

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE HIDDEN CHURCH

“**I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in my people,**” saith the Lord by the prophet Isaiah, 65:19. These words give us an insight into the love of God, which ought to draw us towards himself. We here behold the close relation which subsists between God and his people; of which indeed we should entertain conceptions far too mean, were we to compare it merely to the relation subsisting between a gracious sovereign and his pardoned criminal subjects, or between a condescending and forbearing master and his servants. We are not only objects of his sparing and pardoning mercy, we are incomparably more than this. The Lord rejoices over his people; he delighteth in them that fear him and trust in his mercy. He rests in his love toward them. He beholds them—not as they are in themselves, but as clothed with the righteousness of their Surety, and beautified with his spirit of holiness. He loves those who are renewed by his grace, even as he loves the express image of his person. For those whom he thus loves, are conformed to the image of his Son.

It has been said by someone, Suppose the sun in the heavens, which enlightens, warms, and fructifies everything, were a rational being that could see everything which it effects, it would then behold its own image in every sea, in every river, in every lake, and in every brook,—nay, it would even see itself reflected on the loftiest mountains of ice; and would it not, in the abundance of its joy at such glorious radiance— forgetting itself—embrace all these oceans, seas, and rivers—nay, the very glaciers, in its arms, and delight over them Thus Jesus Christ, the Sun of righteousness, beholds his image and divine work in every renewed soul as in a polished mirror; hence, seeming to forget himself in the abundance of the joy that was set before him. He could condescend to wash the feet of his disciples; hence it was that he exclaimed to the Syro-Phoenician woman, “**O woman, great is thy faith!**”

Thus our eternal Father beholds in his children the beauty of his Son Jesus Christ, with a complacency which is more than we are able to express. He embraces them with the arms of his love; and he loves the image of himself in which he has renewed them.

Happy are the people that are in such a case; yea, blessed are the people who have the Lord for their God! Some of them are spoken of in the portion of the history now before us; and such, in all ages, may be called the hidden church.

“Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him” (I Kings 19:18).

These words conclude the Lord’s address to Elijah at Horeb. After announcing the heavy judgments which were to come upon backsliding Samaria, by means of Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha—this pleasing communication follows, like the still small voice. The last shadow of anxiety was now dispelled from the prophet’s mind.

This announcement of God, respecting the seven thousand faithful worshipers reserved in idolatrous Israel, may lead us,

- I. To consider that God has ever a hidden church;
- II. To reflect upon the promises made to it.

**I. Elijah had complained that the Lord’s name was forgotten,
and his covenant forsaken by the children of Israel;
and had added, that he himself was left alone**

His complaint was correct enough for human knowledge. The days indeed were evil; the age of Noah seemed to have returned; all was dark, dead, ruined, and desolate; and the vintage of God seemed gathered from the earth, with the exception of two or three on the topmost bough.

Painful in the extreme must all this have been to such a spirit as Elijah’s; but, suddenly, he receives from God himself the astonishing tidings, that seven thousand were still reserved, who had not bowed the knee to Baal, nor kissed him. How astonished must the prophet have been at this disclosure! How ready to recall his words, **“I, even I only, am left alone!”** and how must his new commission have been undertaken with renewed courage!

And what could be more delightful, in this our day, than to be surprised by similar intelligence? certainly, our own age seems greatly superior to that of Elijah; but there is much that is only exterior show, which can hardly be mistaken. If all that appears to be divine life were really such; and if all were evangelists, who in modern times are preaching, not for the truth, but against it; if they were men of God, led and gifted by the Spirit of God, and bowed the knee in truth to the exalted Redeemer; if all the multitudes, who in every place crowd into the places of worship, really said in their hearts, **“Come, let us return to the Lord!”** If the thousands, who, in Bible and missionary associations, labor in building the ark, all came into this ark themselves—nay, if even all whom we see uniting for meetings of edification and prayer, could be regarded as true worshippers, then might we indeed say something good of our times, though much would still remain to be wished for.

But of what use is it to deceive ourselves? Things are far from being what their appearance would indicate; alas, many things which, from a distance, look very beautiful, are found, when more closely examined, to be full of deformities, if not mere phantoms of what they seemed to be.

Yet, supposing we could regard all who have the show of piety as real Christians, how few would even these be, compared with the number of those amongst us who openly show themselves to unbelievers? The prevailing spirit of our times is that of infidelity and apostasy—a spirit of pretended illumination, but, in reality, of the blindness presumption—a spirit of opposition to the plain Word of God, and of arbitrary determination upon good and evil independent of it—a spirit of the most idolatrous exaltation of mere natural reason above the revealed wisdom of God. Among the great mass of nominal Christians, both of the learned sort and of the illiterate, it has long been taken for granted that the doctrine of our native corruption is a gloomy fancy, and that of salvation by the blood and righteousness of Christ an antiquated and by-gone notion.

It is held, that the miserable tinsel of exterior decorum, the mere flimsy garniture of selfishness, is quite sufficient to satisfy God; and that a Mediator is not at all necessary to the salvation of men. Many have long been agreed, that the dogmas of a few conceited philosophers, so called, are more to be trusted than the truth of God delivered by Christ and his apostles; and that such faith as that of Paul, Peter, or John, is insufferable in the present day, as being absurd, mystical, and unworthy of any maturely instructed mind—yea, that it ought to be banished from the earth, even by persecution, if no other means will suffice.

Such is the prevailing spirit of our modern Christendom, which, with some, is disguised by a Christian profession; with others, has shamelessly cast off all disguise. It is found in every district, and in all ranks of society, and is taught in by far the greater part of our schools and nurseries. Millions of men professing the name of Christ, lie at the feet of this impious lying spirit in the present day. If you travel through the country, in whatever direction, you find it discovering itself in every company, at public tables and in private families.

Go from one church to another, and you will almost everywhere find that this spirit of seduction is the teacher and expositor; inspect a multitude of our modern hymn books and catechisms, and instead of the Spirit of God, this spirit of darkness in the garb of religion will confront you; yes, and in a very large number of our places of education, this spirit is the Moloch to which our youth and children are sacrificed.

Indeed, a review of the Christian world in the present day, is enough to make every pious spirit shudder. The spirit of antichrist is prevailing in the world to such an extent as it has never done heretofore; and it is almost time to join in with the complaint of the psalmist, **“Help, Lord! for the godly man ceaseth; for the faithful fail from the children of men!”** (Psalm 12:1)

Surely many think far too favorably of the present times. But do not others think far too gloomily of them? We are willing to believe they do, and the experience, which Elijah had, who even thought that he only was left; and afterwards heard, to his surprise, that there were seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal, may help to confirm us in this belief. Assuredly the Lord has many servants with whom we are unacquainted, he has hidden ones whom we may never hear of in this world; and many a country, and many a city, would perhaps long ago have been as Sodom and Gomorrah, had not a small remnant of such been left in those places.

“The kingdom of God cometh not with observation;” for, behold, **“the kingdom of God is within you.”** We do not sufficiently consider this, even as Elijah did not; and therefore we may be often mistaken with reference to this kingdom.

It is not infrequently the case, my brethren, that we measure the temple of God with a very incorrect measuring-line, and therefore deceive selves as to its breadth and extent. For instance, we are apt to take it for granted, that where there are no enlightened preachers, there can be no true Christians. But we forget that God has promised, where the shepherds are corrupt, to take charge of the flock himself!

Where has he made the regeneration of his chosen entirely dependent on human instrumentality? Lo! In the midst of the desert he often plants, with his own hand, the loveliest roses; and from the rudest and most neglected copse we often hear the sweetest notes of the nightingale. We are also apt to think, that where nothing is heard of awakenings, no awakenings take place. But must there be always a sound when it rains, and cannot children be born to the Lord as dew from the womb of the morning—silently and secretly, before daybreak, and while multitudes are asleep?

We are apt to take it for granted, that where there is no opposition to the Gospel, there must be a dearth of decided Christians. Certainly, the words still hold good, **“I am not come to send peace, but the sword!”** and this is commonly shown to be the case. Still there may be real Christians, who, without living under the fear of man, go on in such a quiet, retired, and gentle way, as not to be so exposed to the rancor of the children of this world; and if the Lord say to Laban, **“Take heed that thou speak not to Jacob either good or bad,”** Can Laban act otherwise?

It is generally taken for granted, that in certain connections, stations, and companies, for instance in the courts of infidel or worldly-minded princes, a child of God cannot possibly be found; but do we not see, in the example of a Joseph, an Obadiah and a Daniel, that even this may be the case? Obadiah seems to have possessed the confidence and regard of such a man as Ahab, one of the vilest of men.

The state of Christianity is also frequently estimated by the religious meetings convened in any place and by the numbers who attend them; but is this estimation always correct? May it not be possible, that in a place where no such meetings are held, there still may be many children of God who are restrained from coming together only by timidity and reserve—for such things may be found even in true believers—who are obliged to secrete themselves, like the seven thousand in Elijah’s days. And is it not a part of the providential guidance of many souls, to be directed rather to secret and retired intercourse with God, than to much open conference with their brethren?

Hence it may follow, that possibly in those places where no sympathy or activity exists for religious institutions as for Missionary and Bible Societies, perhaps nothing is wanting but information respecting such institutions, for the excitement of such an interest; or some sincere servants of God may have still so much to do with their own spiritual concerns, that they hardly know how to turn their attention to public efforts of this kind.

All this is possible. But it may be asked, can there be any ground for supposing a people of God to exist, where no works of pious writers are made use of; where there is no information found respecting the progress of the kingdom of God in the world; where scarcely an evangelical sermon or book is ever read or heard of? I answer, we are not sure that in such places there are no people of God.

I know some whom you would all acknowledge to be holy persons, were I to name them to you, who, nevertheless, read nothing in the world but their Bible and hymn book, and daily wipe their eyes for joy that they are so rich with these two books, and think that in these they possess a library which, in their whole life, they will never be able to exhaust, and that they can find nothing so beautiful anywhere as in the Bible! Who can blame them? Now, there may be many such persons in the world, who are very little known.

Moreover, we are apt to make the number of the faithful smaller than it is, by defining too arbitrarily and narrowly the characteristics of a state of grace. We, for instance, lay down a certain process as always observed in the Holy Spirit's work of conversion; whereas he is free as the wind that bloweth where it listeth. Infinite wisdom is seen in an endless variety of processes in the visible creation; and, as uniformity is not its business in the kingdom of nature, so neither is it in the kingdom of grace; but the same object is attained here also by variety.

A gracious change of mind may be as truly wrought by one process as by another. If you have had long to sigh and groan in spirit before your sins were forgiven you, still grudge not at him whose way hath been made to prosper more rapidly, and to whom the Lord has earlier shown his lovingkindness. **"It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good."**

Or, if it be given you to gain spiritual strength more easily, while another is day and night troubled with **"a thorn in the flesh,"** and cast down again and again—is he, on that account, no child of God?

If it be given you to have much knowledge and experience, must it necessarily be given to another also; and can there be no retired and reserved children of God? And if you are active and zealous in awakening others, efficient in preaching, exhortation, &c. while others are not so, nor are able to be so, are you therefore to question the genuineness of their piety? We must never measure others by ourselves. If we seek more after the chief and essential matter, namely, the contrite spirit and the genuine love of Christ and of the brethren, we shall perhaps number many as belonging to the flock of Christ, at present we are apt to overlook.

Elijah, as we find, received an express revelation concerning the faithful in Israel, and their number. The Lord unveiled to him the hidden church, and it may be supposed how great was the astonishment of this man of God, at learning that amongst the very people he had so severely accused, there were so many as seven thousand who had not bowed the knee unto Baal.

He had regarded himself as the only light in the darkness of Samaria; and now, behold! a whole firmament of chosen souls is disclosed to his view, which the clouds of his weak faith had kept hidden from him.

We have to be thankful that even still the church is sometimes refreshed by such pleasing discoveries. Often, on the very spot where we expected to find only thorns and briars, we find a cultivation like the garden of the Lord, and sweeter flowers than are wont to bloom in the more open places of Christendom.

Thus lately, in a village in France, in the cottage of one who had been a notorious, fortune-teller, was discovered a goodly group of the lambs of Christ's flock. So likewise there very recently found, in one of the most dissipated cities in the world, a spiritual plantation of Divine grace, which we should never have looked for in such a moral desert; and yet it had secretly flourished there for several years, known only to the heavenly Husbandman, who planted and kept it.

In another quarter, with which you yourselves are acquainted, where the voice of preaching had long been entirely silent, there was found a considerable company of thriving children of grace, secretly sprung up without any apparently efficient means, of whom the church might be ready to say, "Whence came they? And who hath begotten me these?"

And, in another place, we unexpectedly beheld, through the intervention of a pious and righteous emperor, three hundred saints, of whom almost no one knew anything, lately coming forth from the prisons of malefactors—three hundred, who had not bowed the knee to Baal, and who, for that very reason, had lain in irons without the emperor's knowledge.

God sometimes shows us (it was a happiness I frequently enjoyed in my former charge) some old pilot in the midst of a rude and ungovernable crew, who has grown gray in the midst of the most brutal associates; but behold, he is steering toward Jerusalem, and his guiding star is the star of Bethlehem; or some rough bargeman or sailor, who has grown up in the seat of the scorners! But lo! Through his rude exterior glistens the pure brightness of a genuine Christian character, and beneath his rough leathern doublet beats a heart moored by that anchor which entereth into that within the veil; and again, as has frequently happened to us, we enter a house to preach repentance towards God to some whom we suppose to be spiritually dead, and we are sweetly surprised by the greeting Christian smile of one or more in the family, betraying a secret acquaintance with the peace of God, and perhaps more deep experience in Christ than we ourselves possess.

Such discoveries serve to shame our timidity, to strengthen our faith, and enlarge our hearts; they also teach us to be more prudent and gentle in judging of others, and to take a brighter and more hopeful survey of the world at large.

Since I found among yourselves such retired blossoms of faith, my whole congregation has appeared to me in another light, and when I traverse it, I feel like one who is passing through the shaft of a mine, where one stroke of the mattock, to the right or the left, may possibly discover to him a new vein of precious metal.

Yes, however low may be the present state of the church, we have reason to conclude that it is not so poor and destitute of persons influenced by divine grace as we are ready to imagine.

I believe that if it pleased God to lift the veil, we might be surprised with the discovery of such numbers as would seem like a resurrection scene. We doubt not but the Prince of the host has still many an ambush of reserve in this world, and that he needs only to sound the trumpet, as he will do, in due time, according to Zechariah 10:8, and then we shall be surprised at beholding troops of Christians about us, as Elisha's servant was surprised at beholding troops of angels covering the mount of Dothan. II Kings 6:17.

How often has it happened, that in a church where, for many years, the Word of God had seldom been heard, and of which it was a matter of doubt whether such a church contained in it one real believer, a single occasional discourse, delivered from its pulpit by a stranger, has proved the signal for calling forth, all at once, numbers of timid sheep from their state of concealment! And may not such occurrences give us reason to hope that there are yet many more of the Lord's "hidden ones," with whom we are unacquainted?

How surprised shall we be in eternity, when the veil shall be removed, to find there, from quarters where we least looked for them, among the multitude whom no man can number, standing before the throne, many who were never known as the Lord's people in this world; whom circumstances, or local situation, or their outward defects and infirmities, or their retiring humility and modesty, had concealed from our view!

And not only in eternity, but also in this world, such a joyfully surprising disclosure of the hidden church awaits us—and who knows how near its time may be—that the prophetic language, in Song of Solomon 6:10, will resound as then fulfilled, "**Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?**"

II. If we look in the day time towards heaven, we cannot see the stars of God

They are there fixed in the firmament, but the eye cannot distinguish them. Wait until evening. The night invites their rays from concealment, and in the dark you behold their gentle luster once more. So also is the firmament of the church. In the sunshine of worldly prosperity they are scarcely perceptible, and the difference between them and the better sort of the children of this world is sometimes hardly discernible.

But in this case also, have patience until evening, and their glory will light up before you. As doubtless, at the time when Hazeal the Syrian broke in upon the land with fire and sword, these seven thousand in Israel were made manifest; so also, on the day of the mighty sifting which awaits the Christian world, we shall be better able rightly to measure the Lord's temple upon earth.

These days of purification are hastening on with rapid flight. There is no want of signs of the most diversified kind, which announce to us the nearness of that period in which the Lord will manifest that his fan is in his hand, and will thoroughly purge his floor. Predictions hasten to their close; and the days are approaching, in whose wild perplexity even the elect, were it possible, might be deceived.

Then, if a time should come, when the mark of the beast shall be obtruded on our foreheads at the point of the sword or bayonet, when nothing can save us from torture or a bloody death but a renunciation of Christ and his Gospel, the gold will be separated from the dross in the church, and it will be made apparent where the substance of godliness exited, and where only the appearance and tinsel of it.

Alas, how many a star, respecting which we have at present no such presentiment, will then fall from the firmament of the church; and what clouds of chaff shall we then see borne away on the wind, even from places where our eyes at present perceive nothing but rich floors of wheat!

For everything that is not from the Spirit of the Lord, will not survive the ordeal of that day; and everything which now assumes to itself the ornaments of the sanctuary, but is not clothed with them by the Lord's hand, will be seen in the shame of its own nakedness.

At the very same period, when trees "**without fruit**" shall fall, when multitudes of false brethren shall be severed and distinguished from the true; thousands, of whom at present we know nothing, shall throw aside the veil, and with cries of "**Hosannah!**" shall range under the banner of martyrs.

When no other choice will be left but between Christ and Belial, then will those who heretofore have been reserved and timid, declare themselves openly for Christ and his cause. Thousands, who in the days of comparative quiet seemed to hang down their heads, will rise like young eagles in the beclouded heavens; and the most weak and bashful in the church will be as David. Thus, one joyful phenomenon after another will surprise us in those days.

The deeper the night becomes; the more richly studded and brilliant will be the firmament of the church. The elect shall be gathered from the four winds, and come forth like a new and blooming creation; and we shall seem "**like unto them that dream, when the Lord shall thus turn again the captivity of Zion,**" Psalm 126:1, 2, and when we shall hear hosannas resounding ten thousand thousandfold from all the ends of the earth, Isaiah, 52:10.

But what will most joyfully surprise us at that time, if we live to see it, is, that it will be given even to us poor timid sheep, who are now so weak in faith, to descend cheerfully, if need be, into any tribulation for Jesus' sake, and glorify God even in the fires.

What the Lord says of the seven thousand in our text, will then have reference to us: "**I have reserved them to me;**" and no one who belongs to the Lord will have any cause to fear. Children of God are preserved, into whatever trials they fall. Satan may sorely harass them; but they come off more than conquerors. The world may oppose and distress them, but this is all it can do. They are "**reserved,**" and "**preserved for ever.**"

"**In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world,**" said the Lord. John 16:33.

Thus, however weak in themselves; they shall survive, when the overflowing scourge shall pass through the earth, and in the last time of temptation, when the fan is purging the Lord's floor.

Be of good cheer, therefore, whoever of you are sincerely following Christ. Whatever may happen, the seed of Jacob shall be delivered, for the Almighty himself is their rock; and his church stands so firm that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it!

Let the clouds then gather and forebode the storm—let Hazeal and Jehu gird on their weapons! **“Yet,”** saith the Lord, **“I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.”**

In the great tribulation which shall come upon the whole earth, a church shall discover itself around us, of which as yet, we, in the weakness of our faith, have scarcely dreamed. For thus saith the Lord, Zechariah 10:9, **“I will sow them among the people; and they shall remember me in far countries; and they shall live with their children, and turn again.”**

Yes, he has scattered them like grains of wheat, in all the world, that from them, under the dew of the Divine blessing, a wondrous harvest might spring. Therefore every place and every family where such living seed is deposited, though it be only a single grain, may, on that account, be already counted happy.

Who knows to what increase such a single grain may yet arrive! Certainly, it often fares with this seed as our Lord says, **“Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone”** (John 12:24).

It is true, that believing parents, friends, teachers or inmates, must often themselves previously descend into the grave, and then it is that their prayer is found to have been heard; their example is remembered with powerful influence, and their admonitions recalled and laid to heart; and it is only from their ashes that vigorous plants spring forth; and it is on their tombs that the first penitential tears fall of those they leave behind.

Their labor is never in vain in the Lord, but sooner or later its fruit is found. **“They that were sown,”** saith the Lord, **“shall live, with their children, and turn again;”** they shall increase and be multiplied.

We may well rejoice at such a prospect. Let us give up all narrow notions of the kingdom of God. Moreover, as the Lord knoweth them that are his, and we do not always know them, let us not presume to judge of their number by our own knowledge. They may not be made and fashioned according to our own preconceived pattern; they may not wear the garb and cut of our own preference, and yet they may be citizens of heaven.

Only let it be remembered, that the seal to which every such citizen is conformed, is this: **“Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”**

Wherefore lay apart all gloomy and dejected thoughts that would discourage you from being steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. The everlasting preservation, final victory, and future glory of every true member of Christ’s holy church, should fill us with joy and rejoicing. **“God hath set his King upon his holy hill of Zion.”**

The Lord Jesus Christ shall receive the nations for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession. **“Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him. He shall build the temple of the Lord, and give himself no rest, until he has made Jerusalem a praise in the earth. The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea; and they shall come from the east from the west, and sit down in the kingdom of God”** (Isaiah 40:10; 62: 7; 11:9; Matthew 8:11).

Seeing then that we know these things, we are courageous and look upon the world, not in the gloomy coloring of our own pusillanimity, but in the dawning light of the sun of revelation. *Christ must reign*, and the **“mountain of the Lord’s house shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations flee unto it”** (Isaiah 2:2).

Let not, then, our eyes be dimmed, nor our hearts be distressed by the mists of the present day. Faith already plants the standard of victory upon the scene of conflict: for it has respect to **“the time of the end;”** and, although the trophies of Satan be exalted on high in the meantime, still faith is not daunted.

It sings of the triumph of the Lord; and bears inscribed on its banner, that mighty asseveration of the Almighty:

“I have sworn by myself, the word is gone out of my mouth in righteousness, and shall not return, That unto me every knee shall bow; every tongue shall swear, and say, In the Lord have I righteousness and strength” (Isaiah 45:23, 24).

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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