

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 15

THE CALL OF ELISHA

"So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he with the twelfth: and Elijah passed by him, and cast his mantle upon him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee. And he said unto him, Go back again: for what have I done to thee? And he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat: then he arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him." (I Kings 19:19-21)

"ALSO I HEARD THE VOICE OF THE LORD, SAYING, WHOM SHALL I SEND, AND WHO WILL GO FOR US? THEN SAID I, HERE AM I, SEND ME." (Isaiah 6:8)

"RISE, HE CALLETH THEE." (Mark 10:49) [214]

OF the three divine declarations, referred to in the commencement of the previous chapter, regarding "**the throne and the altar of Israel**," the last must have been especially cheering to the Prophet.

After his recent experience of weakness and temptation, he may have sighed, as he never did before, for the friendship and sympathy of some kindred spirit. GOD had graciously provided a true "**brother born for adversity**." Accordingly, guided either by his own impulse and inclination, or by express authority, he inverts the order of the threefold direction, and speeds him first to find out the son of Shaphat. We have, in this new incident in his history, another of those rapid dramatic changes with which we are now familiar.

There is not a word said in the narrative about the long journey, by which, all alone, he retraced his steps to the north-east of Palestine. From gazing in thought on the awful solitudes of the Sinai desert,- the whirlwind and tempest and fire still blinding us with their terror, and the voice of GOD, more solemn than all, sounding in that magnificent sanctuary of nature,- we are transported, in a moment, to a quiet pastoral scene,- a peaceful home,- by the banks or on the plain of the Jordan.

It is a picture of domestic sunshine;- twelve ploughs and teams of oxen are busy in [215] early spring preparing the ground for the reception of the seed;- and the last of the twelve is guided by the hand probably of an only son,- doted on by fond parents, and he not slow in returning their

love. It must have been, too, a joyous spring-time.

With elastic step, must these eleven ploughmen, with their young master, have gone forth to the fields. For three years and a half had the oxen been "**pining in empty stalls**," - the implements of husbandry unused,- and the sickles of harvest rusting in the desolate barns.

But the sky had at last opened its windows. Man and beast, emancipated from their tedious thralldom, go forth to their appointed task. The furrows, once more moist with genial rain and dew, invite the seed. The ploughshare drives its way through the stubborn glebe; nature is about to spring from her grave, and rejoice in her new resurrection attire.

In the midst of this busy patriarchal scene, the toil-worn Prophet of Carmel and Horeb presents himself. We cannot point to the spot. It must, however, have been somewhere not far from the old familiar Cherith; or from the town of Pella, now hallowed to us through the remembrances of a later age.¹

The presence of the Prophet could not be other than a startling apparition.

With no ordinary feelings must the son of Shaphat and his eleven husbandmen - when pursuing their quiet avocations - have seen all at once at their side, the stalwart figure of GOD's illustrious vice-regent;- one whose name had been for years a household word,- associated with mingled feelings of reverence and terror, awe and wonder! And the whole occurrence, [216] or interview, if we may call it so, was equally strange, unique, dramatic.

In silence,- without uttering a word, Elijah takes off his well-known prophet's mantle - casts it on the shoulders of the young farmer - and then passes on.

How soon and how faithfully has Jehovah's promise been ratified. Before the Seer reaches the skirts of the wilderness of Damascus, his own longings for human companionship are fulfilled. GOD has given him the first pledge of "the hidden church."

He has discovered one family at least, of the reserved "thousands," still faithful to Him.

A ray of new sunshine must at that moment have suffused itself over his soul. He must have felt as if an oppressive load were lifted off his spirit, and as if his own special mission of wind and earthquake and fire were now to be superseded by a gentler embassy. Here was the promised messenger of "**the still small voice**;" - the finisher of the work of which he had himself laid the rugged foundations.

In the spirit of his great antitype, he would be willing to say, in joyful self-renunciation, "**He must increase, and I must decrease.**"

Elisha, in his turn, sudden and startling as the whole transaction was, seems in a moment to have understood the symbol. He knew well, when he felt the garment touching his shoulders, that it formed the token alike of investiture in the sacred office, and of his adoption as son of the Tishbite. [217] ²

There may have been, (there must have been) a rush of conflicting emotions impelling him to cast the vestment aside, and reject summarily the proffered honour. 'What! I the successor of the great Elijah! I, who know nothing but of the sowing of perishable seed, to go forth scattering the imperishable!' But, under the human symbol, he saw the divine hand,- the indubitable commission of Heaven. "**The still small voice**" spoke too articulately to be mistaken or misinterpreted.

To him, as to thousands since, that gracious promise may have come home as a balm-word of comfort - "**He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.**"

Leaving his team of oxen, he speeds him after the great Prophet. Without one syllable of remonstrance regarding his acceptance of the divine call, he prefers the request "**Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee.**"

With similar brevity, without the [218] interchange of any words of courtesy - all silent as to the momentous future - Elijah simply says - "**Go (or return) back again - for what have I done to thee?**", Go! 'as if he said-' But speedily return; for thou understandest well the token;- thou art from this hour the accredited messenger of GOD,- the consecrated seer of Israel.'

Again, without venturing to reply, Elisha hastens to his home hard by, and communicates to his parents the startling tidings. In a brief hour, the destiny of a whole life is changed. In accordance with true patriarchal wont, the Prophet-elect assembles for the last time, around the domestic hearth, the faithful associates in his daily toils! A farewell meal must be partaken of by all. Father, mother, son, servants, seat themselves around the homely board; each heart, we can readily believe, filled with profound emotion.

In connection with the feast, there occurs, in that dispensation of symbolism, another significant typical act. Elisha's agricultural labours are to be renounced for ever; he is to put his hand to a different plough, and never more to "look back."

There must be some expressive outward token of that abandonment. The animals which he had driven before him in plough and harrow, are slain. The implements of husbandry are used as fuel to prepare their flesh for the entertainment. The very harness and tackling are thrown into the fire, to complete the symbol of entire and unqualified renunciation.

The feast is over. The long parting kiss is given to affectionate parents;- the father's blessing is received and returned;- and then, forth goes the ordained Prophet on his predestined mission. On overtaking his master, he immediately [219] begins his lowly offices of ministrations. We may picture in thought the two, journeying on in company to the cities of Samaria, encouraging one another in the Lord their GOD.

Among other practical lessons suggested by the calling of Elisha, let us note, *the variety of character among GOD's servants.*

Never were there two individuals more opposite than these two lights of this age in Israel,- alike in training and in mental temperament.

The one, as we have more fully delineated him in the opening chapter:

- was the rough child of the desert, without recorded parentage or lineage.
- His congenial and appropriate home the wilds of Cherith
- the thunder-gloom of Carmel
- the shade of the wilderness juniper
- the awful cliffs of Sinai;
- a direct messenger of wrath from Heaven - THE PROPHET OF FIRE!

The other, is trained and nurtured under the roof of a genial home, mingling daily in the interchange of domestic affection - loving and beloved.

- No ambitious thought had he beyond his patrimonial acres;
- tending his parents in their old age;
- ministering to their wants;
- and, when the time came, laying their dust in the sepulchre of his fathers.

Even his physical appearance is in striking contrast with that of the other. In the future glimpses we have of his outer life, we look in vain for the stately mien and shaggy raven locks and rough hairy dress of the Bedouin.

If we are most familiar with the one in rocky wilds, caves,- deserts,- mountain solitudes; we are so, with the other, among the homesteads of Israel, or leading a city-life, as a foster-father, among the schools of the prophets.

If the one has been likened to the sun,- the other has the softened lustre of the moon, or of the quiet evening [220] star.

If the one be like his great future successor, "**laying the axe to the root of the tree,**" - making the thronging crowds tremble and cower under words of doom;- the other is surely a faint but lovely reflection of the Baptist's greater Lord, who would not "break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax;" loving ever to deal, in the case of sensitive consciences, with the utmost tenderness; as we see exemplified in his treatment of Naaman's scruples to bow with his master in the temple of Rimmon.

Their very names stand in emphatic contrast. The one meaning either, as we have previously noted, "*My God, the Lord,*" or else, perhaps, "*The strength of God,*" or "*The strong Lord;*" - strength, the lion-symbol, being specially associated with the deeds of Elijah. The other, Elisha, "*GOD is my Saviour,*" or, "*GOD my salvation.*"

If the Tishbite's motto was "*Jehovah, the strong Lord, liveth,*" - Elisha's might appropriately be that of a lowly saint of coming days, "**My soul doth magnify the Lord, my spirit hath rejoiced in GOD MY SAVIOUR.**"

The two, moreover, were raised up for different objects, and each possessed special qualifications for his appointed work.

The one was a destroyer;- Baal, the reputed "lord of force" or "power," had, as we have seen, usurped the place and prerogative of Jehovah. Elijah's task was to overturn this false deity of force, and shew, by startling miracle and judgment, that "**POWER belongeth unto God.**"

Elisha was the healer;- beneficence tracked his path. As his master's career was inaugurated with a miracle of drought and famine,- his, on the contrary, was inaugurated by the healing of the waters at Jericho, and the warding off the curse of barrenness!

In a word, the one was the "Boanerges" of his time;- a "**Son of Thunder!**" the other was [221] Barnabas, "**the Son of Consolation.**" The one stands before us "**the man of like passions.**" The other, the man of like sensibilities.

And there are the same remarkable, the same beautiful diversities, to this hour, in the Church of CHRIST. As in external nature, a forest is not made up of the same trees,- or if the same in kind, each individual tree assumes its own peculiar shape; as every garden has its diversity of flower and shrub; as each field has its varied crop,- all different, yet all ministering to the common necessities of man; as each face has its varied features, with countless varieties of expression; and each body its varied organs - yet all necessary for the completeness of the frame;- so, we trace the same singular yet beautiful diversity in the moral and intellectual and spiritual character of GOD's servants.

Moreover, He adapts them for their varied positions and posts of usefulness in His Church. To every man his work.

Luther and Knox - the Elijahs of their times,- had their vocation in preparing the way for the Zwingles and Melancthons - the gentler messengers of peace;- blasting the rocks,- digging out the rough, unshapely, unhewn block,- to put it into the hands of these more refined sculptors to polish into shape and beauty.

He has men whose province it is to carry the assault into the enemies' works by bold word and deed;- those distinguished for organisation;- ingenious in device for the outward lengthening of the cords and strengthening of the stakes of Zion.

He has others, whose vocation is neither pulpit nor platform,- synod nor council,- ecclesiastical debate nor stern polemics;- but the quiet duties of the study or the closet;- men who are thinking while others are acting,- doing in their own way a secret [222] work, without noise or ostentation;- who could not stand the shouts and clamour of Carmel,- thankful that there are Elijahs who can;- but who love rather to carry their influence amid the homes of Israel, and amid the schools of the prophets.

Thank GOD for this unity in diversity, and diversity in unity.

The division of labour, so needful in social and economic life, is illustrated with equal beauty in the diversity of gifts and operations in the Church of CHRIST: each, in his own way and sphere, labouring for one common end.

In the building of the temple of old, the rough mountaineers of Lebanon were as much needed to hew down the cedar trees, as Hiram of Tyre's cunning workmen to prepare and cast the mouldings of brass, and carve the delicate interlacings of gold.

Let us never depreciate one spiritual workman's avocation at the expense of another. Every "**hammer, and axe, and tool of iron**" is required to shape, and cast, and mould the varied parts; but all are tending to one ultimate object - the bringing forth of the "**topstone with shouting,**" when the cry shall be made - "Grace, grace unto it!"

Although, however, we have spoken of the contrast in the mental temperaments of these two great Prophets, let us not therefore regard them as unkindred, uncongenial, antagonistic. We know how much the reverse was the case; how tender the sympathetic bond which united them.

Opposite in character, they knew that they were embarked in one great and glorious work.

As months rolled on, the golden link of friendship became stronger;- and when the last parting of all arrived, it is manifest how fondly the man of rough visage and iron will, clung to the loving heart from [223] which he was about to be parted. See how these brethren love one another!

We may gather, as a second lesson, *the honour GOD puts on ordinary secular occupations of life.*

Elisha is found,- not engaged in temple worship in Jerusalem or Samaria, not even in meditation and prayer in the retirement of his father's dwelling, but at his plough,- driving before him his team of oxen.

This is another of the reiterated lessons in Scripture as to the dignity and sacredness of labour, and the divine recognition of it.

- Moses was called to his high commission whilst in charge of the flocks of Jethro his father-in-law.

- Gideon, the great champion of his age, was called to be the instrument in overthrowing the gigantic power of Midian while threshing wheat with his father's bullocks at the winepress of Ophrah.

- The announcement of the Saviour's birth was made to the shepherds of Bethlehem while tending their flocks;

- and to the sages of Arabia while gazing on their eastern stars.

- Matthew, the apostle and evangelist, was summoned to attend his great Master while collecting the harbour dues at the port of Capernaum.

- Peter, and John, and Andrew, while busied with their boats and nets, were called to become fishers of men.

Never let us imagine honourable employment in this work-day world to be incompatible with religious duty.

GOD, in all these and other instances, sanctifies daily avocation and toil.

Our worldly callings need not, and ought not, to interfere with the paramount claims of religion in the heart and life. The one rather should assist, stimulate, dignify, and elevate the other. Such pursuits indeed, are not to be confounded with [224] an unreasonable and unseasonable entanglement with "the cares of this life," - when religion is chased - hunted out of every chamber of the soul,- with the lash of engrossing worldliness;- when business or pleasure is suffered so to monopolize, that nothing but the merest crumbs and sweepings of existence can be spared for the claims of GOD and eternity.

But if work and duty be faithfully and honestly intermingled;- diligence in worldly business, the faithful discharge of worldly claims, the engagement in active earthly pursuits and callings, ought to prove, and will prove, rather a stimulus to fervency in spirit, serving the Lord.

Once more - observe, in the case of Elisha and his parents, *the spirit of joyful self-sacrifice manifested at the call of duty.*

Great, undoubtedly, as was the honour of becoming the consecrated prophet of GOD;- we cannot think of his acceptance of the high office, without, at the same time, having suggested the idea of self-renunciation.

Judging from the brief narrative, he was no candidate for such honours. He had all which the world could give to make him happy. In his case the prayer of Agur had been fulfilled to the letter.

He seemed to be in the enjoyment of an ample - a more than ample - competency.

- The heir of a small patrimonial inheritance in one of the rich plains of Gilead;
- twelve pair of oxen and servants at his command;
- a home, with the most hallowed of ties to bind him to his roof-tree,
- the parents from whose lips he had been taught to fear and reverence that GOD to whom his public life was now to be consecrated.

Then add to all this, not only did the severance and relinquishment of these dear family ties [225] involve a struggle, but, in accepting the call of the great Prophet, he was placing himself in circumstances of formidable peril.

- He was abandoning a sphere of quiet, uninvaded seclusion, for the arena of public life;
- He was exposing himself to the implacable resentment of Jezebel and her minions, whose fury had become more ungovernable than ever, since the recent discomfiture at Carmel.

But there is not so much as one hesitating thought;- no converse with flesh and blood;- no tampering with expediency. The call was from GOD. There was no gainsaying it.

In a moment, the most cherished objects, thoughts, hopes of life are surrendered; and he prepares to set out on his arduous calling. Nor does he even manifest, in this last hour spent under the home of his childhood and youth, the natural struggle which, in a heart like his, must have taken place. He keeps all sentimental feelings in abeyance. There is no moping sadness. He makes it even a joyous occasion. He hastily assembles parents, neighbours, friends, servants, around the social board, and bids an affectionate farewell.

We have already noted the pledge of entire self-surrender, lest his heart might be tempted to yield to home influences in that trying hour. He not only kills the oxen; but ropes and tackle, plough and harrow, are cast into the flames.

Like his true apostolic successors, he leaves all to consecrate himself to GOD. In a noble sense, he "denies himself, takes up his cross, and follows."

But to him, as to all who have imbibed his spirit and copied his example, the great promise was fulfilled - **"Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or parents, or brethren, or wife, or children for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold [226] more in this present time; and in the world to come, life everlasting."**

Nor is it Elisha's conduct only that is worthy of note.

That aged pair, who for years had fondly doted on a son all worthy of their affection, manifest an equally beautiful spirit of willing self-surrender. We have every reason to think of him as the prop and pride of their old age.

Among the last thoughts that aged man and his wife entertained, was that of being severed from this light of their dwelling - the nourisher of their old age!

With what fond interest would he daily be followed as he left the household. How would his footfall be joyfully welcomed, as he returned in the gray twilight to stall his oxen, and pen his flocks. Sad would be the day when either duty or death should render vacant his chair at the family hearth. That day has come.

In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye,- the parents are informed that the unexpected blow is impending;- that one plough less is hereafter to be seen in the plain;- that another voice has called him for a son; and that, henceforth, the quiet scenes of the Jordan valley are to be exchanged for the toil and anxiety of an exalted station.

Do they remonstrate? Do they lay an arresting hand on him as he now stands before them, probably in the pride of full manhood, and plead, with tears,- their age - home claims - filial and parental love? No!

Whatever may have been felt, not a tear is shed. It is the voice of GOD calling their loved one to a glorious, honoured work.

If one misgiving come over them, as at that farewell feast they think of a happy past, and glance forward to the blank of the future;- their eyes rest on the hairy cloak of the man of GOD - mute

but expressive symbol! [227]

'Go, go, my son,' would be the words stammered forth from trembling lips, 'for the Lord hath called thee. **"His work is honourable and glorious, and His righteousness endureth for ever!"**'

What a lesson for us, this abnegation of self for GOD and duty.

- What have we surrendered of our worldly ease, our pleasures, our money, our children, our advantages, for Him and His cause?

- What have we done to disarm the power of besetting sins,- by cutting off, like Elisha, the occasion of them,- saying, 'Let oxen, implements, tackling, all go, and perish in the flames, if they rob our hearts of CHRIST, or CHRIST of our hearts?'

- Matthew locked the door of his tollhouse behind him: he would never enter it again.

- The magicians of Ephesus burnt their magical books that they might never more incur the risk of being involved in their sorceries.

And, if we be Christians indeed,- the disciples and followers of the Lord JESUS:- if a greater than Elijah has "**passed by,**" and thrown the cloak of consecration around us;- as "**priests unto God**" - conscious of our high calling and destiny - be it ours, with some feeble measure of the apostle's lofty spirit at self-surrender, to say, "**Yea, doubtless, I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.**" [228] [Page 229 left blank]

¹ *Abel-meholah is placed by Robinson ten miles south of Scythopolis.*

² *"This ceremony has always been considered by Eastern people an indispensable part of the consecration to the sacred office. It is in this way that the Brahmins are still invested with the priestly character, a yellow mantle being thrown across their shoulders, which is buckled round the waist with a sacred ribbon; and it is in this way, too, that the Persian sooffees are appointed. The master, in the anticipation of death, selecting one of his favourite pupils, bequeaths his antiquated garment to the [217] youth, who by that act is publicly recognised as his successor, and looked upon as inheriting along with the mantle, the virtues and powers of his venerable precursor. The Suffavean dynasty, who long occupied the throne of Persia, owed the origin of their family to the reputation which the founder of it enjoyed for sanctity. That person, who was universally regarded as a holy man, was succeeded by his grandson, Juncyd, who took up his mantle after the death of his grandsire, and a crowd of disciples flocked to him as the heir of the talents and qualifications of his deceased relative. It was evidently owing to the prevalence of the same Asiatic sentiments among the Israelites, that the succession to the prophetic office was determined by the descent of his master's cloak of camel's haircloth afterwards upon Elisha, and so well was the action understood, as conveying to the servant the spirit and authority of the master, that he was universally acknowledged as the successor of that eminent prophet, and the leading champion in his age of the cause of GOD." - See Dr Jamieson's "Eastern Manners," p. 313.*

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