

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER NINE

THE PRAYER ON MOUNT CARMEL

We have already had three remarkable instances, in Elijah's history, of the efficacy of the fervent prayer of the righteous man.

- First, **“he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and months.”**
- Secondly, he prayed for the restoration of the widow's son, and the child was restored to life.
- Thirdly, he prayed for the answer by fire to consume the sacrifice, and to decide the controversy with Baal and his priests.

And now we have him praying again, and the heaven gives rain, and the land once more brings forth her fruit. Let us here learn the blessing of walking with God, and conversing with the Keeper of Israel by continual prayer.

“And Elijah said unto Ahab, Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain. So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; and he cast himself down upon the earth, and put his face between his knees, And said to his servant, Go up now, look toward the sea. And he went up, and looked, and said, There is nothing. And he said, Go again seven times. And it came to pass at the seventh time, that he said, Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand. And he said, Go up, say unto Ahab, Prepare thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not. And it came to pass in the mean while, that the heaven was black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Ahab rode, and went to Jezreel. And the hand of the LORD was on Elijah; and he girded up his loins, and ran before Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. (I Kings 18:41-46).

The fire has borne its testimony; the waters now speak. In how many and various ways does our gracious God testify of himself, that he is the living God of providence. This, also, is done in answer to the Prayer of Elijah. Here is,

- I. The preparation for prayer;
- II. The prayer itself;
- III. The answer to it.

We are to imagine ourselves at the foot of Mount Carmel, in the plain below, where the prophets of Baal were slain. Those idolatrous priests have fallen by the hand of Elijah and his new followers, and their blood is mingled with the brook Kishon; and praise redounds to God, who is holy in all his ways, and who is glorified by the overthrow of his enemies, as well as by the hallelujahs of his friends.

Three years and a half had the heavens been shut up from yielding a drop of water to the thirsty land of Israel. What an appearance must the face of the country now have presented! All vegetation parched and burnt up; man and beast reduced to skeletons, and all flesh faded like the grass. They who had now become believers in God must have been filled with unusual terror. They had attained to the knowledge of him amidst the thunders of his judgments; he had appeared as in flames of fire.

Even for the sake of these poor trembling sheep, our prophet was heartily desirous that his Lord and God should again show his goodness and lovingkindness. He longed earnestly, that for the glory of God and the people's good the brazen skies should now dissolve in abundance of rain, and the season of famine and distress terminate. For this purpose it was necessary that Elijah should speak to God. The prayer of faith was to him what the staff was to Moses, with which he divided the Red Sea and struck water from the flinty rock.

Ahab appears to have remained with the people by the brook Kishon, and to have witnessed everything, even the slaying of his priests—not without a partial assent, for Ahab was evidently a weak capricious tyrant, destitute of character, and governed and molded by present circumstances. The miracle on Carmel, and the enthusiastic cry of the people, “**The Lord, he is the God!**” had not left his heart unmoved, but made a momentary impression; so that he might have even thought at the time, “Be it so, that the Lord is God!” But his heart was not changed; no true faith had taken possession of it. Many a one may have impressions from what is taking place around him, so as to be moved by them for a time; but he soon recovers his former state of mind, and goes on afterwards just as if nothing had happened. Such was the case with Ahab and others, at the fiery testimony on Carmel.

Elijah, about to retire for prayer, wished to be relieved from the company of Ahab and his attendants, and he said unto him, “**Get thee up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of abundance of rain.**”

In these words we cannot help discerning a bitter reproof given to the wretched monarch. It looks as if he had said, “Thy carnal ease is thy principal care; now take it; it will not much longer be disturbed by drought and famine.” It was also a cutting reproof, as implying that the king's presence was not wanted; especially while Elijah was about to converse with his God. And does it not convey a touching reproof to any of us, if the children of God are obliged to become mute and monosyllabic on our entering their company, and immediately turn the discourse upon the weather, politics, or the news of the day? Is it not a Divine admonition to us, when we cannot help feeling that we are burdensome to them, that we interrupt them, and when it is gently hinted to us that we do not perhaps feel ourselves quite at home, that we are rather out of our element?

Yes, to be thus sent away from Christian society, and banished as it were from the sanctuary of God, is surely a foretaste of future judgments. And how many amongst you must daily swallow the bitter pill of being told, in one way or another, “Get thee up, eat and drink;” “we should be glad to be without you; we cannot go on comfortably while you are present.”

“**Get thee up,**” said Elijah; and added “**for there is a sound of abundance of rain;**” a sound of a rustling, as is usual before an approaching storm, in the tops of the trees and upon the waters. Whether he heard it only in faith, with the ear of the spirit, or whether God rendered his bodily hearing so acute that he really heard it from afar in the elements, or in the higher regions of the air, we need not inquire. It is enough that he heard it, and it sounded to him like the tolling of the bell of prayer, even as a forerunning Amen to the aspirations for which he was preparing himself; and it strengthened him in the hope that his will, in desiring rain, was one with the will of God, who would now send rain.

My brethren, we sometimes hear such a sound also; and whenever we hear it, let it be to us what it was to Elijah—a summon to prayer. It ought to be so to us, according to God’s intention. When, at any time, the preaching of the truth is blessed to a church, and the word reaches the soul—when a movement appears in a congregation, and a general excitement prevails—when tears of emotion flow, and people meet together and say. “What a powerful, impressive sermon!” there is then a rustling, and it is then time, ye children of God, to lift up your hands and pray, that after the sound, the rain may come.

Again, when some judgment has occurred in the neighborhood; when a barren fig-tree has been unexpectedly cut down before our eyes; when a scorner has been evidently smitten by Providence, that the simple may beware; or whatever it be, when the whole neighborhood is alarmed, and unbelievers themselves are obliged to confess that the hand of God is visible—then pray that it may not stop there.

When you are informed that one individual is desiring the sincere milk of the Gospel, and that another has risen up from the seat of the scornful, and shows an inclination to come amongst the people of God; when you perceive that among the members of your household there is an inquiry after eternal things, and that your children begin to hear gladly of the Lord Jesus; then, then the sound reaches your ears; then it is time to lift up your heart in prayer.

Yes: be watchful, ye children of God! never fall asleep on the walls of Zion, keep your ears attentive, and listen in every direction—in the church and in your houses, among your friends and relatives; and when you hear the rustling, even if but faintly and as at a distance, go immediately to your closet, fall down at God’s footstool, stretch out your hands and cry, “O Lord, We will not let thee go, unless thou pour upon us the gracious rain of thine inheritance.”

And the same course should be pursued when there begins to be a rustling, not merely amongst others, but in your own selves; when it thunders and lightens in your own darkness; when a word strikes you, and a ray of light comes into your soul; when the glory of Christ is more clearly manifested to your mind, and your soul enjoys a foretaste of his grace, then give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure. The rustling is not the rain itself; but it is the forerunner of the rain, an vine summons to prayer. O, regard it as such!

While Elijah was thus employed, Ahab, we are told, went up **“to eat and to drink.”** Miserable man! after all the great and heart-affecting scenes of the day, he felt just as if he had witnessed an interesting, though somewhat tedious comedy, after which refreshment is welcome, and food is relished. Would that such characters were not too common even at present! Many among us are not a whit better than Ahab. But a fearful woe awaits those who suffer the most powerful testimonies, the loudest calls to repentance, and the most affecting works of God to pass before them like a shadow or a dream. They please themselves with such things for a while, as with a “pleasant song” or beautiful painting; but carry nothing away with them from our churches and meetings, except perhaps a feeling of the length of the service, or some topic for conversational display, together with a good appetite for the next carnal meal. Yes, this is all; though perhaps in the morning the Lord by his Spirit has answered as with fire before their eyes and ears. However, we will not detain them; let them **“go, eat, and drink!”**

II. When Ahab was gone, Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; in spirit, however, we find him descending into the valley of humiliation

On Carmel’s summit, where all was calm and still, as in a solitary closet, no unbidden guests followed him; there he could converse uninterruptedly with the Lord. On the top of Carmel, too, he could the sooner perceive if his prayer was heard; and he stood there, on a lofty watch-tower, from whence he could widely survey both sea and land. However, he does not seem to have made much use of this commanding view; for, on reaching the summit, he kneels down, closes his eyes, bends his head forwards towards his knees, and in this posture he begins to address the Lord, and to pray for rain.

Behold him! Would it be supposed that this is the man who, a short time before, stood upon Carmel as a vicerent of God, seemingly empowered with a command over the elements? Yet he now humbles himself in the dust, under the feeling of his own poverty and weakness. What does his whole demeanor express but abasement and consciousness of his littleness and unworthiness! But it was the will of God that we should for once behold his great prophet in such a situation, and overhear him in his closet, in order to teach us where his strength really lay; to show us that it has been God’s rule, from ancient times, to work with weak instruments, and to do wonders by bruised reeds, in order that we might see whence even an Elijah derived his greatness; and not be tempted to place the honor and glory upon the head of man, instead of laying it at the feet of him to whom it belongs; and that we might feel the force of that encouraging sentence of the apostle James, **“Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are.”**

When Elijah stood before the people, he was God’s ambassador, and as such, had to speak and to act in virtue of his high commission; but when he stood before God, he was a poor sinner and a worm, who was only able to live by mercy, and had nothing to demand, but was obliged to beg everything at the throne of grace.

On the summit of Carmel the feeling of his unworthiness seems to have quite overwhelmed him. How could it be otherwise, when he looked back upon the events of that day, and upon the whole course of his life to that moment!

What success had been granted him, in the fulfillment of his desires and prayers. What succor, what preservation, what answers had he experienced! And who was he? He will have it confessed before God and men, how unworthy he is of the least of all these mercies; how willing he is regard himself as the chief of sinners. And in this consciousness he appears before the Lord, entreating again a new wonder, although the altar is still smoking from the fiery testimony which the Lord at his request had so recently given.

When Elijah had wrestled awhile with God in the depth of self-abasement and poverty of spirit, in a manner which perhaps few of us know from experience—for all believers do not tread in a path of such a deep and thorough humiliation—he said unto his servant, **“Go up now,”** that is, to the declivity of the mountain, **“and look towards the sea!”**

He placed him, as it were, on the watchtower, to look out and inform him when his prayer was beginning to be answered by a sign of rain becoming visible in the distant horizon. For, he was certain of a favorable answer, in faith on the word and truth of Him who had said to him at Zarephath, **“Go, show thyself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth!”**

The servant went, looked out in the distance, and cast his eyes about on all sides; but the sky was as clear as crystal—not a cloud to be seen. He came back, and said, **“I see nothing.”** But it is a matter of daily experience, that help does not appear at the first cry, nor is the harvest reaped the moment after the sowing time of prayer. This is certainly not agreeable to flesh and blood; but, spiritually considered, it is very salutary.

What would be the consequence, if God’s treasures were always open to us at our first knocking?

- Should we not then seem to be rulers and commanders in the city of God, and forget our dependent condition?
- Should we not be in danger of making an idol of our prayer, as the Israelites made of the brazen serpent, and think it is our prayer that effects all:
- Should we not think that in prayer we possess a secret charm, a divine rod, or a legal claim upon the bounty of God?

We should soon become self-sufficient.

Therefore our gracious God does not always appear to hearken to the first cry, but lets us generally stand awhile at the door, so that once and again we are obliged to say, **“I see nothing.”**

We ought then to reflect a little, and become deeply conscious that we have, in reality, nothing to claim, but that all is mere unmerited favor. If we make our first approach to his footstool in the character of just persons, he keeps us back until we feel that we are poor sinners, unworthy petitioners; and are ready to say, **“Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.”** Such is his method.

“There is nothing,” said the servant. But our praying Elijah does not despair.

The reason why we generally so easily grow weary, and so soon cease from praying, is because we are not sufficiently in earnest for the blessing we implore. This, however, was not the case with Elijah. He therefore bids the servant to **“Go again seven times.”**

But why precisely seven times? Does it mean several times, or is there here any particular emphasis in the number of seven? And why was the servant thus to go again and again? What would it avail him to hear every time, “There is nothing” O, it stimulated the prophet’s ardor—it animated him to wrestle the more earnestly with God—it made him still less and less in his own eyes, and drew forth deeper and deeper sighs from his contrite soul.

How would his fervor in prayer thus augment from one minute to another! To obtain a speedy hearing is much more agreeable to our natural feelings, but waiting long is far more beneficial for us. Those are the most blessed spots on the face of the earth where prayer is wont to be made with the greatest fervency and perseverance.

During this process of persevering prayer:

- Our corrupt nature receives the most painful and deadly blows;
- The heart is then most thoroughly broken up, and prepared for the good seed of the Word;
- The remains of self-love are then demolished the most effectually;
- The chambers of imagery are then the most properly cleansed;
- The foundation truth in the soul is laid deep.

And when the answer comes at length, how great is the joy!

III. The servant returns the seventh time, and says, “Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man’s hand”

Elijah’s prayer is answered!

It is true, it is only a little cloud at first—hardly visible. But, when God gives the first fruits, he gives the harvest in due time. If thou hast received a little grace, rejoice! Thou hast hereby a pledge that thou shalt receive more! If there be something of his Spirit in thee, know that abundance of grace is in reserve for thee. Forgiveness is a pledge of adoption, and renewal of spirit commenced will be carried on, through faith, unto the day of Christ. Therefore let every sincere Christian rejoice, who sees in himself or in others a little cloud of divine grace. Let him but continue instant in prayer, and the blessing shall increase abundantly.

And the prophet said unto his servant, **“Go up, say unto Ahab, Prepare thy chariot, and get thee down, that the rain stop thee not.”**

Thus was literally fulfilled what Elijah had said: **“There shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to my word.”** Therefore the Lord did not let the full shower come all at once—but, first of all, a little cloud that was scarcely visible, that Elijah might have time to announce the approaching rain to the king, that the rain might come at the word of the prophet; and that it might be fully apparent that the Lord God of Elijah, was the Governor of the world.

The servant comes to the king, who perhaps was stationed in a pavilion upon the mountain, whilst the sky is still clear and seems to promise anything but rain. “**Prepare thy chariot,**” was the message; “**get thee down, that the rain stop thee not!**” “Rain!” would the astonished guests exclaim; “Rain!” would the people cry, full of joyful hope; and scarcely had they lifted up their eyes, when every region of the sky seemed to reply, “Yea, and amen; an abundance of rain!”

Dark thunderclouds ascend out of the sea, one after the other; the heavens become black, the wind sets all the sea in motion, roars through the forests, and a violent storm pours down upon the land, O welcome streams! refreshing floods! The face of the earth is renewed, and all nature rejoices. A breath of life breathes over the fields, wood and meadow are clothed with new verdure, the birds resume their music in the branches, and man, and beast and everything seems as if resuscitated, The voice of rejoicing is heard in the dwellings of the righteous, and joy fills the hearts of the godly.

Ahab is already seated in his chariot, and on his way to his royal seat in Jezreel. But “**the hand of the Lord was upon Elijah.**”

The Lord God invigorated him with supernatural bodily powers, so that the prophet, girding up his loins, ran before Ahab’s chariot, which doubtless was at full speed, on account of the deluging rain. The prophet was now a living memorial to the king, to remind him the great things which the God of Israel had brought to pass by his prophet; that Ahab might not easily forget them, but carry the fresh impression of them to Jezebel.

Elijah therefore outran the chariot before his eyes, through all the torrents of rain and tempest, till he came to the entrance of Jezreel.

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The apostle James, as we have before noticed, adduces this instance of Elijah’s success in prayer as an encouragement to us to persevere in prayer, and to believe that we also shall not fail of being answered, if we only pray in faith; because, “**The effectual fervent prayer of the righteous man availeth much**” (James 5:16). And indeed, who can recount all the wondrous instances in which the truth of this declaration has been realized!

- Through prayer, Moses turned away the fierce wrath of the Almighty from Israel;
- with outstretched arms he smote the host of Amalek; and Manoah,
- by the voice of his cry, Manoah drew down a visible manifestation of the Divine presence in human form (Judges 13:8).
- Through prayer at Mizpeh, the prophet Samuel smote the army of the Philistines, and caused the thunder of terror to roll over Israel’s foes (I Samuel 7:9-12).
- Through prayer, Josiah the prince died in peace (II Kings 22:19, 20).
- Through prayer, fifteen years were added to Hezekiah’s life;
- The three men were preserved in the burning fiery furnace;
- To Daniel it was said by Gabriel, “**I am come because of thy words.**”
- At the prayer of the brethren on the day of Pentecost, the heavens were opened;

- After they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and all were filled with the Holy Ghost (Acts 4:31).
- Prayer burst the fetters of Peter, and broke open the doors of his prison.
- Prayer rebuked storms, healed the sick, and brought back the dead to life.

And what shall I say more of the power, the wonders, and the performances of prayer—the whole Scripture is full of them. And our church also would be full of them—all Christendom would be full of them, were there more prayer in our Israel, and more of this incense on our public, family, and private altar.

But prayer sleeps amongst us; for what we call praying, morning and evening, according to custom—the sleepy, dull, and heartless repetition of devotional language—does not deserve the name of Prayer. Keep those ceremonious compliments to yourselves; the Lord does not want such service. The confessions of the broken and contrite, the cry of the humble, the expression of real godly sorrow, the opening of our cares to our heavenly Father, the breathings of grateful love, the acknowledgment of dependence on the name of Jesus—these are the things which go to constitute true prayer.

Brethren, pray that the Spirit of grace and supplication may be poured out upon you; and then ask what you will, it shall be done for you. He that “**cannot lie**” has promised it. Only ask in his name, as the children of God, by faith in Christ Jesus, trusting in God’s faithfulness to his promises, and you will certainly succeed at last.

If six times, the answer should be, “**There is nothing;**” yet wait on. The seventh time, which is the proper and the Lord’s time, will give the answer you need. Too often we omit to notice God’s answer to our prayers, otherwise how often should we find, to our glad astonishment, that, at the time of our supplication, the commandment had gone forth to help us.

Therefore let the call to prayer be ever regarded by us as the invitation to an unspeakable privilege. “**Continue instant in prayer**” Pray in the Spirit, in the Holy Ghost, and not in your own self-sufficiency, and you will pray with power.

Pray for yourselves, pray for all, and pray with faith and expectation for in the immutable word, that word which must survive both heaven and earth, it stands recorded, “**Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you**” (John, 16:23). Amen.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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