

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 14

RETURN TO DUTY

"And the Lord said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when thou comest, anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi shalt thou anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat, of Abel-meholah, shalt thou anoint to be prophet in thy room. And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay" (I Kings 19:15-17)

"THEN FLEW ONE OF THE SERAPHIM UNTO ME, HAVING A LIVE COAL IN HIS HAND, WHICH HE HAD TAKEN WITH THE TONGS FROM OFF THE ALTAR: AND HE LAID IT UPON MY MOUTH, AND SAID, LO, THIS HATH TOUCHED THY LIPS, AND THINE INIQUITY IS TAKEN AWAY, AND THY SIN PURGED" (Isaiah 6:6,7)

"IS NOT MY WORD LIKE AS A FIRE? SAITH THE LORD; AND LIKE A HAMMER THAT BREAKETH THE ROCK IN PIECES?" (Jeremiah 23:29)

"HAVE NOT I COMMANDED THEE? BE STRONG, AND OF A GOOD COURAGE; BE NOT AFRAID, NEITHER BE THOU DISMAYED: FOR THE LORD THY GOD IS WITH THEE WHITHERSOEVER THOU GOEST." (Joshua 1:9) [200]

IN the previous chapter we considered the comforting assurance regarding the present, which the Lord GOD of Elijah addressed to His servant before quitting the solitudes of Horeb. But there was a communication of mingled judgment and mercy given him also regarding the future. And, as an illustration of the minute, tender, sympathizing interest GOD takes in the case of all His people, it may be well, in a single sentence, to mark how He therein meets and answers, one by one in succession, the complaints of the Prophet. ¹

The first subject of Elijah's grievance was, **"The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant;"** the second, **"They have thrown down thine altars and slain thy people with the sword;"** the third, **"I, even I only, am left."**

'Go,' says Jehovah, in reply to the first, 'pour the consecrating oil on the head of Hazael. He is to be the rod of mine anger against apostate Israel. He will teach them, **"by terrible things in righteousness,"** that it is not with impunity my covenant is forsaken.' And accordingly it was so.

Some years after Elijah had been removed from the troubled scenes of earth to his glorious

reward, the coasts and villages of the northern kingdom were ravaged and scourged by the Syrian armies under this victorious captain;- the footprints of his desolating host, telling amid ruin and pillage and blood, that GOD is not a man that He should lie, nor the son of man that He should repent. [201]

"Go!" says Jehovah, in reply to the second complaint, "**anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi**;" - he too is to be the minister of my vengeance against the royal house of Ahab and his unscrupulous queen.' And though this announced judgment was not accomplished in the days of Elijah, in due time the terrible doom was consummated by a work of extermination unparalleled in Hebrew history.

Every relation, including the remotest kinsfolk of Ahab, was put to the sword, and Jezebel herself subjected to the most ignominious of deaths.

A similar work of destruction was at the same time carried out regarding the Baal-worship.

A vast temple, reared by Ahab in Samaria for idolatrous service, was crowded with votaries. At a preconcerted signal, eighty trusted soldiers rushed in on the crowd as they were engaged in offering sacrifice before the great stone statue of the Syrian idol. The smaller divinities were torn from their niches and pedestals; and, with indiscriminate slaughter, as described by Josephus, the doom uttered amid the solitudes of Sinai was fulfilled to the letter.

In answer to these two first complaints, we have Elijah's GOD coming forth as a GOD of judgment;- responding in the wind and the earthquake and the fire.

But there is yet a third comforting assurance to be added, in answer to his concluding plaint. It is the GOD of "**the still small voice**" who speaks now. It is a word of peace.

'Go,' says Jehovah, '**anoint Elisha the son of Shaphat, of Abel-meholah, [202] to be prophet in thy room**. When thy voice is silent, I shall not want a faithful messenger, and the Church shall not want a faithful guide.

Go, and say no longer, "**I am left alone**;" for this elect Israelite will be a sympathizing friend to thee during the remainder of thy years, and shall take thy place at thy departure. "**And it shall come to pass, that him that escapeth from the sword of Hazeal shall Jehu slay; and him that escapeth from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay.**"

Thus did the Prophet of Fire prepare to leave his retreat with three swords gleaming before him;

- Hazeal's sword of war,
- Jehu's sword of justice,
- Elisha's sword of truth - the sword that wounds only to heal. ²

How this threefold assurance must have calmed his misgivings! He was seasonably reminded, of what should ever be a source of comfort to ourselves,- GOD's sovereignty alike in the Church and the world. By Him kings reign and princes decree justice;- He has manifold arrows in His quiver;- He can carry on His work, at one time, by a Hazeal or a Jehu,- fierce, unrelenting,

unsparing soldiers; at another, by Elisha, a man of love and peace-making the wrath of man to praise Him, and restraining the remainder of His wrath.

Elijah's memorable visit to Horeb was now over. The symbol vision was past. He found himself once more by the mouth of his cave alone. Nay, not alone! While standing there,- the noise of the whirlwind in his ear - the glow of the fire yet dazzling his eyes;- and, what was more, the blessed tones of the still small voice echoing through his heart of hearts;- a second time is the question addressed to him, [203] "**What doest thou here, Elijah?**"

And after an answer similar to that previously made, but uttered in a far different spirit,- the Divine command was given:

"And the Lord said unto him, Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus;" and it is further added, "So he departed thence."

Though, as regards the Prophet's outer life, the scene on Mount Carmel stands forth in pre-eminent grandeur and importance;- the manifestation on Mount Horeb, and more especially this its closing hour, was in many respects the most momentous crisis in his inner life.

We may well, therefore, interrupt the thread of the narrative, and pause for a little on so solemn an incident in the Tishbite's history; making the direction addressed to him, afford subject-matter for a few practical thoughts of a more personal kind regarding ourselves. With these, we shall occupy the remainder of the chapter.

We believe that there are analogous Horeb experiences in the case of every Christian. Sacred spiritual epochs, memorable turning-points,- associated with some peculiar revelation of GOD, either in His Word or providence; these resulting, as in the case of Elijah, if not in an entire alteration of thought and feeling, at least in a new impulse being imparted to the heavenly life.

Such a solemn hour occurs with some at the crisis of an alarming illness, or during recovery from sore sickness; when "**the still small voice**" breaks the silence of the long night-watches and of the darkened chamber; and when life, given back from the gates of death, is devoutly consecrated to the great Restorer.

Such a solemn season occurs, in the case of others, at a time of bereavement; when what we most fondly love has perished [204] from our sight; and when, as "**the still small voice**" of heavenly comfort falls upon the ear,- the broken, bleeding tendrils of the heart, wrenched from creature-props, turn to the great unfailing support and Refuge, and fix themselves there for ever!

Such a solemn hour occurs, with others, at a sacramental season; when the God of the "**still small voice**" has "**passed by**;" and when, having partaken of the sacred symbols, and enjoyed near and blessed experience of the Saviour's presence and mercy, we have vowed a deeper love, and purposes of more devoted and earnest obedience.

Reader, are any of these sacred and peculiar experiences now, or have they been recently, your own? and have you received, like Elijah, the summons to speed you back from your period of silence and seclusion, of awe and adoration, to the needful duties of life?

Let us picture to ourselves some of the feelings with which the Prophet left his Horeb grotto, for "**the wilderness of Damascus.**" We may find in them a reflection of what ours may possibly now be, in returning to engage once more in the calls and cares of a busy world.

As Elijah journeyed back through the desert, one of his feelings doubtless would be this - *deep sorrow on account of his past faithlessness, and a salutary sense of his weakness for the time to come.* Every step of that backward journey must have recalled, with sorrow and shame, the remembrance of his unworthy flight and unworthy unbelief.

Every weary league he retraversed;- every rock, and bush, and arid wady,- must have read to him a bitter rebuke and reproach; ay, and reminded him, that, "strong" as his name imported him to be, he was strong only in GOD.

Perhaps, in [205] his fit of sullen, morbid despondency, he had no time before, to ponder and realise the amount of his ingratitude and guilt. But now, after all he had seen and experienced in the mount, with what different feelings must he have bewailed the past:

- that coward retreat from the gates of Israel;
- that rash, passionate, prayer under the desert juniper tree;
- the vain, proud, self-righteous apology, he had dared to utter in answer to GOD's remonstrance.

How must all these have come home to him, as he hies him back, an altered man, to his God-appointed work.

Could he ever forget the tremendous sermon on sin, preached in that great cathedral of nature;- Sinai the pulpit;- lightning and whirlwind and thunder the ambassadors of Heaven? Could he think of his heroic deeds and vows on Carmel, and the degenerate spirit he afterwards evinced,- and not hear the voice of impressive warning, "**When thou thinkest thou standest, take heed lest thou fall!**"

Is this one of our feelings, in pursuing, after some recent solemn experience or 'manifestation,' our pilgrimage journey,- a deep, heartfelt, realizing view of past guilt and unworthiness?

Perhaps our besetting sins may not be of the same type as Elijah's;- peevishness, fretfulness, discontent, pride, unworthy distrust of GOD's ability and willingness to help. But be they what they may, do we set out anew, like him, feeling their vileness, deeply humbled, softened, saddened at the retrospect?

Under the Divine teaching, have we seen sin, and our own sin, as that awful thing which, ere the still small voice of mercy could be heard, required that the tremendous heralds of wrath and vengeance should burst over the heads of a sinless Surety? And, farther, as we hear GOD's voice now saying, [206] "**Go, return on thy way to the wilderness;**" - do we go, under a salutary consciousness of our own utter weakness and inability, in our own strength, "**to pay the vows which our lips have uttered and our mouth hath spoken when we were in trouble?**" - Do we go, uttering the fervent prayer, "**Hold THOU me up, and I shall be safe?**"

Another feeling Elijah had, in leaving his cave, must have been *a lively sense and apprehension of GOD's great mercy.*

What, in the retrospect of the recent wondrous manifestation, would more especially linger in the Prophet's recollection? Not the wind, not the earthquake, not the fire; but "**the still small voice.**"

He would abundantly utter to himself the memory of GOD's great goodness. His heart would overflow with gratitude when he thought (despite of his coward flight) of Jehovah's varied ministry of kindness:

- the bread and the cruse of water of the juniper tree;
- the angel sent specially to spread a table for him in the wilderness;
- and, more than all, the Lord of angels,- the very Being he had offended and provoked,- meeting him in the cave of his despondency;- making Heaven and earth,- the vastest agencies of nature,- to bring before him a magnificent series of sacramental signs,- ending the glorious display with love;- yes! love to his guilty soul;- hushing and calming his storm-tossed spirit, with that "still small voice!"

Are our feelings, in this respect also, akin to those of Elijah?

If GOD has accorded to us some signal providential interposition, delivering our souls from death, our eyes from tears, and our feet from falling;- or if He has vouchsafed some special and peculiar manifestation of His grace;- spreading, it may [207] be, for us also, as for his servant, some spiritual feast, giving us manna from His own banqueting table - angels' food - the bread of life; and, by means of these sacramental symbols, in the still small voice, sealing and ratifying to us, all the blessings and benefits of the new covenant;- may we not well "**return on our way**" with our hearts pervaded and penetrated with a profound sense of His infinite mercy and lovingkindness! our lips attuned, like those of the Tishbite, as we picture him, once more, with girt loins and pilgrim staff speeding along the desert sands;- our lips attuned to the song, "**What shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits towards me?**"

We may suppose another feeling entertained by Elijah in departing from his cave and returning through the wilderness, would be, *a fixed purpose and resolution of new and more devoted obedience.*

Mourning an unworthy past,- penetrated by a lively sense of Jehovah's love,- he would go onward and forward, resolved more than ever on a life of grateful love and of active and unwavering service, until GOD saw meet to take him up in His chariot of fire.

He would go, not only mourning his besetting sins, but seeking henceforth to watch against their occurrence. And it is worthy of note, that, from this time henceforward, we never again meet with the craven-hearted, petulant, impetuous Prophet.

We may hear indeed no more, (with perhaps one exception,) of any great chivalrous doings;- heroic contests, or Carmel feats of superhuman strength, like the race before the chariot to Jezreel; but neither do we read any more of hesitancy, despondency, cowardice.

If the torch of the Prophet of Fire has less of [208] the brilliant blaze of former ecstatic exploits, it burns, at least, with a purer, steadier lustre.

He may have less henceforward of the meteor, but he shines with more of the steady lustre of the true constellation, From this date he seems to enter on the calm, mellowed evening of life, following a troubled tempestuous day.

Reader, if in some similar momentous crisis of your history, Elijah's GOD may be saying to you, as to him, "**Go, return on thy way;**" - is it in your case also with purposes of new and earnest obedience?

Are you to leave your cave, whatever that may be, with the firm determination, in a strength greater than your own, that, whatsoever others do, as for you, you will serve the Lord? saying, Other lords, in time past, have had dominion over us, but "**this God shall be our God for ever and ever?**"

And, while you go, like him, with the resolve to be holier, humbler, more meek, more gentle, more loving, more trusting;- go also, like him, feeling, that you have a great mission on hand; a life of solemn work and duty;-preparation for eternity!

GOD pointed out to Elijah special work to perform: "**Go, anoint Hazael - Go, anoint Jehu;**" and he did his Lord's bidding. He has work for each of us also, in our different spheres;- work for Him; work in our own hearts, work in our own families;- work in the Church, work in the world. "**Go,**" says He; "**return on thy way;**" not to sleep under the juniper tree, but to active life;- to glorify me in your daily walk, and business, and station, and character.

With this as our solemn purpose and resolution, may it be said of us, as of Elijah,- may GOD thus write down in His Book of Remembrance- "**So he departed thence.**" [209]

Bereaved! we have specially spoken of your experience, as being possibly similar to that of Elijah, in this eventful moment of his history. We may revert, therefore, yet once more, to GOD's monitory words addressed to him, as suggestive of thoughts more peculiarly applicable to your case and circumstances. "**Go, return on thy way to the wilderness.**"

Yes! "**the wilderness.**" This earth, to you, is a blighted world; "a land of drought, a desert not inhabited."

As Elijah passed the old juniper tree, even the very angel's footsteps could not be traced: no fragment was left of his shining robes,- no echo of his voice. And as you return too, to the old familiar haunts; this voice and that voice are silent. Those who sat with you at your feasts in the wilderness, are gone: nothing is left but the black patch of smouldering ashes, where the banquet was once spread, and the mutual vow recorded.

Gone! nay, not 'gone.'

Many are like Elijah's angel,- only away to do higher behests of love and mercy in brighter worlds, and beckon you to follow after them! If you be left behind a little longer to tread the

wilderness;- oh, let it be with you, as with the prophet;- let all GOD's dealings only quicken your footsteps to the true land of promise; meanwhile seeking to do your duty in your earthly sphere, with patience and faith, meekness and submission;- until GOD prepare your fiery chariot to descend and bear you up amid reunions that are to know no dissolution.

And if, perchance, some youthful eyes may fall on these pages,- let such suffer a word of exhortation.

You are unlike Elijah, as he now stands before us at the mouth [210] of his cave, girded for his journey; unlike this stern, rough man, who had fought for years the Lord's battles, amid famine and judgment;- and who was now drawing near to the close of his mission.

The world is still all before you; its Cheriths, and Carmels, and Zarephaths, and wilderness sojournings.

And be thankful for this;- that you have yet time, and strength, and sphere, to serve GOD in your day and generation. Be thankful that you have yet, unforfeited opportunities;- that, with GOD's grace, you have the grand opportunity, which others have missed, of making that life and that mission a glorious one;- not by great Carmel - deeds of power and ostentation; but by faith, and love, and active lowly service.

What would Elijah have given to live over again the past irrevocable days? What would he have given to stand again at Jezreel's gate, amid the rushing of the storm, when the tempter first came and assailed him, and led him captive?

You have that future before you:- you have the unblotted pages of life's book yet to write. It depends much on your resolutions now, how they are to be written. To you, GOD does not say, as to Elijah,- "**Go, return.**" It is, 'Go, set out;- the journey is all yet to be trodden.'

Is it to be the faith and lowly submission of Cherith? The bold, devoted, heroic testimony of Carmel? or, is it to be the sullen, peevish discontent,- the unworthy inactivity of the wilderness of Beersheba?

Is it to be a life for GOD and for Heaven; or a life for earth and self?

Many an old care-worn, travel-worn Elijah envies you;- envies you this chance of a pure, godly, unselfish, elevated existence, which can be theirs no more!

In entering the great world, you must expect to encounter its whirlwind, and earthquake, [211] and fire. But let "**the still small voice**" be ever heard, amidst every hurricane of temptation.

Go in the might of the Prophet's GOD. Let your name be "**ELIJAH!**" GOD's strength.

"I write unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one." With pilgrim staff and girded loins, and "**the still small voice**" echoing in your ear, be it yours to say - "**We will go in the STRENGTH of the Lord God!**" [212] [Page 213 left blank]

¹ *These are well brought out by Dr Krummacher.*

² *Matthew Henry.*

~ end of chapter 14 ~
