it. Impending death itself, that hour when, we might suppose, all false confidences and illusions might well be shaken, finds the hardened and impenitent impervious as ever to conviction. Hence the miserable delusion of those who, trust to the relentings and penitential feelings of their last hours. It is too often a vain unrealized dream. "**As men live, so do men die!**"

- The Scorners in life, is a Scorners at the last:
- The blasphemer in life, is often a wilder blasphemer at the last.
- The unjust remain "unjust still," and the filthy remains "filthy still."

Oh, it is the saddest picture of moral apostasy, - the saddest exponent of the [272] enmity of the unregenerate heart, - when even the King of terrors brings no terror to the seared conscience and

indurated soul, - the banner of proud defiance against GOD and His CHRIST waved, even when the awful gloom of mortal darkness is closing in all around!

The king's passion is still roused, - the fever of vengeance burns hot as ever; and the last miserable dregs of his life are spent in the renewed attempt to baffle Omnipotence, but only to squander afresh the blood of his innocent soldiers.

A third troop of fifty are equipped and sent forth on the same luckless errand.

Wise, however, at all events on this latter occasion, is their leader. On reaching Carmel, he sees from the awful memorials of rejected warning in the blackened skeletons around, how vain it would be, again contemptuously to summon Elijah to surrender; how vain rather, by assaulting the person of his ambassador, to rush with madness against the bosses of Jehovah's buckler.

He falls down a suppliant at the Prophet's feet, begs his own life and that of his followers. He besought him, and said unto him - "**O man of God, I pray thee let my life and the life of these fifty thy servants be precious in thy sight. Behold there came fire down out of Heaven and burnt up the two captains of the former fifties with their fifties, therefore let my life now be precious in thy sight.**"

Be it ours to imitate the example of this soldier, and take timeous warning by the fearful fate of the despisers of divine vengeance.

Every narrative of punishment in the olden time, is a parable, - the foreshadow of sadder eternal realities, written for our admonition on whom the ends of the world have come. The present incident is one of these [273] Old Testament prefigurations, of the certain doom that will overtake all who dare to fight against GOD. "**Hand**" here is "**joined in hand**;" - fifty by fifty league themselves against the Almighty; but their "**swift destruction**" reads to us the solemn moral, that "**the wicked shall not escape unpunished.**"

Yes, let all who make light of divine warnings and venture on high-handed resistance to GOD's word and will, gather around these heaps of smouldering ashes and splintered armour on the slopes of Carmel, and hear the silent voice of the silent dead proclaim the sterner verities of a world to come, - "**Upon the wicked he shall rain fire and brimstone and an horrible tempest; this is the portion of their cup,**" "**The chaff he shall burn with unquenchable fire!**"

Ere we leave the scene of flaming retribution, let us connect it and contrast it, for a moment, with that other "**answer by fire,**" which, ten years before, had descended on this same mountain. The two may not inaptly be taken as symbolic illustrations of the law and the Gospel.

The Gospel lesson and picture is conveyed in the older narrative.

The fire from Heaven, invoked by Elijah, fell on the sacrifice as an atonement for the sins of the people. The thousands of Israel were gathered around, gazing in expectant silence, while the lone Prophet laid the bullock in pieces on the altar. As the fire at his intercession came down; not an Israelite was touched, not a hair of their head was singed; the visible emblem of GOD's wrath consumed the vicarious sacrifice: then followed the rain clouds of blessing, and the multitudes

dispersed with the praises of Jehovah on their lips [274] . . . **"Oh give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever!"** (Psalm 118:27, 29.)

In our present narrative, we behold the emblem of the law. That previous, ever-memorable day of sacrifice, seems to be guiltily forgotten and ignored alike by king and soldiers. The altar erected by Elijah is desecrated: the shrine of Baal-zebub at Ekron is madly preferred to it. And now, when above the same hallowed ground, the clouds of Heaven again part, - the winged lightning-emblem of righteous vengeance - falls on the defiant sinners themselves. The rejected Deity manifests Himself under the awful revelation of **"a consuming fire."**

Do we know the reality of this solemn alternative?

"The Lord answereth by fire!" Fire - the wrath due to sin - must come down, either on the sinner or on the provided Sacrifice. Reject the Saviour and His great atonement, and however splendid or imposing may be our own moralities and boasted righteousness, **"fire"** must come forth from His presence and **"mingle our blood with our sacrifices."**

Blessed are they who have been enabled to lay hold by faith on the glorious Gospel declaration,- **"Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us."** We may devoutly say, in the words of the captain of the third fifty, as we address the true **"Man of God"** - the **"Man of His right hand"** - the God-Man Mediator - **"O man of GOD, I pray thee, let my life be precious in thy sight!"** 'I have given thee,' May He not reply, 'the best proof which, (Omnipotent though I be) I could give, that your life is thus precious in my sight, in not sparing my own, that ye might have the gracious offer of a free salvation! The precious blood I [275] shed, is the evidence and exponent of the preciousness of your souls to life! **I came that ye might have life, and that ye might have it more abundantly!"**

But to return. The supplication of the third captain is graciously heard. As it was with Elijah's Lord in Horeb, so is it with himself now; the voice of mercy follows the earthquake and the fire. The lives of the troop are spared. The Angel of the Lord of the preceding context, again addressing his servant, bids him fearlessly join himself to the armed band, accompany them back to the city, and confront in person the dying king. The Prophet accordingly descends from the summit of the hill, and, unaccounted with human arms or panoply, joins the cavalcade.

We may imagine them entering the gates of Samaria. There is an unusual stir in the royal city. A monarch, whose life is fast ebbing in the palace, would be theme enough of absorbing interest and excitement. But to this was added the strange tale, or rather the startling reality, of the holocaust on Carmel, and the terrible revival of Elijah's power.

How the eager crowd would rush to the city-gates to catch a glimpse of the wonder-working Prophet - the captured hero, - loved and revered by many - dreaded by all!

And, if such were the feelings of the general population, what must have been those of the king, when, in a few moments, the rough hair-clad man stands at the bedside of the monarch he has doomed! It was the hawk cowering in the presence of the eagle.

We are again forcibly struck, indeed, with the calm dignity of Elijah's demeanour. There is no

reference to the miraculous vengeance - the fire-smiting of the earlier part of the day, no vaunting or parade of delegated omnipotence.

As the [276] minister of the Most High he simply utters his message, and then retires. He solemnly repeats, without comment, "**the word of the Lord**" - "**Thus saith the Lord, Forasmuch as thou hast sent messengers to enquire of Baal-zebub the God of Ekron, (is it not because there is no God in Israel to enquire of his word?) therefore thou shalt not come down off that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die.**"

The delivery of this doom ends the remarkable interview. The king is silent. He is too much appalled in the presence of the man of GOD, or else his bodily strength is sinking too rapidly, to permit him to entertain the thought either of remonstrance or of vengeance. The pallor of death slowly gathers over his countenance, - for the solemn statement immediately follows, "**So he died according to the word of the Lord which Elijah had spoken.**"

It was the Tishbite's last meeting with the house of Ahab, - his last message of wrath,- his last protest against Baal. The hours of his own earthly existence were now nearly spent, - already the sentence was framing in the upper sanctuary, "**Well done, good and faithful servant.**"

It is pleasing to think of him in this his closing public act, true as ever to his great life-work and calling, as the unflinching Reformer of his day, - denouncing the degradations of the Baal worship, quenching the strange fires on the defiled altars of his country, and rekindling the sacred flames; - the same heroic spirit we found him when first presented to us on the sacred page; like Moses, not fearing the wrath of the king, but enduring, as seeing Him who is invisible. "**Go down with him, be not afraid,**" said the Angel - The Lord to [277] the Prophet.

It is the same encouraging word JESUS speaks to us, in all time of our tribulation. He will Himself descend with us from our Carmels, to the battle of life, - from our hill-tops of prosperity to the valley of humiliation and trouble.

He says to us, as He said to His church in Philadelphia, "**I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation.**" "**At my first answer,**" says Paul, "**no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: . . . notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.**"

The reference to the incident which has occupied our attention in this chapter would not be complete, without taking in connection with it that parallel passage in the Gospels, where two Apostles, in the blindness of a false zeal, sought to draw, from Elijah's conduct on this occasion, a vindication of their own unworthy desire of retaliation (Luke 9:55). When our blessed Lord and His disciples were journeying together in this very district, on their way from Galilee to Jerusalem, - James and John were stung to the quick by the churlish inhospitality of some Samaritan villagers. These villagers had refused, to the Jewish strangers, the wonted courtesies accorded to travellers: and in their passionate misguided zeal, the two "**sons of thunder,**" (as the Lord had well named them,) - perhaps a distant view of Carmel suggesting the precedent, asked permission of their Master, that, in imitation of the old Prophet, they might call down fire from Heaven: "**Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to come down from Heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?**"

The proposal was sharply [278] rebuked and silenced.

"Ye know not," said He, **"what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."**

JESUS does not vindicate the conduct of the boorish, sectarian villagers; but He bids the imprecators of vengeance remember that they had grievously mistaken and misapprehended the character of the dispensation under which they lived. The days of Elijah were past. It was now no longer the economy of terror, judgment, visible retribution; but the gentle, peaceful era of the Gospel.

The calling down of fire from Heaven on the part of the Tishbite, was no more than the visible expression of the character of that severe, rigid dispensation, whose prophet and interpreter he was. It was different altogether under the dispensation of the Spirit - the newly inaugurated era of peace and love.

"The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them!" How this declaration rebukes the spirit of intolerance which has marked for centuries the career of persecuting churches, and more especially the apostate Church of Rome; - that Church which has sought to maintain its own supremacy, and to crush truth and freedom, by means of fire, prison, and the sword, - and this under the spurious name of "religious zeal."

Whatever be the strength of our own convictions, we dare not, as the children of the new dispensation of light and love and charity, attempt to lord it over the consciences of others. Corrupt worship and practice are not to be uprooted and extirpated by violence and penal laws. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal. They who use the sword must perish by the sword. All acts of resentment, vindictiveness, revenge,- either on the part of Christians [279] as individuals, or in their corporate capacity as a church, are inimical to the spirit and character of Him, who was meek and lowly in heart, and whose dying utterances were words of forgiveness.

And if we may draw yet another lesson from this same passage, and one more specially applicable to the times in which we live,- it is, that the present tendency to inflame and foster "the war-spirit" is in every way opposed to the economy of the Gospel. Let us not be mistaken or misapprehended. All honour to the brave men who (noble examples of self-sacrifice) are willing to shed their blood and surrender their lives for their country's good, - the guardians of our homes, our liberties, and all that are dear to us! Moreover, as society at least now exists, we pronounce those to be the wildest dreamers, who, on spurious "peace-at-any-price" principles, would disband our armies, - convert our swords into ploughshares, and pave with cannon our iron highways. ¹

But neither can we [280] coincide with those who would draw from the stern conflicts and bloody exploits recorded in the pages of Old Testament story, argument and defence, if not encouragement, for the savage realities of modern war, - and for the reason already assigned, that the character of the dispensation is completely changed.

As little dare we take the fierce campaigns of Joshua, Gideon, David, and others, with their cruel

accompaniments, to justify the modern war-spirit, - as we can take the fact of Elijah's slaughter of the apostate priesthood, or Elijah's invoking the fire to descend on Ahaziah's soldiers, as a vindication of the minister or priest who now would gird himself for the work of a homicide, - or venture, with his own hands, to take bloody retaliation on the enemies of Him to whom vengeance belongeth. Elijah's age (symbolized in Horeb by the earthquake, the hurricane, and the fire) has passed away, and has been succeeded. by that of "**the still small voice.**"

We maintain, therefore, that War,- meaning by that, either the wanton letting loose of the fierce passions of human nature, or the frantic lust of conquest and aggression, - is not more a blot on humanity, than a presumptuous violation and desecration of the spirit of the New Testament - that kingdom which "**is righteousness and peace.**"

May God, in His mercy, hasten the time, when the spirit of the new economy shall be more widely recognized and acknowledged, - when nations, as nations, shall listen to and obey the great law of the Gospel dispensation, enunciated by the lips of the Prince of Peace, its author and representative, - "**This is my commandment, that ye love one another!**" [281]

¹ *"Peace may be sought in two ways. One way is, as when Gideon sought it, when he built his altar in Ophrah, naming it, 'God send peace;' yet sought this peace that he loved, as he was ordered to seek it; and the peace was sent in GOD's way: 'The country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon.' And the other way of seeking peace is as Menahem sought it, when he give the king of Assyria a thousand talents of silver that his hand might be with him, That is, you may either win your peace, or buy it, - win it by resistance to evil; buy it by compromise with evil. You may buy your peace with silenced consciences; you may buy it with broken vows, buy it with lying words, buy it with base connivances, buy it with the blood of the slain, and the cry of the captive, and the silence of lost souls - over hemispheres of the earth; while you sit smiling at your serene hearths, lisping comfortable prayers evening and morning, and so mutter continually to yourselves, 'Peace, peace, when there is no peace; but only captivity and death, for you, as well as for those you leave unsaved; and yours darker than theirs.'" - Ruskin's Lectures: "Two Paths."*

~ end of chapter 18 ~
