

ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

By

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CHAPTER TWELVE

THE "STILL SMALL VOICE."

(I Kings 19)

REFRESHED by sleep and food, Elijah resumed his journey across the desert to Horeb. Perhaps no spot on earth is more associated with the manifested presence of God than that sacred mount. There the bush burned with fire; there the law was given; there Moses spent forty days and nights alone with God.

It was a natural instinct that led the prophet thither, and all the world could not have furnished a more appropriate school. Natural scenery and holy associations lent all their powers to impress and elevate the soul. Forty times the prophet saw the sun rise and set over the desert waste. I do not know that anyone has perfectly explained the meaning of that symbolic number which so frequently appears upon the page of Scripture, and is so often associated with failure and temptation. In passing, I can only note the fact of its frequent repetition. Thus, at last, the prophet came to Horeb, the mount of God. We have to consider how God dealt with His dispirited and truant child.

I. GOD SPAKE TO HIM

In some darksome cave, among those rent precipices, Elijah lodged; and, as he waited, in lonely-musings, the fire burned in his soul. But he had not long to wait. "**Behold, the word of the Lord came unto him.**"

That word had often come to him before.

- It had come to him at Thisbe.
- It had come to him in Samaria, after he had given his first message to Ahab.
- It had come to him when Cherith was dry.
- It had come to summon him from the solitudes of Zarephath to the stir of active life.
- And now it found him out, and came to him again.

There is no spot on earth so lonely, no cave so deep and dark, that the word of the Lord cannot discover and come to us.

But though God had often spoken to him before, He had never spoken in quite the same tone - **“What doest thou here, Elijah?”** The accent was stern and reproachful: “Thou art My servant; thou art set to do My will; if ever thou wast needed, it is now; the tide is on the turn; a great reformation is almost ripe. Why hast thou left thy post? How camest thou hither without My bidding or My leave?”

Elijah shrank from a direct reply. If he had answered truly, he must have confessed that he was utterly in the wrong, without a single word of extenuation or excuse. He had done wrong in leaving his post; and that first wrong step had been aggravated by every one which he had taken since, plunging him further and further into the dark.

If the prophet had answered that searching question of God with shame and sorrow; if he had confessed that he had failed, and asked for forgiveness; if he had cast himself on the pitifulness and tenderness of his Almighty Friend - there is not the least doubt that he would have been forgiven and restored. The past would never have been named against him; and the results of his fatal flight would have been repaired. God would Himself have stood in the breach, until His child could hasten back again to his post, and lead on the glorious work which he had so nobly commenced.

But instead of this, he parried the Divine question, and evaded it. He did not try to explain how he came there, or what he was doing. He chose rather to dwell upon his own loyalty for the cause of God; and to bring it out into striking relief by contrasting it with the sinful backslidings of his people.

“I have been very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant; thrown down Thine altars; and slain Thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”

All this was well known to God; and I do not think the prophet would ever have alluded to it, unless he had been hard pressed to find an excuse to palliate his own cowardice and neglect of duty.

In point of fact, he was thoroughly demoralized with unbelief and fear. The sky of his soul was covered with clouds so dense, that no star of comfort glimmered through their murky curtains. There was a tinge of self-vindication and of blame on others, which was scarcely worthy of him.

He did not sufficiently realize that the fault lay with himself; and that he, equally with others, was to blame for the pass to which the cause of God had come. His was a noble nature, under a temporary cloud; a palace in ruins; a splendid vessel rolling rudderless in the trough of the waves.

There was, no doubt, truth in what he said. He was full of zeal and holy devotion to the cause of God. He had often mourned over the national degeneracy. He keenly felt his own isolation and loneliness. But these were not the reasons why at that moment he was hiding in the cave; nor were they the real answer to that searching question, **“What doest thou here, Elijah?”** How often is that question put still!

When a Christian worker, sorely needed, deserts his post because of some unforeseen difficulty, or to secure selfish gratification and ease, to that couch of indolence, or to that forest glade where soft breezes blow, the question comes, “**What doest thou here?**”

When a child of God is found in the theater, the dancing saloon, or the place of evil companionship, sitting in the seat of scorners, or walking in the way of the ungodly, again must the question come as a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, “**What doest thou here?**”

When one endowed with great faculties digs a hole in the earth, and buries the God-entrusted talent, standing idle all the day long among the loungers in the market-place, again must the inquiry ring out, “**What doest thou here?**”

Life is the time for doing. The world is a great workshop, in which there is no room for drones. God Himself worketh as the great Masterbuilder. All creatures fulfill their needful functions, from the angel that hymns God’s praise to the wasp that buries a corpse. There is plenty to do - evil to put down; good to build up; doubters to be directed; prodigals to be won back; sinners to be sought. “**What doest thou here?**”

Up, Christians, leave your caves, and do! Do not do in order to be saved; but being saved, do!

II. GOD TAUGHT HIM BY A BEAUTIFUL NATURAL PARABLE

He was bidden to stand at the entrance to the cave; but this he hesitated to do, until afterward. Did that hesitancy arise from a guilty conscience, reminding him that all was not right between him and God?

Presently there was the sound of the rushing of a mighty wind; and in another moment a violent tornado was sweeping past. Nothing could withstand its fury. It rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; the valleys were littered with splintered fragments; but the Lord was not in the wind. And when the wind had died away, there was an earthquake. The mountain swayed to and fro, yawning and cracking; the ground heaved as if an Almighty hand were passing beneath it; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And when the earthquake was over, there was a fire. The heavens were one blaze of light, each pinnacle and peak glowed in the kindling flame; the valley beneath looked like a huge smelting-furnace; but the Lord was not in the fire.

How strange! Surely these were the appropriate natural symbols of the Divine presence. If we had been asked to describe it, we should have used these first of all. But hark! a still small whisper is in the air - very still, and very small, like the trembling echoes of a flute which is being played among the hills. It touched the listening heart of the prophet. If the more tumultuous outburst of power had expressed the storm and tumult of his nature, this elicited and interpreted a sweeter, nobler self, and cast a softening spell over his tempest-tossed spirit, and seemed to be the tender cadence of the love and pity of God which had come in search of him. Its music drew him from the cave, into the innermost recesses of which he had been driven by the terrible convulsions of nature.

“And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave.”

What was the meaning of all this?

It is not difficult to understand. Elijah was most eager that his people should be restored to their allegiance to God; and he thought that it could only be done by some striking and wonderful act. He may have often spoken thus with himself: “Those idols shall never be swept from our land, unless God sends a movement swift and irresistible as the wind, which hurries the clouds before it. The land can never be awakened except by a moral earthquake. There must be a baptism of fire.”

And when he stood on Carmel, and beheld the panic among the priests and the eagerness among the people, he thought that the time - the set time - had come. But all that died away. That was not God’s chosen way of saving Israel. And because He did not go on working thus, Elijah thought that He was not working at all; and abandoned himself to the depths of despondency.

But in this natural parable God seemed to say: “My child, thou hast been looking for Me to answer thy prayers with striking signs and wonders; and because these have not been given in a marked and permanent form, thou hast thought Me heedless and inactive. But I am not always to be found in these great visible movements; I love to work gently, softly, and unperceived; I have been working so; I am working so still; and there are in Israel, as the results of My quiet, gentle ministry, seven thousand, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.”

Yes, and was not the gentle ministry of Elisha, succeeding the stormy career of his great predecessor, like the still small voice after the wind, the earthquake, and the fire? And is it not probable that more real good was effected by his unobtrusive life and miracles, than was even wrought by the splendid deeds of Elijah?

We often fall into similar mistakes.

When we wish to promote a revival, we seek to secure large crowds, much evident impression, powerful preachers; influences comparable to the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. When these are present, we account that we are secure of having the presence and power of God. But surely Nature herself rebukes us. Who hears the roll of the planets? Who can detect the falling of the dew? Whose eye has ever been injured by the breaking of the wavelets of daylight on the shores of our planet? **“There is no speech, nor language; where their voice is not heard.”**

At this moment the mightiest forces are in operation around us; but there is nothing to betray their presence. And thus was it with the ministry of the Lord Jesus. He did not strive, nor cry, nor lift up, nor cause His voice to be heard in the streets. Whilst men were expecting Him at the front door, with blare of trumpet, He stepped into His destined home in the disguise of a peasant’s child. His going forth is ever prepared as the morning. He comes down as showers on the mown grass. His Spirit descends as the dove, whose wings make no tremor in the still air.

Let us take heart! God may not be working as we expect; but He is working. If not in the wind, yet in the zephyr. If not in the earthquake, yet in the heart-break. If not in the fire, yet in the warmth of summer. If not in thunder, yet in the still small voice. If not in crowds, yet in lonely hearts; in silent tears; in the broken sobs of penitents; and in multitudes, who, like the seven thousand of Israel, are unknown as disciples.

But Elijah refused to be comforted. It seemed as if he could not shake off the mood in which he was ensnared. And so when God asked him the second time, “What **doest thou here, Elijah?**” he answered in the self-same words with which he had tried to justify himself before: “**And he said I have been very jealous . . .**”

It is pleasant to think of those seven thousand disciples, known only to God. We are sometimes sad, as we compare the scanty number of professing Christians with the masses of ungodly. But we may take heart: there are other Christians besides.

That harsh-seeming governor is a Joseph in disguise. That wealthy owner of the garden in Arimathea is a lowly follower of Jesus. That member of the Sanhedrim is a disciple, but secretly, for fear of the Jews. For every one entered on our rolls of communicants, there are hundreds - perhaps thousands - whom God shall reckon as His when He makes up His jewels. But if you, dear reader, are one of that number, I entreat you, do not remain so: it puts you in a false position; it robs the cause of God of your help and influence; it is an act of treachery to Christ Himself. Beware lest, if you are ashamed of Him, the time may come when He shall be ashamed of you.

It is quite true that confession means martyrdom in one form or another; and sometimes our heart and flesh shrink back in unutterable anguish as we contemplate the possible results of refusing the act of obeisance to Baal. But, at such times, let us cheer ourselves by anticipating the august moment when the dear Master will speak our names before assembled worlds, and own us as His. And let us also ask Him in us and through us to speak out and witness a good confession; effecting that in us and by us which we are totally powerless to effect by ourselves.

We are all doing more good than we know. Elijah thought that he was doing nothing, except when battling with idolatry and sin. He never thought how often he was helping those seven thousand, by the indirect influence of his example. We, perhaps, accomplish less by our great efforts than we effect by a consistent life, a holy character, a daily shining. Lighthouse keepers never know how many weary, longing eyes turn in the darkness to the silent light they maintain through the dark night. Our duty is to shine, not asking questions, not eager for great results; but content to do the will of God, consistently, humbly, and constantly, sure that God is not unrighteous to forget our work of faith and labor of love.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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