

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 20

THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

"And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground. And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces. He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the LORD God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over. And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him. And they said unto him, Behold now, there be with thy servants fifty strong men; let them go, we pray thee, and seek thy master: lest peradventure the Spirit of the LORD hath taken him up, and cast him upon some mountain, or into some valley. And he said, Ye shall not send. And when they urged him till he was ashamed, he said, Send. They sent therefore fifty men; and they sought three days, but found him not. And when they came again to him, (for he tarried at Jericho,) he said unto them, Did I not say unto you, Go not?" - II KINGS 2:8-18.

"AND THEY HEARD A GREAT VOICE FROM HEAVEN SAYING UNTO THEM, COME UP HITHER. AND THEY ASCENDED UP TO HEAVEN IN A CLOUD; AND THEIR ENEMIES BEHELD THEM." (Revelation 11:12.)

"AND I SAW AS IT WERE A SEA OF GLASS MINGLED WITH FIRE; AND THEM THAT HAD GOTTEN THE VICTORY OVER THE BEAST, AND OVER HIS IMAGE, AND OVER HIS MARK, AND OVER THE NUMBER OF HIS NAME, STAND ON THE SEA OF GLASS, HAVING THE HARPS OF GOD." (Revelation 15:2) [296]

THE loving attachment of the "sons of the prophets" to the person of Elijah, is rewarded by the sight of the closing miracle of his life, the recollection of which could not fail ever afterwards to

embolden and strengthen them in the midst of their labours and trials.

He is to pass over Jordan. The old Gileadite, with that instinctive love of country and birthplace so common at life's close, seems desirous to get across the border-river, that the scene of his mysterious departure might be amid the secluded valleys and ravines of his Fatherland. There was a ford or ferry then, as now, across the Jordan.

But as the public life of the Prophet began, so it would terminate, by an exhibition of divine power.

The GOD he served would certify to him, by an outward visible sign, the truth of that promise, which others apprehend only by faith, "**Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age**" - Elijah unties his well-known mantle or cape; wraps it tightly round and round (as the word means), in the form of a staff, - and, like Moses of old with his shepherd's rod, he violently smites the waters of the river. These are divided hither and thither, and the two prophets cross through the dry channel. On reaching the opposite bank, they quietly [297] resume their lofty converse.

Elijah feels that his moments are numbered, - he must bid his best and truest earthly friend farewell: "**What shall I do for thee before I be taken away from thee?**" is the interrogatory with which he breaks silence.

It was a startling, perplexing question; Elisha well knew how much the departing seer had in his power. But as we may well imagine, earthly ambition had no share in dictating his answer: the wealth, and honours, and prizes of the world had no fascination in the eyes of one, who had already given such noble proof of self-renunciation, and self-sacrifice.

His thoughts are not on himself, but on the Church which is so soon to be orphaned: his one solitary wish and ambition is, that he might be enabled to follow the footsteps of his great predecessor, by glorifying GOD in his day and generation. What to him half so enviable or desirable, as to inherit a portion of that noble spirit, - to have his own soul enkindled with some sparks of that hallowed fire which is now to be borne from the altar of earth to that of Heaven!

"And Elisha said, I pray thee let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me."

What meant he by this request! We never for a moment can entertain the supposition, which some have ventured to advance, that Elisha's humble nature could have prompted him to crave that he might be doubly endowed in comparison with Elijah, by the possession of superior gifts and graces.

The expression he used was one well understood among the Hebrews, A double portion of goods always descended to the eldest son of an Israelite; - this bringing along with it the special birthright blessing. Elisha's request, therefore, was no more than this - that he would have the double portion of the first-born, and thus be [298] served heir and successor to his illustrious Master.¹

Elijah, indeed, in reply, allows that he had asked "**a hard thing**;" he refers the granting of it to

the Divine decision; informing his companion that if he be permitted to see with his bodily eyes the miraculous ascension, he may accept this as a pledge and assurance, on GOD's part, that the farewell request is not denied.

The two holy men are now lost to the sight of the fifty spectators among the recesses of Gilead. **"They still went on,"** we read, **"and talked."**

What that talk was, we know not; although we almost wish we could lift the veil and listen to the interchange of thought at that solemn moment, when one of the two was standing on the threshold of eternity.

- It may have been about Israel, - the completion of the overthrow of idolatry - the continued revival of the olden faith, and the nurturing of a manly piety through the instrumentality of the schools of the prophets.
- It may have been about themselves:- Elijah may have been tendering some last faithful lessons to his successor, from his own failures and shortcomings:- by a mutual rehearsal of the divine dealings,
- they may have been **"encouraging one another in the Lord their God."**
- It may have been about the mysterious, unseen realities of that glorious spirit-world, on which the honoured Tishbite was about to enter.

Be this as it may; a tempest - a desert simoom-would seem to have swept over them. [299]

We are reminded of Ezekiel's vision - **"And I looked, and behold a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire unfolding itself - and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst, thereof. as the colour of amber out of the midst of the fire"** (Ezekiel 1:4).

The mountains in a moment glow with lurid light. The unearthly splendour has resolved itself above their heads, - or rather by their side, - into a Chariot of FIRE, and horses of FIRE.

Seated in this flaming equipage, - the burning axles revolved by the fierce hurricane, - the Prophet is swept upwards to the clouds. ²

Who can follow that car of mysterious flame?

Imagination feebly tries to realize the feelings of the rapt and wondering occupant. He who is now borne aloft - not as a Prophet, but as a Conqueror - must, in his upward journey, have undergone some marvellous transformation, alike in bodily and spiritual organism, the nature of which we can only dimly conjecture.

He left earth, **"the man of like passions,"** with the body of corruption and death: but mortality is now swallowed up of life, and the corruptible has put on incorruption. Nor can we attempt to comprehend the magnificence of that flight, as he passes, through suns, and stars, and worlds, into the presence of the Infinite. We can but faintly picture in thought, the bands of Angels- the Seraphim (the burning or fiery ones) welcoming their kindred spirit within the heavenly gates.

We can think of another illustrious [300] member of the covenant people welcomed by

Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of GOD, - or, as he bends before the throne-uttering, as his first words, the old motto of earth, now the song and rejoicing of eternity - "**THE LORD LIVETH BEFORE WHOM I STAND!**" *Prophet of Fire*, thou hast reached the source of thy brightness! "**Then shall the righteous shine forth as the SUN in the kingdom of their Father.**"

Such may have been the scene in Heaven - What was it on earth? The solitary companion of his pilgrimage stands awestruck, trembling, confounded, - his eye scorched with the blaze of the dazzling retinue. He can only give vent through his tears to the unavailing lament - "**My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof!**" He speaks like a bereft fatherless child.

It is another proof of the change which had taken place in the naturally rough, stern spirit of Elijah, - making him the object, not of dread or terror, but of affection and filial love.

At a former period of his history he would more probably have been apostrophized as "*Prophet of fire,*" "*Herald of wrath;*" but now, it is "**My father, my father.**" Moreover, in the loss to the Church on earth of that one man, Elisha saw a sadder calamity than if the hosts of Jehoram - fifty thousand strong - had been swept away.

He had been the true army of Israel, - its bulwark of defence - its phalanx of strength - its head and shield in the day of battle. The chariots and charioteers on which earthly kings depend for victory, had been concentrated, in the case of Israel, in him. His word had at one time closed the loopholes of Heaven; at another, it had unmasked its batteries, and brought the lightning from the clouds.

Rending his own [301] clothes in customary token of grief, Elisha catches up the mantle that had dropped from the ascending chariot. It was a precious memorial of departed worth, - the old well-known companion of many wanderings, - associated with the performance of many chivalrous deeds. More than this, it was the priceless badge of his own investiture with the prophetic office, - the guarantee that his parting request had really been granted, as well as a visible sign to others that the spirit of Elijah rested upon him.³

The weeping, solitary prophet must not abandon himself to fruitless tears or disconsolate grief. With that cloak as a treasured keepsake, and a pledge of reunion in a better country where no chariot of fire could part them, he hastens back to work and duty.

Standing again by the Jordan, he folds up the mantle, and smites the water, saying, "**Where is the Lord God of Elijah?**" - (lit., "Where is Jehovah, the GOD of Elijah, even He?") Elisha knew that he had received for his heritage not only Elijah's mantle and Elijah's spirit, but, what was better, the guidance and support of Elijah's GOD. His best earthly friend and protector was gone, - severed from him for all time; but he had an unchanging portion and refuge in his Heavenly Friend - the living Lord, the strength of his heart and his portion for ever. The smitten waters obeyed his summons.

The sons of the prophets, who were still gazing from the Jericho terraces, had their faith still further confirmed by [302] this renewed miracle. It afforded them additional assurance that

Elisha was divinely invested with the spirit and office of their beloved father. They came to meet him, and "**bowed themselves to the ground, doing homage before him.**"

With a natural incredulity, however, they could hardly be convinced that Elijah's translation had been real. He was wont often, in the same way, suddenly to disappear from the haunts of men, and as suddenly to shew himself when duty demanded. Might he not possibly still be found dead or alive amid these savage mountains? Might not that fierce whirlwind have only taken him up a little way in its wings, and dashed him down on some mountain or valley? He had disappeared nigh the same spot, where, ill an earlier age, his great predecessor in work and spirit had withdrawn from mortal view; and then, if it had been true that GOD had taken the soul of His servant to Himself, - could they not rescue his remains, at least, from the oblivion and mystery which had rested for centuries around the obsequies and burial of the old Hebrew lawgiver? It was a labour of love at all events, - a befitting and gratifying homage to his memory, to send fifty bold mountaineers to search these cliffs and precipices. This they did for three days without success - "**He was not, for GOD TOOK HIM.**"

Let us occupy the remainder of the chapter, in seeking to discover some reasons for the peculiar method of Elijah's departure in his equipage of flame, - carried soul and body to Heaven without tasting the pangs of dissolution.

In the symbolic teaching of the Old Testament, the Chariot of fire could not have been without its significancy, as a befitting [303] close to a life of flaming zeal.

We cannot avoid comparing and contrasting it with a greater and yet kindred event in a later age. A mightier than Elijah ascended also to Heaven from one of the mountains of Palestine. But His triumphal chariot, - appropriate to His divine character and person as Immanuel, - was a cloud, - the chariot of GOD - the invariable emblem of Deity - which bore HIM majestically from the gaze of the rapt disciples, - that same "cloud" on which, as Judge, He is to come again; - "**Behold, He cometh with clouds!**"

But as Elijah was the flaming minister of vengeance in an apostate age, - the successive acts in whose life-drama were the fiery flashes of divine judgment, - what more appropriate, than that in a car of symbolic :Fire - (the emblem of GOD's judicial righteousness and wrath against sin) - he should ascend to his crown! "Elijah," says Matthew Henry. "had burned with holy zeal for GOD and His honour, and now with a heavenly fire he was refined and translated."

Nor have we to go far to discover the special end and design which GOD had in view, in vouchsafing to him this strange anomalous exemption from the universal doom of mortality, revoking in his case the sentence of dissolution.

He wished, by a startling outward visible sign. to give evidence to these degenerate times of the existence and reality of another life.

Three great beacon-lights of hope and comfort on the subject of the body's Resurrection and a separate state, were set up to illumine each of the three grand eras or dispensations of the Church.

The patriarchal era had this "**blessed hope**" unfolded in the translation of ENOCH; the Mosaic era in the departure of ELIJAH; and the crowning and triumphant pledge of it was reserved for the Christian era, in the Resurrection [304] of our LORD - "**Christ the first fruits, afterwards they that are Christ's at his coming.**"

Let us stand with Elisha in these awful solitudes of Gilead; and as we see the Prophet-hero, in a moment, wrapt in his chariot of flame, and soul and body together borne upwards to Heaven,

- Let us regard the mysterious scene as a grand prophecy by symbol and vision of our own glorious future as believers in JESUS "**children of the resurrection.**"

- Let us accept it as the foreshadow and pledge of what will happen to all the saints, both those whose bodies shall, at that solemn hour, be slumbering in their graves, as well as those who shall be alive at CHRIST's second coming. "**We shall not all sleep,**" says the apostle, "**but we shall all be changed, in a moment.**" The world itself shall then be resolved into a fiery chariot, - "**the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also, and the works that are therein shall be burned up.**" But, far above this tremendous conflagration, shall be heard the song of the glorified, as they are upborne in the cloudy whirlwind to meet the Lord in the air,- "**Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.**"

And is there not comfort and encouragement, too, for every desponding believer, in this final dealing of GOD with His servant, - ministering to him such an "**abundant entrance**" into a world of glory?

Who was this transfigured conqueror? Was it not the same coward-prophet, who once sat moping under the wilderness juniper-tree - peevish - fretful - abandoning himself to unworthy despair? Yet out of weakness he had been made strong: he had risen "**like a giant refreshed:**" and for this "**man of like passions,**" who [305] had, once and again, too painfully manifested the infirmities of a fallen nature, there was decreed at last the most glorious of triumphs!

In the prospect of the same hour of departure, there may be some reading these pages, who, by reason of present corruptions and infirmities, and the saddening memory of past unworthiness and sin, may, through fear of death, be all their life-time subject to bondage. Let not these recollections of past shortcoming and backsliding, and the consciousness of present infirmity, needlessly depress you. If, like Elijah, you have listened to the still small voice, - if you have resolved, like him, to rise from your posture of despondency, to grapple with duty, to face trial, and to make a renewed consecration of yourselves to GOD, - He will not deny to you the chariot of final triumph - and give you, in JESUS, victory over death.

- Are we meet for the chariot of fire?

- Is our work done?

- Are we girded for the glorious dismissal?

- Can we say, as the New Testament Elijah could say, "**I am now ready?**"

- Could we meet the fiery whirlwind bravely, calmly, as the Prophet did?

We can, if we have made his life-motto our own, "**The LORD liveth.**"

Or rather, if we have heard the voice of Him who has taken the sting from death, and robbed the grave of its victory, - **"Fear not, I am he that LIVETH, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, and have the keys of the grave and of death!"** Laying hold by an appropriating faith of these words, - the chariots of death become the chariots of salvation, - the gate of the grave and the gate of Heaven become one. Elijah, by his symbolic act, tells us how the last enemy may be truly conquered.

It was when, with his mantle, he smote the Jordan, that the [306] chafed waters receded and opened for him a safe passage.

We have a mantle, too, by which we can smite the Jordan of death. It is the mantle of CHRIST's finished work and righteousness. It divides the darksome waves, and enables us to sing with the Psalmist, **"We went through the flood on foot, there did we rejoice in him."**

Even now, as we are journeying on towards Jordan, - some of us, it may be, near it, - JESUS asks each of His true servants, as Elijah did his of old, **"What shall I do for thee?" "Whatever ye ask in my name, that will I give unto you."** What shall our request be?

Shall it not be that of Elisha, - that, as heirs of GOD, we may have the portion of His First-born; - that we be **"heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ;"** - that even now we may be enrolled as members of **"the general assembly and Church of the First-born which are written in Heaven!"**

GOD keep us all from any poorer request, - from bartering, like Esau, our heavenly birthright for any mere mess of earthly pottage.

Again, to pass to the other closing incident; as we see the mantle of Elijah falling on Elisha, let us ask ourselves, 'Has his mantle fallen on us?' What mantle? His true cloak was not that rough coverlet of sheepskin; that was the mere outer badge and symbol peculiar to his age and office. But the mantle in which we may all more or less be arrayed, is the mantle of his virtues, - the beautiful spirit of consecration to the GOD he served; active, self-denying, single-eyed, bold, unflinching, uncompromising. O Prophet of the Highest, whose work, in these degenerate days, could stand the fiery test and ordeal like thine?" **"My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof!"** [307]

One other thought.

It was in a chariot of FIRE, Elijah was taken to Heaven. Is it not in a similar chariot, in a figurative sense, He takes many of his people still?

He brings them, as He did Elijah, to the brink of Jordan; keeps them for years hovering amid the rough, rugged glens and gorges of trial, - seats them in a flaming equipage, - reins in the fiery horses, until, in the fire, they are refined and purified as gold, and fitted for their radiant crowns!

Many are making it their life-long effort to mount some worldly chariot - the chariot of riches, or the chariot of fame. GOD often appoints far other for His loved ones. It is the chariot of FIRE! He whispers in their ears as they enter it, **"Through much tribulation ye shall enter into the**

kingdom!"

Oh, how many can bless Him with their dying lips, for that chariot; and can say, on the retrospect of years on years, it may be, of burning trial, 'But for that chariot of fire, and these horses of fire, we should never have reached the throne and the crown!' and whose eternal ascription, as they cast that crown at the feet of a Redeeming Saviour, is this, "**WE ARE SAVED, YET SO AS BY FIRE!**"

If GOD from time to time may be taking some of us out amid Jordan valleys, to witness glorious departures, let us bless His name as we see the chariots ascending, that humbler saints far than Elijah are still left in the Church to strengthen the faith of the beholders, - to magnify the power of sovereign grace, and to cast down upon mourning survivors a priceless mantle of Christian faith and love and triumph.

Further, If any be like Elisha, mourning the loss of departed relatives, let these follow his example, by smiting the waters of death with the noble question, "**Where is the LORD [308] GOD of Elijah?**"

- Elijah has gone: but the Lord GOD he served still remains,
- the creature has perished, but the Creator perishes not.

The chariot of flame has borne my loved ones out of sight; I have to return to life-duties like the Prophet of Gilgal - all solitary and alone - the companionship I most prized and cherished, gone for ever! But where is Elijah's Lord GOD? He ever lives, He ever loves.

Yes, I will go back to my stricken home, - from these ravines of sorrow, these waters of death, - exulting and saying, "**The LORD LIVETH, and blessed be my Rock, and let the God of my salvation be exalted.**" "**They shall perish; but THOU remainest.**"

And when the Lord shall conduct me down to these same ravines, and dark Jordan-floods; - I will take courage, from seeing the dying grace manifested by them, to go boldly through the gloom: "**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for THOU art with me.**"

I will sing as they sang, with trembling lip and faltering utterance, just as they were stepping into the car of victory - the horses of fire impatient for flight: -

"Raise the eye, Christian, just as it closeth,
Lift the heart, Christian, ere it repositeth;
Thee from the love of CHRIST nothing shall sever;
Mount when thy work is done, - praise Him for ever." ⁴

¹ "*The phrase employed in Deuteronomy 21:17, to denote the amount of a father's goods, which were the right and token of a first-born son, is literally a mouth of two; a double mouthful. Thus the gift of the double portion of Elijah's spirit was but the legitimate conclusion of the act of adoption, which began with the casting off the mantle at Abel-Neholah years before. This*

explanation is given by Grotius and others." - See note, Smith's Bible Dictionary, p. 535

² Ephraim Syrus thus paraphrases it: "Suddenly there came from the height a storm of fire, and in the midst of the flame the form of a chariot and horses. and parted them both asunder."

³ To this day, in the East, a reputed saint, when departing from life, indicates his successor by bequeathing to him his mantle, the symbol of his spiritual power; and although that mantle may be dirty, patched, tattered, or threadbare, it is deemed to be of higher price than the brockaded robes of kings, and the older it is, the more precious it becomes. Elisha well understood the sign." - Kitto.

⁴ The above sentence was written at the time of the occurrence of two remarkable deaths in which the author was specially interested. He retains the reference, as a feeble tribute to the cherished memory, particularly of one of these, - a member of his flock - at once the greatest sufferer, and the most signal monument of Divine grace he has known in the course of his ministry. Gifted by nature in no ordinary degree, she was, nevertheless, permitted to wander during twelve years of apparently unsanctified suffering [309] amid the gloomy ravines of trial; "going through fire and through water," before being brought out into "the wealthy place," But after the long, weary week-day of unrest, the Sabbath of the soul came at last, "**Chosen in the furnace of affliction,**" the work of the Refiner was, in His own good time, accomplished. He seemed, in a marvellous way, to transfigure her before He glorified her. "**BUT IT SHALL COME TO PASS THAT AT EVENING-TIME IT SHALL BE LIGHT,**"

We may appropriately append to this chapter the following meditation of Bishop Hall:-

"Lord, what great favour was that which Thou shewedst to Thy Prophet Elijah: to send a fiery chariot for him to convey him up to Heaven! I should have thought that the sight of so terrible a carriage should have fetched away his soul beforehand, and have left the body grovelling on the earth. But that good Spirit of Thine, which had fore-signified that fiery rapture, had, doubtless, fore-armed Thy servant with an answerable resolution to expect and undergo it, Either he knew that chariot, however fearful in the appearance, was only glorious, and not penal; or else he cheerfully resolved that such a momentary pain in the change would be followed with an eternity of happiness. O God, we are not worthy to know whereto Thou hast reserved us. Perhaps Thou hast appointed us to be in the number of those whom Thou shalt find alive at Thy second coming, and then the case will be ours, we shall pass through fire to our immortality; or, if Thou hast ordained us to a speedier despatch, perhaps Thou hast decreed that our way to Thee shall be through a fiery trial. O GOD, whatever course Thou, in Thy Holy wisdom, hast determined for the fetching up my soul from this vale of misery and tears, prepare me thoroughly for it; and do Thou work my heart to so lively a faith in Thee, that all the terrors of my death may be swallowed up in an assured expectation of my speedy glory; and that my last groans shall be immediately seconded with eternal hallelujahs, in the glorious choir of Thy saints and angels in Heaven. Amen. Amen."-Bishop Hall's "Breathings of the Devout Soul," p. 204. [310] [311 Left Blank]

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