

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE WORK-DAY EVENING

Sacred history may be regarded as a Divine prediction, which is as yet only in part fulfilled. When we are grieved with the present sad and gloomy state of things, we may well resort to these pleasing oracles, which set forth in type as well as in prophecy the representation of future and better times. For with reference to all that formerly took place of a beautiful or glorious description, in the land where Israel sojourned, it may be said, **“The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be”** (Ecclesiastes 1:9). From the history of Eden, down to that of the glorious church of God, every happy event recorded shall ultimately be renewed in a far more glorious manner. May this certainty cheer and animate us as we approach, in the history of Elijah, one of the most glorious events to which divine grace ever gave birth before the Christian era.

“And it came to pass, when the LORD would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Bethel.

“And Elisha said unto him, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel. And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace.

“And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the LORD hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the LORD will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace.

“And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the LORD hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on” (II Kings 2:1-6).

The prophet has finished his work upon earth and the stormy labors of the day are followed by a beautiful evening, tinged with the golden light of another and a blissful world. He is like the mariner, who, after a long and perilous voyage, is now in sight of the haven of his destination, and joyfully hastens to strike his topmasts and take in his sails.

He walks, for a few days longer, as if already within the hearing of the music of heaven; and can now gratefully recount some of the fruits of his labors, for they begin to manifest themselves more clearly to his view. The events we are now about to consider, will form a pleasing contrast to his past history, and will serve to remind us of that happy period when the enigmas of this life will all be explained in the most satisfactory manner, and its temporary discords resolved into the most exquisite harmony.

Three points in the passage before us are especially worthy our notice:

- I. Elijah's desire for retirement;
- II. His visits to the schools of the prophets;
- III. The reception he meets with there.

I. Elijah had now withdrawn from more public notice into the secluded neighborhood of the Jordan

We find him at present in the little town of Gilgal, not far from Jericho, on that memorable spot where Joshua, after the miraculous passage of the river, set up the twelve stones, and dedicated them as a lasting memorial of the divine mercy and faithfulness; **“that all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord is mighty.”**

If ever these ancient words had deeply affected Elijah, and inspired his mind with renewed vigor, it must surely have been now, when his own situation, in many respects, so strikingly resembled that of his forefathers. If those massy stones were still remaining as in all probability they were, how must he have felt at the sight of them! He also might have erected his Ebenezer near them, and have consecrated it with tears of sweet and humble thankfulness. For how frequently had he himself been led by the hand of the Almighty through an overflowing Jordan!

The prophet has now completed his pilgrimage. He knows it by a Divine revelation. The horses of fire and the flaming chariot stand already prepared behind the clouds to fetch him away; nor has the Lord concealed from him the distinguished manner in which he is about to be taken home. He therefore goes from Gilgal to Bethel to bid a last farewell to his disciples as to his dear children. He hoped to have made this journey alone; but scarcely had he taken his staff, when Elisha appears ready to join him. However much he wished to be alone at this time, he loved his faithful friend too dearly to reject his society at once.

They therefore set out together; but they had not gone on long before Elijah is unable to conceal his desire for solitude. He therefore says to him, **“Tarry here, I pray you for the Lord hath sent, me to Bethel.”** But no; Elisha cannot this time accede to the wish of his venerable master. **“As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth,”** replied he, **“I will not leave thee;”** and they proceed together on their way. Twice again, at Bethel and at Jericho, Elijah repeats his request with increasing urgency, **“Tarry here, pray thee, for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan.”** But all such entreaties were of no avail. Elisha persisted in affirming, **“I will not leave thee.”**

This urgent wish, of Elijah to be alone is not difficult to explain. He knew what a great distinction the Lord intended for him, such as from the beginning of the world had never been conferred on any saint of God but once; and what was even Enoch's triumph compared with that of Elijah? Elijah was not only to be translated into heaven by a way which passed not through the gates of death, but this translation was also to take place visibly, with a glory never before witnessed. A whirlwind was to accompany it; nay, a fiery chariot from another world was provided to fetch the prophet home. He probably knew the day and the hour when this would occur. Only consider this deliberately, and you will be ready to wonder that he did not sink under the weight of such an expectation.

How must he have felt, when, lifting up his eyes to the heavens, he would say to himself, "In a few days I shall be passing through those heavens into the very presence of the Lord, where I shall see all the ancient fathers—Abel and Enoch, Methuselah and Melchizedek, and the father of the faithful, and Moses, and the psalmist, the man after God's own heart, and dwell among them forever. Where I shall behold the King of kings and Lord of lords, even the Lord himself!"

Is it any wonder, that in the midst of such thoughts, even the company of his dearest friend was too much for him? Especially when he reflected that he was a poor sinner, having many faults and infirmities, how must such reflections have induced him to seek to be alone with his God. He had had much spiritual experience since he had been employed in the Lord's service; but surely never could his thoughts have been so extraordinary as at present. What wonder was it he should wish to pour out his soul alone with God?

The vessel of a human bosom was too narrow for it, though it were the bosom of a friend. How much had he to reflect upon, to confess, to mourn over; and how much cause too for thanksgiving and praise! Whether Elisha comprehended this we know not. He would certainly have done his master an acceptable service had he complied with his request and remained behind. Nothing however could induce him to do so. He was firmly resolved not to leave him.

Humility also appears to have influenced Elijah on this occasion in wishing to decline the company of his friend. He appears to have desired to conceal his approaching triumph even from Elisha himself, lest any glory should be given to the creature rather than the Creator. Let us here blush at ourselves! For how vain are we apt to be of our own little distinctions!

Not so Elijah, that eminent man of God. Honorable indeed are those persons in God's sight, who are thus humble in their own. O that there were more such truly modest and humble characters among professed Christians! It is qualities like these which find favor even with then converted world.

Thrice—at Gilgal, at Bethel, and at Jericho—did Elijah, with increasing importunity, entreat his companion to leave him; the Lord having directed him first to one place and then to another. Thrice does Elijah receive the same concise and decided reply, "**As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.**"

Elijah was therefore obliged to yield to the determination of his friend.

And doubtless he was the more ready to acquiesce in it, as he might infer, from Elisha's language, that the Lord had revealed to him the secret of his approaching exaltation, and that he had received divine direction to accompany his departing master to the borders of Jordan, perhaps that he might afterwards be able to bear testimony of this wonder to the world.

We have good reason to suppose that this was the case, and that it was this which induced him to say, **“As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.”**

The great and glorious things which the Lord performs amongst men must not be hidden in a corner. In due time they must be published upon the housetops, and contribute to make known the honor of Him who will fill heaven and earth with his glory. Hence it often happens that he places secret witnesses about his children, even where they think themselves unobserved by any human eye. Thus many a pious spirit enters heaven, supposing that no one knew anything of his life and experience, and even ignorant himself of the glory which God had shed around him. But after such persons have left this world, everything comes to light; the Lord removes the veil which concealed their real character, and it is made known to the praise of his grace, as well as for the encouragement of surviving brethren, how mighty the power of God was in their weakness, and how much the Lord had accomplished in them and through them.

Hence the memory of the just becomes blessed even on earth, and they live in the affectionate recollections of many. **“Their works do follow them.”** They leave a sweet savor here below, and cheer and animate many surviving imitators. Such characters of two individuals lately deceased well known to many of you—the worthy Jaeniké of Berlin, and the faithful Krafft of Cologne. How many admirable things respecting both these persons have come to light since their departure!

What a number of the loveliest actions of their lives did we hear for the first time at their graves! O, I hope there are still many amongst us, who, like Abel, will begin to speak loudest when dead; and who at present have the fairest and brightest side of their life “hid with Christ in God.”

II. Elijah and Elisha went on from Gilgal together

Their course was directed first to the little town of Bethel. The sons of the prophets at Bethel went out to meet them; and the same thing happened when they arrived at Jericho. These were remarkable and highly gratifying occurrences especially at a time when faith seemed almost extinct in Israel, and **“the ways of Zion mourned.”**

God had reserved to himself the education and instruction of the people of Israel. In their divinely-appointed institutions we see the ground-plans and models, according to which the Almighty, in the jubilee or millennial age of his kingdom, will call into being that grand renovation which awaits the earth and all that is upon it, whether animate or inanimate. And as in the history of this distinguished people all the institutions of human society find their best models; so do those of instruction in particular.

Scholastic institutions, according to the modern system, Israel certainly does not appear to have known, at least until the Babylonish captivity.

But instead of these, home and school were one, and in the place of hireling lips, instruction was poured forth from the tender hearts of father and mother. The child learnt to lisp the name of the Lord under the vine and the fig-tree, before the door of the peaceful dwelling.

- There the sacred histories of antiquity, recounted with the eloquence of affection, passed before its admiring soul.
- There the ideas of God and of the great ends of human life were gradually impressed upon the tender mind.
- There it early learnt that which is eternally true and beautiful, and good for the human mind to know.

And this was learnt, in the animated imagery of sacred historic record, by many an Israelitish child, almost before it had become conscious that its years of tuition had arrived. Thus it was pleasantly initiated into Israel's wisdom, hopes, and prospects, and guided into a way of thinking, feeling, and anticipating, which penetrated upwards through the clouds of heaven, and forwards through the bounds of time.

Having enjoyed the benefit of such a popular education in the highest sense of the word, many a young Israelite came forth from the paternal dwelling, vigorous in body and in mind, with an eye open to everything that is worth observing; susceptible, like good ground, of the best cultivation; and carrying in his hand, from his very home, the key of Scripture, of history, and of nature.

The stars of heaven, the trees and flowers of the field preached to him; and the instructive voices of the Levites and prophets, which were constantly heard through the country, found in his mind a quick and vivid echo.

Now, if among these youths there was one who was pressed in spirit to penetrate deeper into the mysteries of the kingdom of God, and to search after wisdom from above, as the vocation of his life, and to become a teacher of Israel; the schools of the prophets, which, since the time of Samuel, appear as the fairest blossoms of Israelitish history, were open to receive him. These were a kind of missionary seminaries of a superior order; and owed their origin chiefly to the contrast of a mournful state of ecclesiastical declension and moral disorder.

The decrepid character of the superannuated priest Eli, surrounded by his degenerate sons clearly indicates the state of things at that period. Such were the persons who ought to have been crown of the nation and the guardians of the sanctuary. A speedy and powerful remedy was therefore requisite, to prevent the moral degeneracy from becoming universal. This remedy God sent in the person of Samuel, who shines as a bright luminary in those gloomy days.

With his appearance commences a new epoch in the history of the Old Testament church. He united in himself the offices of judge, prophet and priest; at a happy moment he put his hand to the helm of the nation, and, and was the means of preserving it from destruction. By him those seminaries of the prophets appear to have been first set on foot, which contained the promise of better things in Israel, and served as a security to the well-being of the country.

Also, in ministering to that righteousness which exalteth a nation, it probably furnished it with a succession of able counselors and leaders. For this purpose he appears to have gathered about him companies of pious, intelligent, and studious young men, who were called the sons of the prophets; who also became Israel's brightest ornament and the repository of her intellectual treasures.

The Scriptures mention four of these interesting seminaries: two in the time of Samuel; one at Kirjath-jearim, where the ark of the covenant was kept at that time, I Samuel 10: 5,10; another at Ramah, where Samuel is expressly mentioned as “**appointed over them**,” I Samuel 19:18-24; and two more in the time of Elijah and Elisha, at Jericho and at Bethel.

There were, probably, other such seminaries established by Elijah at Samaria, Gilgal, and elsewhere. There, or very near these towns, were settled, as little colonies, these servants of the Lord; the unmarried ones, as it should seem, in one housekeeping together, and the rest in families apart at their own cottages. The pupils of these establishments had to maintain themselves by their labor as husbandmen or mechanics.

This was not thought strange in Israel, much less contemptible. Indeed it has ever been the practice of that nation to teach their children some trade, even though they might be destined to learning and sacred offices. Many of their most respected rabbis have been even surnamed according to their civil professions, as “Rabbi Judah, the baker;” “Rabbi Isaac, the smith;” “Rabbi Johanan, the shoemaker,” &c. Nor was it ever imputed to Paul or to Aquila, by their enemies, as anything degrading, that, besides their ministerial office, they were tentmakers.

That the sons of the prophets understood and carried on such occupations, is evident from II Kings 6:4, where we find them with the ax and tools, cheerfully engaged in constructing their wooden dwellings.

The study which chiefly occupied these sons of the prophets, was doubtless that of the word; and the tongues of their teachers were as “**the pen of a ready writer**.” Their instructions were certainly something else than what passes for theological learning and knowledge in the present day. Undoubtedly they were employed upon the positive meaning and practical import of revelation.

If sacred history were the subject of their discourse, it was doubtless for the purpose of tracing, in some edifying manner, the footsteps of the Lord; or of concluding from things past those which were future. Then the mysteries Aaronic priesthood and of the ceremonial law, we may suppose, formed another subject of instruction in the schools of the prophets. Thus the bleeding Lamb of God, that was to bear and take away the sins of the world, might be presented to them in exposition of the sacrificial institutions. Certainly we find such things pointed at by David in the 51st Psalm.

Moreover, as their religious and civil codes were intermingled, especially under the theocracy, The one would not be studied without the other; neither can we well suppose that the cultivation of their own language would be neglected, especially as it was the most sacred tongue in the world.

Their studies would also be connected with devotion, very differently from the popular studies of modern days. The spirit would be sought and not merely the letter. The depths of true wisdom would be sounded; and thus, treasures of things new and old would be brought forth by sanctified intellects.

The special employments, however, in which the sons of the prophets are exhibited to us in Scripture history, are those of prophecy and sacred song. In I Samuel 10, we find a whole company of such disciples meeting Saul on the hill of God, near Kirjath-jearim, with “**a psaltery, a tablet, a pipe, and a harp**” before them, and themselves prophesying. And, in I Samuel 19, we see king Saul, on another occasion, at Ramah, meeting an assembly of the sons of the prophets prophesying, with Samuel set over them.

It is evident, from both these passages, that the art of sacred melody was diligently cultivated in those retired nurseries of whatever was lovely and of good report; and that this art was devoted, according to its original appointment, to the praise of God, and the cheering and beautifying of civil and domestic life. Ancient traditions tell us much of the great attainments of these sons of the prophets in the lovely art of sacred song, and how affectingly they thus poured forth the harmony of their souls. By what is called their prophesying in I Samuel 10, and elsewhere, we understand an outpouring of the language of the heart in song or in praise, under the special influence of the Holy Spirit and these effusions we must conclude to have been always of the sublimest and holiest nature.

Now, if the final object of these excellent schools was not precisely to form *prophets and seers*—for such the Lord alone forms and calls—yet the Lord was pleased to have ready such assemblies of his saints, from which, when he saw good, he might select a messenger for himself, endowed with all human preparatives, whenever these were deemed requisite.

It is highly probable that most of the prophets proceeded from these institutions; the shepherd Amos seems to point out his to the office as an exception to the rule, he says, in chapter 7:14, “**I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet’s son; but I was a herdman, a gatherer of sycamore fruit: and the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and said to me, Go prophesy unto my people Israel.**”

These institutions at least, provided the country with many enlightened teachers, many worthy, well-instructed, and faithful heads of families, and judges. And, even had they not done so, still their very existence answered a high and holy purpose. They were the depositories of Israelitish light and justice; they shone as luminaries in a crooked and perverse nation; and reprobated apostasy more severely by their example, than could have been done by the most powerful language.

Their quiet but mighty influence served to oppose the inroads of surrounding heathen darkness. They were also a spiritual asylum wherein spiritual mourners might find instruction, comfort, and peace. And who shall say what streams of living waters, from those fountains of Israel, refreshed and fertilized the country at large.

O my brethren! What sorrow fills my heart retiring from the picture of these ancient and piously devoted seminaries back into our own times, to contemplate the establishments for instruction which modern wisdom has devised and boasts of.

O ye sons of Israel, how much better were ye provided for than most of our youth in the present day! And yet we honor ourselves as CHRISTIANS! Where are institutions at present to be found, in which another spirit rules than that of the world and the profane? Where can we behold flourishing seminaries in which a Christian's hope for his children would flourish also? Alas, they do but rarely, very rarely indeed exist; notwithstanding our systems of education, those boasts of the age we live in. In what, then consists the vaunted perfection of such systems?

Is it in those fragments of classical literature which are crammed into our youths;

Or in those ornamental accomplishments to which our daughters are made to sacrifice their health and mental cultivation. Or is it in the almost general separation of modern instruction from the word of truth, the Gospel of our salvation? Or is it in the more popular manner in which individual branches of knowledge are treated, apart from all deeper investigation, apart from their general connection, and, above all, apart from the knowledge of God as their chief end and perfection?

Or does the excellence of our modern education consist in purely heathenish conceptions of liberty, morality, and justice, as accredited to our youth in many seminaries, by blind leaders who never study the sacred oracles with half the diligence, zeal, and respect with which they study the basic writers of ancient Greece and Rome?

And here I cannot refrain from inserting the remark of an enlightened writer upon the present state of education in Germany. "Education," he says, "is become a system of seduction. Young men, and even schoolboys and apprentices, are trained into instruments of faction and rebellion, and are found the most active associates of tumult and revolt in the present day.

Yes, the most audacious blasphemies and execrations are uttered in the ears of listening youths, and even of children, against clergy, magistrates, and public institutions, while the minds of the young are thus easily excited, and drink in these iniquities like water."

A monstrous ignorance of the Word of God, an affecting and deplorable want of scriptural knowledge, exists far and wide; for, during the last thirty years, our youths have been beguiled of all the blessings of holy things in our public and private seminaries; yes, in our very universities; and those who have most distinguished themselves in perpetrating these spiritual robberies have become the most reputable, popular and best rewarded.

The most vapid and superficial talking passes for religious and moral instruction; and school books full of subtle omissions, or of the most daring attacks upon religion, are introduced by authority. Instruction in history, that memorial of divine justice and human sins, commonly abused to the implanting of national pride, and the dissemination of the most pernicious principles and doctrines.

If we do not yet find this gloomy description fully realized everywhere, we have to ascribe exclusively to an invisible watcher, who has hitherto set bounds to the floods of Belial. Let us commend to Him, who still cherishes thoughts of peace towards us, and not of evil, our places of tuition both high and low; may he reform, consecrate and renew them!

It is true that greater importance has been attached in some places to religious instruction, and the hours devoted to it have been doubled. But this alone will not cure the evil. Another spirit is wanting in our schools and seminaries to complete, animate and sanctify every branch of instruction.

We ought, therefore, to pray for the outpouring of the Spirit of Christ; and, God be thanked! We never shall seek it in vain. We have Divine promises in abundance, which encourage us to look forward, in prayer, for better days. Particularly would I refer you to that prophecy of Zechariah, which shall assuredly come to pass, **“In that day shall there be upon the bells of the horses, HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD; and the pots in the Lord’s house shall be like the bowls before the altar. Yea, every pot in Jerusalem and in Judah shall be holiness unto the Lord of hosts: and all they that sacrifice shall come and take of them, and seethe therein: and in that day there shall be no more the Canaanite in the house of the Lord of hosts.”** (14:20, 21).

What a glorious prospect is here presented to us of the future condition of the church and of the world! The beauty and luster of holiness shall then be spread over all we possess, and over all that surrounds us. The Spirit of the Lord shall be universally diffused, and every object will partake of a Divine consecration. The sciences will then be the handmaidens of religion, and their alpha and omega will be the glory of God in Christ. The arts will return to their primary destination, and be again devoted to the service of the living God. **“I, the Lord, will hasten it in its time.”**

III. It must have been gratifying to Elijah to behold these sons of the prophets

They were coming forth to meet him, and to hear, from their voices, an echo to his own ardent prayers, which, when his faith was weak, he had supposed to have no counterpart. It must have increased his own self-humiliation to witness such green spots still remaining in their moral desert, whereas he had thought the prophets all slain, and himself standing quite alone in Israel. He would now feel self-abased at the distrust he had expressed respecting the success of his labors.

For here, notwithstanding the malignant influence of an Ahab and a Jezebel, and the apostasy of a whole nation, these blooming plantations of truth had thriven amidst storm and tempest in those parts of the country where Satan’s seat had more especially been set up.

It must have cheered the heart of the prophet to associate, with his hope of heavenly glory, the thought of leaving behind him such goodly bands of champions in the service of the God of Israel.

On his coming with Elisha to Bethel, the sons of the prophets are already aware of the loss that awaits them. Probably the Lord himself had made it known to them. With such feelings, as on this occasion, they had never before saluted their paternal master.

How much did they need to establish their hearts in order to suppress all rising turbulence of feeling! For a delicate sense of propriety told them they ought not to let the master perceive that they knew of his approaching removal. They venture to disclose only to Elisha the secret of their mournfully afflicted souls, whilst beckoning him aside, and whispering with a trembling voice into his ear, “**Knowest thou that the Lord will take away master from thy head to-day?**”

But Elisha, as if putting a still stronger seal upon their lips, signified to them that they should keep the matter to themselves. “**Yea, I know it,**” said he softly to them; “**hold ye your peace!**” This happened at Bethel and the same thing was repeated at Jericho.

These are pleasing scenes, extremely delicate and characteristic. Surely, even in the kingdom of God, there is something which the world calls discretion, and this must at least be reckoned amongst the odors and beauties which Sharon’s roses and lilies shed around them.

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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