

ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

By

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CHAPTER TEN

HOW THE MIGHTY FELL!

(I. Kings 19)

AMID the drenching storm with which the memorable day of the convocation closed in, the king and the prophet reached Jezreel. Probably they were the first to bring tidings of what had occurred. Elijah went to some humble lodging for shelter and food; whilst Ahab repaired to the palace, where Jezebel awaited him. All day long the queen had been wondering how matters were going on Mount Carmel. She cherished the feverish hope that her priests had won the day; and when she saw the rain-clouds steal over the sky, she attributed the welcome change to some great interposition of Baal, in answer to their pleadings. May not some such colloquy as this have taken place between the royal pair, when they met in the palace interior?

“How have things gone to-day? No doubt, well; the rain has anticipated your favorable reply.”

“I have nothing to tell you that will give you pleasure.”

“Why! has anything happened?”

“The worst has happened.”

“What do you mean? Where are my priests?”

“You will never see them again.”

“Never see them again! What do you mean? Tell me quickly!”

“They are all dead; by this time their bodies are floating out to sea.”

“Who has dared to do this thing? Did they not defend themselves? Did you not raise your hand? How did they die? Where is Elijah? Have the people broken into revolt?”

“Then Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done; and withal how he had slain the prophets with the sword.”

Jezebel's indignation knew no bounds. She was like a tigress robbed of her young. Ahab's temperament was sensual and materialistic; if only he had enough to eat and drink, and the horses and mules were cared for, he was content. He could not understand people becoming so enthusiastic about religious matters. In his judgment there was not much to choose between God and Baal. His was the motto of the Epicurean, "**Let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die.**" Not so Jezebel. She was as resolute as he was indifferent. Crafty, unscrupulous, and intriguing, she molded Ahab to her mind; and, in doing so, anticipated the symbol of the Apocalypse, in which the scarlet-clad woman rides upon the beast.

To Jezebel the crisis was one of gravest moment. Policy, as well as indignation, prompted her to act at once. If this national reformation were permitted to spread, it would sweep away before it all that she had been laboring at for years. She must strike, and strike at once; and where would her blow tell so well as when aimed at the master-spirit of the day's proceedings? So that very night, amid the violence of the storm, she sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "**So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them, by to-morrow about this time.**"

That message betrays the woman. She did not dare to kill him, though he was easily within her power; and so she mastered her wrath, and contented herself with threats. Her mind was set on driving him from the country, so that she might be left free to repair the havoc he had caused. In this, alas! she was only too successful.

Elijah's presence had never been so necessary as now. The work of destruction had commenced, and the people were in a mood to carry it through to the bitter end. The tide had turned, and was setting in toward God; and he was needed to direct its flow, to keep the people true to the choice which they had made, and to complete the work of reformation by a work of construction.

From what we have seen of him, we should have expected that he would receive the message with unruffled composure; laying it before God in quiet confidence, assured that He would hide him in the secret of His pavilion, from the wrath of man, and shield him from the strife of tongues. Surely he will preserve a dignified silence, or return an answer like that which Chrysostom sent on a similar occasion to the Empress Eudoxia, "Go tell her I fear nothing but sin." But, instead of this, we are told (and surely the sacred historian must have heaved a deep sigh as he wrote the words), "**When he saw that, he arose, and went for his life.**"

"**He went for his life!**" Accompanied by his servant, and under covert of the night, he hurried through the driving storm, across the hills of Samaria, and directed his course, with true Bedouin instinct, toward the extreme south of Judea, where the pasture lands of Palestine fade into the drear expanse of the Arabian desert.

Nor did he slacken his speed till he had left far behind him the country over which Jezebel's scepter swayed, and had reached Beersheba, the town that clustered round the well of the oath - where, centuries before, Abraham had planted a grove, and called upon the name of the Lord. He was safe there; but even there he could not stay. His spirit seems to have become utterly demoralized and panic-stricken. He could not even brook the company of his servant; so, leaving him in Beersheba, he plunged alone into that wild desert waste that stretches southward to Sinai.

Through the weary hours he plodded on beneath the burning sun, his feet blistered by the scorching sands; no ravens, no Cherith, no Zarephath were there; no human sympathy lent him its kindly aid; the very presence of God seemed to have withdrawn itself from his side. At last the fatigue and anguish overpowered even his sinewy strength, and he cast himself beneath the slight shadow of a small shrub of juniper, and asked to die. **“It is enough now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers.”**

What might have been! If only Elijah had held his ground - dwelling in the secret place of the Most High, and hiding under the shadow of the Almighty - he might have saved his country; and there would have been no necessity for the captivity and dispersion of his people. The seven thousand secret disciples would have dared to come forth from their hiding-places, and avow themselves; and would have constituted a nucleus of loyal hearts, by whom Baal had been replaced by the Lord. Yes, and his own character would have escaped a stain which has resisted the obliterating erasure of the ages, and still remains, fraught with shame and sorrow.

Elijah's influence in Israel never recovered from that one false step. He missed a chance, which never came again. And though God, in His mercy, treated him lovingly and royally as a child. He never again reinstated him as a servant in just the position which he so thoughtlessly flung away. It is a solemn thought for us all! If for one moment we are left to ourselves, we may take a step which may shatter our influence, and forever after put us into a very different position from that which might have been ours if only we had remained true. As children, we may be forgiven; as servants we are never reinstated, or trusted quite as we were once.

It is noteworthy that the Bible saints often fail just where we should have expected them to stand.

- Abraham was the father of those who believe; but his faith failed him when he went down to Egypt, and lied to Pharaoh about his wife.
- Moses was the meekest of men; but he missed Canaan, because he spoke unadvisedly with his lips.
- John was the apostle of love; yet in a moment of intolerance he wished to call down fire out of Heaven.
- So Elijah, who might have been supposed to be superior to all human weakness, shows himself to be indeed **“a man subject to like passions as we are.”**

The old castle which from its hill watches over the town of Edinburgh, clustering beneath, was captured only once in the whole history of Scotland; and its capture happened thus: Its defenders thought that on one side the steepness of the rock made it inaccessible and impregnable; and they put no sentries there. And so, in the gray mist of the early morning, a little party crept up the precipitous slopes and surprised the garrison into surrender.

Is there not a warning here for us all? It may be that some have been saying boastfully of certain forms of vice, “I shall never yield to this or that. I have no inclination to such forms of sin. This is one of the points in which I am strong to resist.” Beware! - it may be that the great enemy of souls has a special design in producing in you a sense of false security, that he may assail and vanquish you in the very point in which you deem yourself impregnable, and so forbear to watch.

What a proof is here of the veracity of the Bible!

Had it been merely a human composition, its authors would have shrunk from delineating the failure of one of its chief heroes. No artist would think of snapping a column just as it was tapering to its coronal. Men sometimes complain against the Bible for its uncompromising portraiture. Yet, is not this its glory? It holds the mirror up to human nature, that we may learn what is in man; that we may none of us despair; and that we may infer that, if God were able to fashion his choicest ware out of such common earth, it is possible for Him to do as much again, in the most ignorant and degraded of His children.

Is there not even a gleam of comfort to be had out of the woeful spectacle of Elijah's fall?

If it had not been for this, we should always have thought of him as being too far removed from us to be in any sense a model. We should have looked on him as we do at the memorials of a race of giants, with whom we have nothing in common. But now, as we see him stretched under the shade of the juniper tree asking for death, behaving himself with more pusillanimity than many amongst us would have manifested, we feel that he was what he was only by the grace of God, received through faith. And by a similar faith we may appropriate a similar grace to ennoble our mean lives.

Several causes account for this terrible failure.

(1) His physical strength and nervous energy were completely overtaxed.

Consider the tremendous strain which he had undergone since leaving the shelter of the quiet home at Zarephath. The long excitement of the convocation, the slaughter of the priests, the intensity of his prayer, the eighteen miles swift run in front of Ahab's chariot, succeeded by the rapid flight, which had hardly been relaxed for a single moment till he cast himself upon the desert sand, had resulted in sheer exhaustion. He was suffering keenly from reaction, now that the extreme tension was relaxed, and this counted largely in the unutterable depression under which he was suffering.

We are "**fearfully and wonderfully made;**" and our inner life is very sensitive to our outward conditions.

It has been truly said, that the most trivial causes - a heated room, a sunless day, want of exercise, or a northern aspect - will make all the difference between happiness and unhappiness, between faith and doubt, between courage and indecision. Many who send for the religious teacher would be wiser if they sent for their physician. And if any who read these lines are conscious of having lost the sunny gladness and buoyant faith of former days, before they speak of the mysterious hidings of God's face, or lament their own backslidings, it might be well to inquire if there may not be some physical or nervous cause. And if there be, it will attract, not the blame, but the compassionate sympathy of Him who knoweth our frame, and remembereth that we are but dust.

When we consider the speed and strain of our times, it is marvelous that there are not more amongst us suffering from the intolerable depression beneath which Elijah sank on the desert sand.

(2) *He was keenly sensitive to his lonely position.*

“I only am left.” Some men are born to loneliness. It is the penalty of true greatness. At such a time the human spirit is apt to falter, unless it is sustained by an heroic purpose and by an unfaltering faith. The shadow of that loneliness fell dark on the spirit of our Divine Master Himself when he said: **“Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.”**

If our Lord shrank in the penumbra of that great eclipse, it is not wonderful that Elijah covered in its darksome gloom. You remind me that he might have had the company of his lad. But remember there is company which is not companionship. We may be more lonely in a crowd than in a desert. We need something more than human beings; we need human hearts, and sympathy, and love.

(3) *He looked away from God to circumstances.*

Up to that moment Elijah had been animated by a most splendid faith, because he had never lost sight of God. **“He endured as seeing Him who is invisible.”** Faith always thrives when God occupies the whole field of vision. But when Jezebel’s threats reached him, we are told most significantly, **“when he saw that, he arose, and went for his life.”**

In after years, Peter walked on the water until he looked from his Master to the seething waves. **“When he saw the wind boisterous he was afraid; and, beginning to sink, he cried. Lord save me!”** So here, whilst Elijah set the Lord always before his face, he did not fear, though an host encamped against him. But when he looked at his peril, he thought more of his life than of God’s cause; and was afraid of man that should die, and of the son of man that should be made as grass; and forgot the Lord, his Maker, which made Heaven and earth. **“When he saw that, he arose, and went for his life.”**

Let us refuse to look at circumstances, though they roll before us as a Red Sea, and howl around us like a storm. Circumstances, natural impossibilities, difficulties, are nothing in the estimation of the soul that is occupied with God. They are as the small dust that settles on a scale, and is not considered in the measurement of weight.

O men of God, get you up into the high mountain, from which you may obtain a good view of the glorious Land of Promise, and refuse to have your gaze diverted by men or things below!

It is a great mistake to dictate to God.

Elijah wist not what he said when he told God that he had had enough of life, and asked to die. If God had taken him at his word, he would have died under a cloud; he would never have heard the still small voice; he would never have founded the schools of the prophets, or commissioned Elisha for his work; he would never have swept up to Heaven in an equipage of flame.

What a mercy it is that God does not answer all our prayers! How gracious He is in reading their inner meaning, and answering that! This, as we shall see, is what He did for His tired and querulous servant.

How many have uttered those words, "**It is enough!**"

- the sufferer, weary of long and wearing pain;
- the wife tied to an inhuman husband;
- the Christian worker, whose efforts seem in vain:

"It is enough. Let me come home. The burden is more than I can bear. The lessons are tiresome. School-life is tedious; holidays will be so welcome. I cannot see that anything will be gained by longer delay. It is enough!"

O silly, silly children! little do we know how much we should miss if God were to do as we request. To die now would be to forego immeasurable blessings which await us within forty days' journey from this; and to die like a dog, instead of sweeping, honored and beloved, through the open gates of Heaven.

It is better to leave it all in the wise and tender thought of God. He wants us home; but will not let us come till we have learned the last lesson and done the last stroke of work. And we shall yet live to thank Him that He refused to gratify our wish, when, in a moment of despondency, we cast ourselves upon the ground, and said, "Let us die. It is enough!"

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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