

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY

THE PREACHING BY FIRE

The vital energy of the church of God upon earth manifests itself in a threefold activity, directed to the three great objects of self-renovation, union, and missions. Of this threefold operation of the true church Paul speaks, in Ephesians 2:20-23.

By self-renovation, we understand the effort of the church to expel from within her every foreign, unscriptural element that may have crept in; to remove errors from her midst; and to build herself up on the true foundation of the prophets' and apostles' doctrine, "**Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.**"

By her endeavors after union, we understand that activity of the true church by which she seeks to combine believers more closely together, and to promote more and more their growing up into him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ; as the apostle says, "**In whom all the building fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord.**"

By missionary activity, the church endeavors to enlarge her boundaries, to recover new provinces from the prince of darkness, to increase the number of her children, whether from the heathen or the nominally Christian world, and to build them together on the same foundation, "**for an habitation of God through the Spirit.**"

Now wherever the true church exists she invariably manifests this threefold vital activity; but sometimes one indication of it predominates over the rest.

In some places, for instance, the doctrines of the majority are correct and scriptural, and she has rather to devote her powers to the growth and union of her children. But, in general, her self-renovating activity is what is most required, and her work is to lay afresh those foundations which the father of lies has subverted.

The prophet Elijah was an eminent reformer under the Old Testament. The *restoration* of idolatrous Israel to the faith of their forefathers, was the commission entrusted to him.

We should keep this in view as we meditate upon the events of his life, and thus we shall better understand the peculiar character of some of those events. That part of his history in particular which is now before us, will hereby become divested of the strangeness of its first appearance.

“And when the messengers turned back unto him, he said unto them, Why are ye now turned back? And they said unto him, There came a man up to meet us, and said unto us, Go, turn again unto the king that sent you, and say unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that thou sendest to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron? therefore thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die.

“And he said unto them, What manner of man was he which came up to meet you, and told you these words?

“And they answered him, He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins.

“And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite. Then the king sent unto him a captain of fifty with his fifty. And he went up to him: and, behold, he sat on the top of an hill. And he spake unto him, Thou man of God, the king hath said, Come down. And Elijah answered and said to the captain of fifty, If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And there came down fire from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.

“Again also he sent unto him another captain of fifty with his fifty. And he answered and said unto him, O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly. And Elijah answered and said unto them, If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And the fire of God came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.

“And he sent again a captain of the third fifty with his fifty. And the third captain of fifty went up, and came and fell on his knees before Elijah, and besought him, and said unto him, O man of God, I pray thee, let my life, and the life of these fifty thy servants, be precious in thy sight. Behold, there came fire down from heaven, and burnt up the two captains of the former fifties with their fifties: therefore let my life now be precious in thy sight.

“And the angel of the LORD said unto Elijah, Go down with him: be not afraid of him.

“And he arose, and went down with him unto the king. And he said unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Forasmuch as thou hast sent messengers to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron, is it not because there is no God in Israel to enquire of his word? therefore thou shalt not come down off that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die.

“So he died according to the word of the LORD which Elijah had spoken. And Jehoram reigned in his stead in the second year of Jehoram the son of Jehoshaphat king of Judah; because he had no son” (II Kings 1:5-17).

Thus ends the narrative which commenced with the mission to Ekron.

- **“Our God is a consuming fire!”**
- **“God is not mocked!”**
- **“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!”**

Let us pause, and consider the marvelous contest here related. Here is,

- I. Ahaziah’s attempt against Elijah;
- II. The prophet’s victory;
- III. Ahaziah’s awful overthrow.

I. The messengers of the king are already on their way to Ekron

Leaving the guilt mission with their master’s conscience, they proceed with alacrity on their journey, and they have already settled in their own minds the time when they shall arrive at Ekron.

But the Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vain. Another oracle comes forth to meet them, from a quarter quite unlooked for. All at once a living barrier stands in their way. A man suddenly appears before them of a majestic figure, clothed in a hairy mantle. Here is no troop of angels, no any mailed band of men; nothing but an individual fellowman without armor or weapons. Yet astonishment seizes the courtly messengers at the sight of him, and their train and equipage are obliged to halt.

“The Tishbite!” is the word of alarm from one to the other; and before they have time to inquire and advise together, the venerable stranger confronts them and discharges his divine commission:

“Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that thou sendest to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron? therefore thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die?”

The stranger having spoken these words, turned about and went his way. We may well imagine the consternation occasioned by this unexpected encounter; how the men looked fully at each other and knew not what to say. Little had they dreamed of carrying back to their prince such a speedy answer to his inquiry, and this too without money and without price. But from whom does it come? O they are conscious that it comes from an oracle that cannot lie.

They have no heart to proceed on their journey to Ekron; they dare not do it. They know too well this terrible man, the fire-tested messenger of the Lord’s displeasure. They turn about in haste, as if the least delay were dangerous, and return with awful apprehensions to Samaria. Verily it cannot always be foreseen what may happen on such journeys as those to Ekron or to Endor. It is a fearful thing to pass by God and his word, and to turn aside to lying vanities. In courses like these, how many have met with such disclosures as might well both make their ears tingle and their hearts quake.

Many a one, by having recourse to refuges of lies, has forever lost sight of the light of truth, and lived and died under strong delusions. Let us, therefore, never forget the exhortation of the apostle: **“Little children, abide in Him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming”** (I John 2:28).

II. King Ahaziah lying upon his couch, supposes his messengers to be on the road to Ekron

But lo! Unexpectedly the door of his apartment opens, and the messengers stand before his bed. Almost before he has time to wonder what this can mean, they begin to relate to him what has happened to them on the way.

“There came a man up to meet us, and said unto us, Go, turn again unto the king that sent you, and say unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that thou sendest to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron? therefore thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die.”

Terrific as was this message, the king collects himself sufficiently to inquire, **“What manner of man was he which came up to meet you and told you these words?”**

“He was a hairy man,” answered they, **“and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins.”**

This portrait was well known to the king. **“Yes,”** says he, with as much composure as he could assume, **“I thought so; it is Elijah the Tishbite!”**

The king dismisses his messengers. “Send me hither one of my captains,” cries he with stifled fury and resentment. The captain appears in the sick man’s chamber, and reads in the features of his lord the nature of his commission.

“Go with your troop,” says Ahaziah, **“seize Elijah the, Tishbite and bring him to me!”** The captain bows obediently and hastens to fulfill the king’s orders.

Let us reflect a moment on the monstrous presumption which the sick monarch here exhibits! He knows who the man is whom he is about to attack. He has seen the mighty acts with which the Lord had borne testimony to this his own messenger. He knows that God had a second time, in Elijah’s case, **“hearkened to the voice of a man,”** and that this redoubted champion of truth has the Almighty Himself for his shield; yea, that the thunder and fiery flame of heaven has been at his command.

Yet all this prevents him not from taking the field against the prophet, and thus virtually declaring war against the King of kings. Impiety renders him frantic, and his feverish fury robs him of his understanding. A handful of chaff would now contend with the fire, and a fleeting vapor would combat with the storm! Surely all this is no longer merely natural. Strong satanical delusion has taken possession of this senseless transgressor, and it is evident that he is become judicially blind.

The captain with his fifty departs upon his commission, and it is not long before he meets the enemy. On the summit of a mountain—probably on Carmel—they come in sight of the prophet. There he sits solitary and silent, immersed in sacred meditations. But he sits there like a king upon his throne, secure in his God and surrounded by an invisible guard. He beholds the host approaching him with glittering weapons, and easily imagines who has sent them, and what is their errand. But he is not afraid in his invisible but impregnable fortress.

He is well able to confront them under the banner of his God, and quietly suffers them to come against him. They approach nearer and nearer to surround him as their prisoner; but something in his appearance, or in their thoughts of him, keeps them still at a respectful distance. It seems as if they had a presentiment of peril should they venture to seize him.

The captain, therefore, contents himself with imperatively declaring his master's order. **“Thou man of God, the king hath said, Come down.”**

The Prophet feels a holy indignation for the honor of his God. He opens his mouth with a faith which would have removed mount Carmel into the midst of the sea had it been necessary, and exclaims, **“If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven and consume thee and thy fifty!”**

No sooner had he uttered the words, then the Lord heard them; for to prayers which seek only his honor and glory he refuses not his Yea and Amen! The fire descends from heaven, and the captain with his fifty lie dead below the prophet's feet.

When this terrible event is notified to the king of Israel, he becomes so infatuated with rage, that instead of perceiving what power he was up against, he sends forth a second captain with his fifty, seemingly more daring than the first; who finds Elijah still in the same place. He draws near, at the head of his fifty, to the servant of the Lord and with astonishing presumption addresses him in sight of the slain around him, **“O man of God, thus hath the king said, Come down quickly.”** **“If I be a man of God,”** answers Elijah the second time, **“let fire come down from heaven and consume thee and thy fifty!”** And the fire of God came down from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

One would suppose that the intelligence of this second defeat would have caused a change in Ahaziah's mind, and have induced him to conclude a truce in this impious war; but no! He is resolved to hold it out to the last. He sends out a third captain with his fifty, for the purpose of bringing the prophet to him as his prisoner. The captain departs with his company of soldiers, and there is a fearful prospect of the wrathful judgment being repeated a third time.

Elijah still sits in the same place upon his eminence. He is not afraid of many thousands; for he knows that he has sufficient strength in his God to lay any army in the dust that might come against him. But when the third captain at the head of his company arrives at the mount, and beholds the man of God, and the dead bodies of the slain lying below, he is seized with a feeling of reverential dread, which he in vain labors to overcome.

He feels that it is bearing arms against the Almighty himself to bear them against his ambassador; and, overpowered by the awe with which the presence of the holy man inspired him, and by the conviction that Elijah's God is the true God, he puts up his sword into the scabbard, approaches the prophet with reverence, falls on his knee before him, and exclaims, "**O man of God, pray thee let my life and the life of these fifty thy servants be precious in thy sight. Behold, there came fire down from heaven and burnt up the two captains of the former fifties with their fifties; therefore let my life now be precious in thy sight!**"

O how must Elijah have rejoiced at this submission to the living God, which saved him from the mournful necessity of vindicating the honor of the Lord a third time with consuming flames of fire! For he had no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but it was his delight, even as it is the delight of his Lord, that the sinner should turn from his ways and live. Doubtless it caused him no little pain, when he was compelled to call for the sword of the Almighty to be unsheathed and his fire from heaven to descend. And when this did take place, it was his divine vocation and the holy object of his mission that required it, for the extirpation of idolatry and the reestablishment of that Divine law which had been trodden under foot, and of that faith of the fathers which had become extinct.

The weapons of Elijah's warfare were therefore not carnal. They were wielded by that queen of passions—an ardent love to God and his cause—and they were brandished in obedience to a holy zeal for the glory of the Lord's name. It was because the canker of idolatry had eaten so deeply into the heart of the chosen people, that such severe remedies were required in order that the people might be healed.

In considering such narratives as the present, we should ever remember that the times of Old Testament were very different from those of the Christian dispensation; and that much which it became Elijah to perform would be far from proper for a subject of the New Covenant. Our Saviour in Luke, 9: 54-56, expresses himself significantly as to the distinction between the old dispensation and the new.

When the disciples, James and John, said to him, "**Lord, wilt thou that we command fire to fall from heaven and consume them even as Elias did?**" our Lord replied, "**Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them!**"

It seems as if he had intimated that the days of severity were past, and that those of mildness had succeeded them. The discipline of Mount Sinai no longer bears the rule; but patience and love. Elijah was a herald of Divine justice, therefore he necessarily appeared with lightning and thunder on his lips; but ye are messengers of grace, who must gain the hearts of sinners by the Gospel of the tender mercy of God; and thus your feet must be "**beautiful upon the mountains**" as the patience wherewith the vessels of wrath are endured, has ever since shown that a hand once pierced sways the sceptre of the world's government, and that a friend of sinners sits on the throne of dominion; so ought the New Testament church to exhibit a faithful likeness of the gentle and patient Lamb of God in whose blood they have made clean, and who, through enduring and suffering, entered into glory.

The lovely image of the compassionate Son of man ought always to be visible in his members. It therefore infinitely more becomes us as followers of the Lamb, to pray for the enemies of his righteous cause, than to desire God's displeasure upon them. It is unspeakably more befitting us, in patience and meekness to heap coals of fire on the heads of our adversaries, and to overcome them by the power of love; than to call down the wrath of the Almighty upon them.

In short, our whole disposition and conduct ought to evince that we are the disciples of Him who **“came not to destroy men's lives, but to save them;”** and that, by the cross of Christ, a fountain of love has been disclosed, which has taught us to bear all things, to believe all things, and endure all things; a love which many waters cannot quench.

III. The captain, having besought Elijah that his soul and the souls of his fifty might be precious in his sight, was spared by means of this sincere humiliation

For God resisteth only the proud and the perverse; but giveth grace to the lowly. The Lord said to Elijah, **“Go down with him: be not afraid of him.”**

What a command! what a mission! He was now to enter into the very midst of the enemy's camp, and repeat to the enraged king at Samaria, the judgment of heaven. But the command and implied promise of his God lifts him up, as on eagle's wings, above every fear. He leaves the lonely hills, and hastens, at the captain's "side, to the royal city.

Surely as a conqueror enters the gates of some captured fortress, amidst the waving of victorious banners, did Elijah enter the city of Samaria. He knew that in the assembling crowds around him there were few who were not his adversaries; yet he walks through them with a dignity which curls the insolence of the boldest blasphemer. The king, perhaps, is impatiently inquiring whether there be any news of the arrival of his prisoner; when the door of his apartment opens; and who can describe Ahaziah's amazement at beholding the object of his hatred—the man with the hairy mantel and the leathern girdle, himself approaching his couch.

But he utters no hard word, no triumphant taunt. He knows that in this ungodly man he still beholds his lawful monarch and chief magistrate. Elijah knows that **“the powers that be are ordained of God;”** and hence, though he is the Lord's prophet and standing before an apostate and idolatrous king, he in no wise trespasses upon the respect due to royal dignity.

He adheres strictly and literally to the message entrusted to him by the Lord; and, without adding to it or taking from it, he declares, **“Thus saith the Lord, Forasmuch as thou hast sent messengers to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron, is it not because there is no God in Israel to enquire of his word? therefore thou shalt not come down off that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die!”**

Elijah, having thus spoken, departed. But the words he had uttered remained behind. **“He died,”** says the sacred historian **“according to the word of the Lord which Elijah had spoken.”**

The church of God on earth had one destroyer less, and hell one victim more!

“In Judah is God known,” sings the Psalmist: “his name is great in Israel. In Salem also is his tabernacle, and his dwelling place in Zion. There brake he the arrows of the bow, the shield, and the sword, and the battle. Selah.

“Thou art more glorious and excellent than the mountains of prey. The stouthearted are spoiled, they have slept their sleep: and none of the men of might have found their hands. At thy rebuke, O God of Jacob, both the chariot and horse are cast into a dead sleep. Thou, even thou, art to be feared: and who may stand in thy sight when once thou art angry?

“Thou didst cause judgment to be heard from heaven; the earth feared, and was still, When God arose to judgment, to save all the meek of the earth. Selah. Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.

“Vow, and pay unto the LORD your God: let all that be round about him bring presents unto him that ought to be feared. He shall cut off the spirit of princes: he is terrible to the kings of the earth” (Psalms 76:2-12).

Hallelujah! To him be the glory and the kingdom for ever and ever! Amen.

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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