

ELIJAH, AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

By

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ELIJAH AND THE SECRET OF HIS POWER

(II Kings 2)

IT was the cherished wish of Dr. Chalmers that there should be granted to him a Sabbatic decade, after the six decades of work, between the sixtieth and seventieth years of life, so completing its entire week. And it was surely a natural desire on the part of one who ranks amongst the foremost workers of our time. Whether or not this had been a specific desire of Elijah, in God's gracious providence it fell to his lot. And after a life full of storm and tempest, it came to pass that at eventide there was light and peace and a parenthesis of rest; as if the spirit of the world which he was about to enter were already shedding its spell over his path.

There is always something beautiful in the declining years of one who in earlier life has dared nobly and wrought successfully.

Younger men gather round the veteran to whom they owe the inspiration and model of their lives, and call him "father," enwreathing his gray locks with crowns in which love is entwined with reverence. Seeds sown years before and almost forgotten, or reckoned lost, yield their golden returns. Memory rescues from the oblivion of the past many priceless records; whilst hope, standing before the thinning veil, tells of things not perfectly seen as yet; but growing on the gaze of the ripened spirit.

The old force still gleams in the eye; but its rays are tempered by that tenderness for human frailty, and that deep self-knowledge, which years alone can yield. The crudities are ripened; the harshnesses are softened; the bitternesses are mellowed. Marah waters no longer forbid the thirsty lips; but an Elim invites the weary. And from those revered lips flow rivers of wise and loving counsel to the younger generations grouped around.

Such a life-evening seems to have been Elijah's. He did not reach a great old age. In all likelihood he showed no signs of physical decay. His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. He probably betrayed his age more in the deeds he had done, and in the mellowness of his spirit, than in the infirmities of the natural man. Still there is little room for doubt that the noon of his life was well passed when he prepared himself for his final journey. And it must have been very grateful to him, as it was most fruitful of blessing to his country and to the cause of God, that there was granted a time of comparative calm at the close of his tempestuous career.

For those years of retirement were valuable, in the highest degree; both in their immediate results upon hundreds of young lives, and in their far-off results on the coming times.

I. THE WORK OF THE CLOSING YEARS OF ELIJAH'S LIFE

His life has been called a "One-man Ministry;" and there is much in it to warrant the description. This one man was, as Elisha exclaimed, "**The chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof.**" He made his age. Towering above all the men of his time, he cleft his way through the crowds of meaner souls, and withstood the onslaughts of evil; as a rock shakes off the waves that break on it into volumes of spray.

By heroic exploits, and by deeds of superhuman might, he strove single-handed against the tides of idolatry and sin that were sweeping over the land. In this he reminds us perpetually of Martin Luther and of John Knox; all these men were spiritual giants by reason of their faith, which could appropriate the power of God, as the lightning-conductor can rob the thunder-cloud of its electric stores and bring them to the earth.

But though largely successful in keeping the cause of true religion from dying out, Elijah must often have realized the desirability of carrying on the work more systematically, and of leavening the country more thoroughly with the influence of devoted men.

So, under Divine direction, he carefully fostered, if he did not altogether inaugurate, an institution which was a relic of former times, and known as "*the Schools of the Prophets.*" When we use the word "Prophet," we think of it as indicating a man who can foretell the future, and thus much confusion is introduced into our reading of Scripture. It includes this idea as a fragment of a larger meaning. The word means "*boiling or bubbling over;*" and so a prophet was one whose heart was bubbling over with good matter, and with those Divine communications which struggled within him for utterance. He was a spiritual geyser, the mouth-piece and spokesman of God.

- "**God . . . spake by the Prophets.**"

- "**Holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.**"

So these schools of the prophets were colleges, in which a number of young men gathered, their hearts open to receive, and their tongues to utter, the messages of God.

The Christian traveler among the Western Isles of Scotland will hardly fail to visit one small, bare, lone spot out amid the roll of the Atlantic waves. It is thy shore, Iona, of which I write! No natural beauties arrest the eye or enchain the interest. There is but one poor village, with its two boats, and a squalid population.

Yet who can visit that low shore, and stand amid those crumbling ruins, without intense emotion? - since it was there that Columba built the first Christian church, to shed its gentle rays over those benighted regions; and to shelter the young apostles who carried the Gospel throughout the pagan kingdoms of Northern Britain.

With similar emotions should we stand amid the ruins of Bethel, Gilgal, and Jericho; where, in his declining years, Elijah gathered around him the flower of the seven thousand, and educated them to receive and transmit something of his own spiritual force and fire. These were the missionary seminaries of the age; the repositories of sacred truth and learning; and beneath his influence, an Isaiah, a Hosea, an Ezekiel, may have first received impulses which have since thrilled through the world.

These young men were formed into separate companies of fifty, in different towns. They were called “sons;” the chief among them, like the abbot of a monastery, was called “father.” Clad in a simple dress, they had their food in common, and dwelt in huts slightly made of the branches of trees.

They were well versed in the sacred books, which they probably transcribed for circulation, and read in the hearing of the people.

They were frequently sent forth on the errands of God’s Spirit

- To anoint a king;
- To upbraid a high-handed sinner; or
- To take the part of oppressed and injured innocence.

It was, therefore, no small work for Elijah to put these schools on so secure a basis that, when he was gone, they might perpetuate his influence and guard the flames which he had kindled.

II. THE ATTITUDE OF HIS SPIRIT IN ANTICIPATING HIS TRANSLATION

The old man clung to those young hearts, and felt that his last days could not be better spent than in seeing them once more; though he resolved to say nothing of his approaching departure, or of the conspicuous honor that was shortly to be conferred on him.

Here is the humility of true greatness!

He foresaw that he was to enjoy an exodus, to which, in the whole history of the race, there had been but one parallel. Yet he was so reticent about it that, if he had had his way, no mortal eye would have beheld it. Any one less great would have let the secret out, or have contrived to line the heights of the Jordan with expectant crowds of witnesses. But, instead of this, he kept the secret well locked up within him, and tried to dissuade Elisha from accompanying him a single step. **“Tarry thou here.”**

Perhaps that loyal heart feared attracting to himself, either then or afterward, honor due only to God.

Alas! what a rebuke is here for ourselves! The prophet’s evident desire to die alone shames us, when we remember how eager we are to tell men, by every available medium, of what we are doing for the Lord.

- There is not a talent with which He entrusts us, which we do not parade as a matter of self-laudation.
- There is not a breath of success that does not mightily puff us up.

What wonder that our Father dare not give us much marked success, or many conspicuous spiritual endowments, lest we be tempted further to our ruin! Oh, when shall we be free of ourselves? Would that we could live so perpetually facing the sun that we might never see the dark shadow of self! **“I could not see for the glory of that light.”**

The Holy Spirit of life alone can set us free from the law of sin and death. Let us urge Him to hasten the performance of His gracious office, and to give us the sweet humility of this man, who was willing to efface himself, that men might think only of his Master and Lord.

We are also deeply impressed by the calm tenor of the prophet’s course through those closing days.

He knew that ere many suns had set he would be standing in the light of eternity, mingling with his peers, understanding all the mysteries that had puzzled his eager spirit, and beholding the face of God; and we might have expected him to fill the preceding hours with ecstatic offices of devotion. But instead, he spent the days, as he had often spent them before, visiting the schools of the prophets, and quietly conversing with his friend, till the chariot swept him from his side.

And, as we consider that spectacle, we learn that a good man should so live that he need make no extra preparation when death suddenly summons him; and that our best method of awaiting the great exchange of worlds is to go on doing the duties of daily life.

That was a wise and true reply of Wesley to the inquiry, “What would you do if you knew that you would have to die within three days?”

“I should just do the work which I have already planned to do: ministering in one place; meeting my preachers in another; lodging in yet another, till the moment came that I was called to yield my spirit back to Him who gave it.”

When our summons comes, we should wish to be found, not in the place which sentiment or a false sense of religious propriety might suggest; but just doing the work which we have been appointed to do, and in the place where duty would demand our presence at that very hour. The workshop and the factory are as near Heaven as the sanctuary; the God-given task as fair a height for ascension as Olivet or Pisgah.

III. THE AFFECTIONATE LOVE WITH WHICH ELIJAH WAS REGARDED

It Strongly showed itself in Elisha. The younger man stood with his revered leader, as for the last time he surveyed from the heights of Western Gilgal the scene of his former ministry. And, in spite of many persuasives to the contrary, he went with him down the steep descent to Bethel and Jericho. He followed him, even though they had to cross the Jordan, which means death and judgment.

The sacred historian accentuates the strength of their affection, as he says thrice over, they two went on; they two stood by Jordan; they two went over. And again the strength of that love, which the cold waters of death could not extinguish, approved itself in the repeated asseveration: **“As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.”**

It is sweet to think that there were in the rugged, strong nature of Elijah such winsome qualities as could elicit so deep and tenacious an affection. We catch a glimpse of a tenderer side, for which we had hardly given him credit.

Unusual emotion also welled up in the hearts of the young men, whose reverence shared the empire with their love, as they beheld their master for the last time. With delicate reticence they would not speak on a subject which he did not mention; but, drawing Elisha aside, they asked him whether the moment of separation had not come. “Yes,” said he in effect, “but do not speak of it. Let there be no parting scene. Give and receive the parting farewells in expressive silence.”

And thus the old man tore himself away from them.

But in all their intercourse, how real and near the Lord seemed!

- To Elijah it was the Lord who was sending him from place to place: **“the Lord hath sent me.”**
- To Elisha it was the living Lord to whom he constantly appealed: **“as the Lord thy God liveth”**; living on the other side of the great change through which his master was to pass to Him.
- To the prophets, it was the Lord who was taking their head and leader to Himself.

Surely those who speak thus have reached a position in which they can meet death without a tremor. And what is death but, as we shall see in our next chapter, a translation!

What is the Lord to thee, my reader?

Is He a dear and familiar friend, of whom thou canst speak with unwavering confidence? Then thou needest not fear to tread the verge of Jordan. Otherwise, it becomes thee to get to His precious Blood, and to wash thy garments white; that thou mayest have right to the tree of life, and mayest enter in through the gates into the city.

~ end of chapter 16 ~

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