

# ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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## Chapter 3

### THE RETREAT

**"And the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. And it shall be, that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there. So he went, and did according unto the word of the Lord: for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, that is before Jordan. And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook." (I Kings 17:2-6)**

**"SO THE SPIRIT LIFTED ME UP, AND TOOK ME AWAY; ... BUT THE HAND OF THE LORD WAS STRONG UPON ME." Ezekiel 3:14) [34]**

ONE of the striking dramatic incidents here occurs, which we shall often have occasion to note in the course of the Prophet's life.

Where he met the king of Israel, and delivered the abrupt communication considered in the last chapter, we know not. It may have been at some unexpected moment; as when Isaiah met King Ahaz **"in the highway of the fuller's field;"** or when the monarch was seated on some state-day in regal magnificence, with Jezebel at his side, amid a blaze of courtiers, in the palace of Jezreel; or on some religious festal occasion, when the six hundred priests of Baal, clad in their official vestments, were doing homage to the Phoenician idol, and rending the air with the cry **"O Baal, hear us!"**

All this, however, is left to conjecture. But the message having been delivered, the GOD, whose behest it was, proceeds to secure the safety of His faithful servant-alike from court vengeance and from being involved in the national calamity. He directs him to flee to a lonely spot - probably amid the wilds of his own native Gilead - and there to wait farther intimation of the Divine will.

In prompt obedience to the monition, **"he went and did according to the word of the Lord; for he went and dwelt by the brook Cherith, which is before Jordan." <sup>1</sup> [35]**

We can picture to ourselves his strange solitude. Some narrow gorge, uninvaded by human footstep, fenced in by nature to form a prophet's chamber - the awning of this "pilgrim-tent" constructed of the interlacing boughs of fig, oak, and oleander; the blue vault of Heaven overhead, leading him by day to consoling thoughts on the Great Universal Presence; the sun shining with tempered lustre, answering to the deeper sunshine of a quiet conscience within; the

stars by night, like the wakeful eyes of ministering angels, keeping watch over his lonely couch as he pillowed his head on the dewless leaves:- with that better pillow still for the weary - the sublime consciousness of having done his duty, and subordinated his own will to that of the Highest.

What a contrast - his evening meal and chamber of repose, with those of the monarch in whose guilty ear he had recently proclaimed the judgment of GOD!

- the ivory palace, filled with imported luxury
- the retainers, gorgeous with Tyrian purple and dust of gold
- the royal couch, curtained with Phoenician draperies and redolent of Phoenician perfumes.

A stranger was the rough Bedouin [36] Prophet to all such dainties.

His table, the green award,

- his retainers, the winged fowls of Heaven,
- his bed, the hollow of the rock
- its coverlet, his rough hairy mantle
- his lullaby, the music of the rippling stream, which, as it babbled by - the one tuneful brook of a silent land - sang morning and evening a hymn of GOD's faithfulness.

But, as we picture him, with thankful, contented heart, strengthening in summer's drought the stakes of his hut; or in winter's cold, gathering, like the apostle of Melita, the scattered leaves and dry wood to kindle and feed his lonely fire; - as we imagine him thus, night by night composing himself to rest, have we not a living commentary on words with which he may have filled his waking and sleeping thoughts - "**A little that a just man hath is better than the riches of many wicked.**" "**When thou liest down thou shalt not be afraid; yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.**" "**The curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked; but he blesseth the habitation of the just.**"

Let us pause here, and ponder, as a first lesson, *the power of prayer.*

The whole land was pining under the most fearful of judgments. Every brook, save that lonely rill of Cherith, had failed. No dewdrops spangled the forests with their crystal jewels,- no rain-torrents answered the silent inarticulate cry of the gasping earth.

The ground upturned by the ploughshare had become rigid furrows of iron - the dust lay thick on the highways - the heavens above were a blazing furnace. All day long, from the chariot of the sun, there seemed to be discharged bolts of scorching fire. Nature lay prostrate [37] and helpless under the withering curse. And how was this?

James tells us, "**Elias prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months.**" Oh, wondrous power! - a mortal pleading with GOD! - Omnipotence being moved by weakness! The seasons arrested in their course;- nature's processes curbed; - the windows of Heaven closed, and the fields and granaries of earth emptied and spoiled - all - all owing to the voice of one man!

And does not the example of the Tishbite refute the oft-repeated objection to prayer- "What need is there to try to move GOD? He has all things 'foreordained, whatsoever comes to pass.' It can only be a bold, presumptuous dreamer who can think of altering or modifying the Divine decrees. If He has resolved to send judgment, He needs not the pleadings of a mortal to remind him of His purposes."

Not so did our Prophet reason;- his was a truer and nobler philosophy. Well did he know that Ahab's wickedness had provoked the Divine displeasure; and if GOD Himself had not announced to His faithful servant the specific form of retribution, He had, at all events, doubtless, given him to understand that judgment was prepared and ready to descend.

But this does not release or exonerate Elijah from what he felt to be alike his duty and his privilege.

We find him on his knees - praying - and "**praying earnestly**;"- just as if the awful lesson about to be read to Israel depended on these feeble petitions. GOD, had He seen meet, without any human intervention, might have "**thundered in the heavens**," and the Highest given His voice, "**hailstones and coals of fire**;" He might have "**sent out His arrows and scattered them - shot [38] out lightnings and discomfited them**." But "**the Prophet of Fire**," knowing the appointed medium through which the Being he served fulfils His behests, employs the conducting-rod of prayer to fetch down the lightning from His treasures.

It reminds us of the Apostles - the "**Prophets of Fire**" of a later age. The promise of a fiery baptism of a different kind had been given them. But, nevertheless, they continued, we read, "**with one accord, in prayer and supplication**;" and it was while thus engaged - assembled "with one accord in one place" - that there came the descent "**as of a rushing mighty wind**," and "**cloven tongues like as of fire sat upon each of them**."

How constantly are similar illustrations of this prevailing "power," brought before us in the case of believers of old.

- It was by prayer Jacob wrestled and prevailed.

- It was by prayer Joshua arrested the fiery wheels of the sun's chariot.

- It was by prayer Daniel shut the lions' mouths, and cheated death of its prey.

- It was prayer - the prayer of good King Hezekiah and the pious remnant among those who owned his sceptre - that saved Jerusalem from utter destruction, and the people from captivity. He carried his desperate case and cause,- he spread the railing letter of the Assyrian invader before GOD in an agony of prayer. Next morning, the hushed tents of Sennacherib - the ground strewn with his dead - was the divinely-renewed testimony that "**the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much**."

And we have the same blessed refuge - the same strong consolation - in our hours, whether of impending national or individual sorrow.

Whatever be the cloud that may be gathering, this is our sheet-anchor - our polar-star in the [39] day of trouble - "**The Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, neither his ear heavy that it cannot hear!**"

Let us learn, further, from this incident in Elijah's life, *the triumph and sure recompense of faith.*

It was a bold and brave thing, surely, to utter such a prayer, and confront Ahab with such an announcement. Indeed, independently of the wrath of the Israelitish monarch, the *malison* Elijah had pronounced could not fail to rouse the indignation of the whole kingdom.

That savage-looking seer of Gilead would be hated and denounced by the starving thousands on whom his imprecation had fallen, as a "**troublers in Israel.**" But, bold as a lion, he fulfils his mission as the ambassador and vice-regent of Heaven.

He knows that he has been divinely called to vindicate the cause of truth and righteousness. Ahab may load him with irons - he may seize and torture him in hopes of coercing a revocation of the hateful utterance. Famishing with hunger, the people may also be hounded on to vengeful extremities against this prophet of evil tidings. But in tranquil composure he waits the result. He is like the daring soldier who has fired the train, and who, with the consciousness of having bravely done his duty, is prepared for the worst, even should he be involved in the awful havoc - buried under the blood-stained ruins.

We cannot, indeed, claim for Elijah, as "**a man of like passions,**" exemption from all doubt or misgiving in the present emergency. Unquestionably he had, as all have, a weaker side, even in what we suppose the least assailable part of his nature. It was no common heroism which was needed to [40] outbrave the vengeance of an infamous court, a debased and infuriated priesthood, a people stung to madness by want.

The very blight and prostration of the external world, too, must have been a touching spectacle to a feeling heart. The trees draped in ashen leaves;- the cattle lowing on arid pastures - innocent children making a vain appeal for food to parents miserable and helpless as themselves!

But a higher impulse than his own had prompted the prophetic woe.

He knows that it was no selfish, wayward caprice on his part, but the will - the righteous decree - of the God and King whose servant he was. He will not retract the retributive utterance; he will allow no debate or parlanche between duty and expediency.

Others may have sought to deter him; his own heart at times may have prompted more timorous counsels. Under the same feeling of oppressive solitariness which impelled him subsequently with pusillanimous spirit to take flight to Horeb, he might now have purchased immunity from danger by refusing to deliver his message, and fleeing, like another Jonah, for shelter amid the mountains of his native Gilead. But he will obey GOD rather than be deterred by the frowns, and fears, and even sufferings of men. With the calm confidence and resolve of a kindred spirit, he can say - "**In the Lord put I my trust; how say ye to my soul, Flee as a bird to your mountain?**"

Nor is he left without the sure reward and recompense which follow simple trust and bold action.

As the angel was sent to Peter in his dungeon, or to Paul in the storm, just at the crisis-hour when help was most needed;- so does the same GOD provide now a refuge for His Prophet.

When he had no earthly home or friend,- when [41] king and people were confederate against him;- One who was better than home, and friend, and king - the "**El Shaddai,**" the "**All-Sufficient,**" comes with the cheering word - "**Get thee hence, and turn thee eastward, and hide thyself by the brook Cherith that is before Jordan.**"

Moreover, not only does He furnish him with a refuge, but He makes provision for the supply of his daily wants; and in order to manifest His power and boundless resources, employs for this purpose the unlikeliest means and agencies. He makes the ravenous birds of the forest have their instincts in abeyance, in order that they may minister to His servant. "**And it shall be that thou shalt drink of the brook; and I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there!**"

The Lord God of Elijah is still to this hour faithful to His promise - "**Them that honour me, I will honour.**" "**The young lions may lack and suffer hunger; but they that seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing.**"

Manly work done in His service - sacrifices made in His cause - will sooner or later be repaid with usury.

It is because the presence and power of a personal GOD are so little felt and realized that our faith is so weak, and our ventures in His cause and service are so small.

When the soldiers of Gustavus Adolphus, the greatest king of Sweden, wished to dissuade him from risking his life by exposure in battle, it is said his grand reply was "GOD Almighty liveth." The motto of the Gilead Prophet was the same - "**The Lord GOD of Israel liveth, before whom I stand!**" With his faith anchored on that simple but sublime assurance, he hastened to his rocky, sterile abode, knowing that his "**bread would be given him, and his water would be sure.**" And all that his "**God had spoken came to pass.**" [42]

On reaching his secluded retreat, lo! the joyous, unwonted sound of the brook broke upon his ear. The ravens, too, were there waiting their strange mission. When the gates of the morning opened, they flocked with the miraculous bread; when the gates of evening closed, down they flew, bearing the promised sustenance. <sup>2</sup>

Night by night, as the curtain of darkness fell around, wrapping himself in his mantle, and composing his head on his leafy pillow, he could exultingly say "**The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear! the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid!**"

It may have seemed at first sight indeed strange, this long period of suspension from busy life, this seclusion from the scene of action where his voice and presence were so needed. It was enough for him, however, that his GOD willed it to be so, and patiently to wait the disclosure and development of the Divine purposes. Moreover, can we doubt that this season and place of deep solitude proved to Elijah a meet and needed training-school to prepare and qualify him for

the grander achievements that were before him?

"O God, how infinite is Thy providence, wisdom, and power!  
We creatures are not what we are, but what Thou wilt have us;  
when Thy turn is to be served, we have none of our own.  
Give me but faith, and do what Thou wilt."

- Bishop Hall's Meditations. [43]

It was so in the history of the most illustrious saints, both in Old and New Testament times.

- Moses had forty years' separation from the world in the Sinai desert, before entering on his unparalleled mission as the liberator and leader of the many thousands of Israel.

- John had his loving spirit fed and refreshed and disciplined in the solitudes of Patmos.

- John's loving Master had His days and nights of sacred seclusion on the mountains of Judea and Galilee, where His holy human soul was strengthened for arduous conflict.

- Paul, in training for the great work of the apostolate, had three years of retirement amid the deserts of Arabia.

- Luther,- the Elijah of his age,- had his spirit braced for hero-deeds during an uninterrupted season of prayer and the study of the sacred oracles, in the lone castle of Wartburg in the forest of Thuringia.

In the same way would the "**Prophet of Fire**" carry with him his torch to this vestibule of nature's temple - not to quench it, but rather, by holding more intimate fellowship with the great Source of Light, to get it kindled with a purer flame from the inner sanctuary.

We are told nothing regarding his occupations during these months of loneliness. But may we not think of him truthfully as "alone, yet not alone;" seated under the rock-clefts, with the music of the brook in his ear,- his heroic soul, filled with mighty thoughts, musing devoutly on his great work, and earnestly seeking to be braced for his momentous life-struggle?

May not nobler winged attendants than the birds of Heaven have brought down messages of comfort to refresh and invigorate his spirit? Ay, by mystic and hallowed communings with the Lord of angels, may he not have been enabled to perfect the self-surrender and self-consecration of his whole nature, getting his will more and more merged and absorbed in the will of the great Being he delighted to serve?

He would ever after, in all probability, cherish the remembrance of Cherith as a place and occasion of calm and elevated joy; and can we doubt that, when he emerges from his obscurity, he will come forth more fully harnessed for the battle,- the fire of his earnest soul burning with a purer, intenser, and more tempered lustre?

And is it not so with GOD's people still? When He has for a time secluded them from a busy

world,- sent them away from life's thoroughfares to hold pensive communings with their own hearts in the lonely wilderness of trial, have they not been led to feel and to recognize, not only a gracious needs-be in the Divine dealings, but, following in Elijah's spirit the teachings and directions of the great Disposer, have they not found that they come forth from their season of affliction better fitted for their work and disciplined for their warfare,- moreover, that in their very hours of sadness, He opens up for them unimagined sources of solace and consolation? In taking them to Cherith, He does not permit them to go unbefriended or alone.

What Patmos was to John, or Cherith to his great prototype, so can He make the gloomiest of seasons bright with the manifestations of His own grace and love [45] He will not suffer the Cherith of sorrow to be without its brook of comfort and its winged messengers of peace.

He provides streams of consolation specially suited for His people in all their seasons of trial.

Sickness is such a Cherith; when secluded from life's active duties

- health withdrawn
- strength prostrated
- body and mind enfeebled;
- pain extracting the cry, "**in the morning, Would God it were evening; and in the evening, Would God it were morning.**"

Yet how many can look back on such seasons and tell of their brooks of solace?

- Bible promises welling up with new beauty like streams in the desert;
- a nobler and truer estimate of life imparted;
- nearer and more realizing views of GOD and Heaven.

Bereavement is such a Cherith.

When the scorching sun of sorrow has withered up life's choicest flowers, and dried its sweetest sources of pleasure, "the wilderness and the solitary place are made glad." He who has taken away, comes in the place of "the loved and lost."

Our very sorrows, like the sable-plumaged ravens, are transformed into messengers of comfort.

GOD fulfils His own promise by the bestowment of "**the hidden manna;**" that we may come forth from the severe soul-conflict, like Jacob, wrestling, but it is like him also, with "**a new name.**"

And even in the prospect of Death itself; though called like Elijah to "**Cherith which is BEFORE JORDAN;**" - the All-Sufficient - the living GOD - is there, amid the turgid waters of "**the border river,**" to cheer and support us, saying, "**Fear not, I am with thee; be not dismayed, for I am thy God.**" Whatever be our circumstances; our discouragements, disappointments, sorrows - "**fightings without, and fears within**" - worldly calamities, temporal [46] losses; let us not utter the misgiving word, "**Where is the Lord God of Elijah?**"

Let us rather take as our motto, under all the varying conditions of life, "**JEHOVAH-JIREH**"  
**The Lord will provide.**

Let us do our duty, and GOD will fulfil His word. Let us go to our Cheriths, and God will have ready His promised brook and ravens and manna. Let us prepare the fire and the wood, and God will provide His own lamb for the burnt-offering. [47]

<sup>1</sup> *It would only perplex the reader to give the various conjectures on the topography of Cherith, from Eusebius, Jerome, and Josephus, to those of modern travellers. Dr Robertson, Stanley, and Van de Velde mention with probability, among other claimants, the Wady Kelt, near Jericho. On a careful examination of authorities, however, we are disposed strongly to adhere to the view stated - giving it a position much farther north, on the other side of Jordan. As Elijah, at the time, must have been either at Samaria or Jezreel, the Wady Kelt was not in the direction indicated by the Divine command, "eastward before Jordan." In Hebrew, the word "before," has invariably the geographical meaning of "east," So that the expression, "before Jordan," pointed to its eastern bank. Both Jerome and Eusebius place it thus - on the other side of the border river. Keil adds the remark, with reference to the Wady Kelt, that "its close proximity to Jericho, then rebuilt by Hiel, would at this time make this exact spot scarcely fit for a secure place of concealment."*

<sup>2</sup> *"I cannot see that bird, but I must needs think of Elijah, and wonder no less at the miracle of his faith than of his provision. It was a strong belief that carried him into a desolate retiredness to expect food from ravens. This fowl we know is ravenous; all is too little that he can forage for himself, and the Prophet's reason must needs suggest to him that in a dry barren desert bread and flesh must be great dainties, yet he goes aside to expect victuals from that purveyance. He knew this fowl to be no less greedy than unclean; unclean as in law, so the nature of his food. What is his ordinary prey but loathsome carrion! Yet since GOD had appointed him His caterer, he stands not upon the nice points of a fastidious squeamishness; but confidently depends upon that uncouth provision, and, accordingly, those unlikely purveyors bring him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening . . . Upon the sight of them, he magnified with a thankful heart the wonderful goodness and truth of his GOD, and was nourished more with his faith than with his food."*

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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