

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

J. R. MacDuff, D.D.

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Chapter 12

THE DRAMA OF THE DESERT

"And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there: and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said unto him, What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts: for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah!" (I Kings 19:9-13.

"OUR GOD SHALL COME, AND SHALL NOT KEEP SILENCE: A FIRE SHALL DEVOUR BEFORE HIM, AND IT SHALL BE VERY TEMPESTUOUS ROUND ABOUT HIM. HE SHALL CALL TO THE HEAVENS FROM ABOVE, AND TO THE EARTH, THAT HE MAY JUDGE HIS PEOPLE . . . HEAR, O MY PEOPLE, AND I WILL SPEAK; O ISRAEL, AND I WILL TESTIFY AGAINST THEE: I AM GOD, EVEN THY GOD." (Psalm 50:3, 4, 7. [170]

THE wanderer was alone, yet not alone. A voice he could neither mistake nor misinterpret had sounded in his ears the thrilling question- "**What doest thou here, Elijah?**"

Every syllable was pregnant with meaning and rebuke. "**What doest thou here?**"

Life (and none should know better than thee) is a great doing; not hermit inaction, inglorious repose, guilty idolatry.

"**What doest thou**" - thou my vice-regent in these degenerate days,- thou whom I have honoured above thy fellows, and who hast had proof upon proof of my faithfulness?

"**What doest thou here**" - here in this desolate spot - away from duty;

- the Baal-altars rebuilding
- my own altar in ruins;

- the sword of persecution unsheathed, and the bleating flock left by thee (coward Shepherd!) to the ravening wolf?

"What doest thou here, Elijah?" Thy very name rebukes thee! Where is GOD, thy strength? Where are the prayers and vows of Carmel? Child of weakness, belying thy name and destiny, **"What-doeest-thou-here?"**

That voice is responded to by an answer in which are still mournfully blended selfish mortification, wounded pride, skeptic faithlessness:- **"I have been very jealous for the Lord God of hosts, because the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets [171] with the sword; and I, even I, only am left, and they seek my life to take it away."**

The question is repeated. But before this is done, GOD opens the volume of nature with all its grand and terrible, yet soothing influences. **"The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!"** Let us take our stand with Elijah on the mount, and listen to the sublime utterances.

Let us endeavour to picture the manifestation itself - the historical scene here described.

Elijah is commissioned to leave the cave, and to stand in the mount before the Lord. **"And behold,"** we read, **"the Lord passed by."**

But the august Presence is preceded by a threefold manifestation,- three successive couriers or harbingers of the Divine Majesty,- storm, earthquake, fire:- three terrific voices crying in the wilderness, **"Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God."**

First, **"a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord."** ¹

A tumultuous storm swept by; the [172] winged tempests of Heaven are let loose from their chambers to wrestle with the old granite peaks;- they rush from cliff to cliff with a sound like the crash of armies in a shock of battle;- the splintered rocks lie scattered in the valleys beneath, driven to and fro as chaff in the summer thrashing-floor.

Jehovah had arisen in the glory of His majesty to shake terribly the earth. **"BUT,"** it is added; **"the Lord was not in the wind."**

The Prophet, in trembling amazement, marvels what next was to follow. He may have expected, after this exhibition of Power, some audible expression of the Divine will; and that the **"wind"** was the trumpet-voice heralding its proclamation. But there was none!

The hurricane has passed, the tempest is lulled, all is for a moment hushed in silence. It has left nothing but the memorials of its fury in the fragments which strew the scene of desolation.

Again, however, a murmuring, muffled, hollow sound, reaches his ear. The sky is darkened, the

earth is convulsed, the everlasting hills rock and tremble; [173] fresh masses of stone come thundering down from the mountain summits, the leaves in the great volume of nature are again torn in tatters - tossed in the wild elemental war; "**but the Lord is not in the earthquake.**"

What next?

Is there still to be no manifestation of Love and Mercy in conjunction with Power? The Prophet gazes, but the reeling of the earth, the last symbol of terror in this sublime panorama, is only to give place to a third.

"After the earthquake, a fire."

In that dim twilight hour, the sky was red with flame; a lurid glow converts every mountain summit into a ruby battlement; the valley at his feet blazes like a smelting furnace.

Flash, it may be, succeeds flash, of brilliant Eastern lightning. This was the most terrible of all. Fire!

- It was the recognised emblem of Divine wrath.
- It was fire that was hurled down from Heaven on the cities of the plain.
- It was fire that came forth from the Lord and consumed Nadab and Abihu, the two sons of Aaron.
- It was fire that burned on the top of that same Sinai when Jehovah proclaimed the Decalogue.

Elijah had recently seen his burnt-offering on Carmel, consumed by fire;- the symbol of that righteous vengeance, which must fall either on the sinner or on his vicarious sacrifice.

There was nothing, therefore, in this last manifestation, to calm the fears of the lonely spectator.

He must have bowed him down in crouching terror in the mountain cave. There was no lullaby to his soul in this new flaming harbinger. "**The Lord was not in the fire.**" But this mighty parable of nature is yet incomplete.

After the fire there was "**a still small voice**;" - a "still soft whisper," as the words may be rendered, like the tremulous cadence of sweet music falling on the entranced ear. [174]

The Lord was THERE! Strange contrast to the hurricane and earthquake symbols which preceded it. It is a "**voice**" a "**still voice**" - a "**small voice**."

The chafed, riotous elements have rocked themselves to rest. All nature is hushed; the sky is clear; the soft evening shadows fall gently on the mountain-sides; and the Prophet's own perturbed spirit partakes of the repose.

Nature's vast volume opens to a page on which is inscribed in gleaming letters- "**God is love!**"

It is enough. The Prophet reads! - he adores! - he rejoices!

Wrapping himself in his mantle, he comes forth and stands at the entrance of his cave. GOD has set him, as He set Moses, **'in the cleft of a rock, and made all His glory to pass before him:'**

He has proclaimed His name and everduring memorial. **"The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious."**

And Israel's illustrious seer, like Israel's sweet singer, can now give thanks unto the living Jehovah, for He is good - for His mercy endureth for ever!

Let us proceed, however, more especially, to consider the object of this manifestation and its designed lessons. We may warrantably regard it as a great acted parable, containing important truths, alike for the Prophet and for the Church in all ages.

We may look briefly, in the first instance, at the design of these parabolic utterances as regarded Elijah. His despondency, as we have previously noted, had manifestly arisen from a sinful and unworthy distrust of GOD's power. **"I alone,"** said he, **"am left."**

He had forgotten that even though his erroneous conclusions had been correct - though ten thousand knees had been bowing to Baal, and the merest [175] wreck of true-hearted Israelites had been left; still there was ONE above, who could in a moment hurl every idol from its impious shrine, and quench every flame on the apostate altars.

How, then, does Jehovah recall the Prophet's better convictions?

He gives him an awful exhibition of His might and majesty. He makes dumb nature the preacher to revive the convictions of His servant in the great truth - that the **"Lord God omnipotent reigneth."**

He manifests Himself in the hurricane and the earthquake and the fire, so that the Tishbite could say with a deeper emphasis than the Psalmist, **"God hath spoken once, yea, thrice have I heard this, that POWER belongeth unto God."**

These majestic symbols spake to him with awful eloquence. 'Poor craven-hearted Prophet! wilt thou distrust Me after this?

Can I, who have the elements in my grasp,- who **"thresh the mountains and beat the hills as chaff"**, - I, who direct the volleyed lightning and give wings to the tempest,- can I not be trusted to protect thy life?

Why afraid of the threats of a mortal, when thou hast the GOD of thy Fathers to stand by thee? **"Who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man that shall be made as grass; and forgettest the Lord thy Maker, that hath stretched forth the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth, and hast feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy? and where is the fury**

of the oppressor? . . . I am the Lord thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared; The Lord of hosts is his name. And I have put my words in thy mouth, and I have covered thee in the shadow of mine hand, that I may plant the heavens, and lay the foundations [176] of the earth, and say unto Zion, Thou art my people!"

But more than this.

Although these tremendous natural phenomena preceded the Divine manifestation, it is expressly said, that the Lord himself was not in either wind or earthquake or fire.

We must regard them, therefore, as conveying to the Prophet additional symbolic meaning.

They were the reflected moods of his own mind;- his own impetuous turbulent self - was mirrored in these agents and elements of nature. Earthquake and tempest and flame were the meet types of his past prophetic mission and character.

He was denounced by his royal master as a "**troubler in Israel**;" and even in the eyes of the people he could not be regarded otherwise than as a minister of awe and terror,- an incarnation of righteous vengeance, passionate zeal, fiery courage,- at whose bidding both the natural and political horizon was black with cloud and portent and storm.

And as he had begun, so doubtless perhaps might Elijah expect that with famine and FIRE and blood, he would complete his mission, and inaugurate the regeneration of Israel. GOD wished to shew him that all this stormy zeal - this flaming retribution - was not the wonted method of the Divine dealing;- that judgment was His strange work;- and that a mission begun thus in terror was to end in peace,- "a mission begun with John the Baptist's boldness was to terminate with John the Evangelist's love." ²

'Enough,' He seems to say, 'Prophet of Fire. Thou hast awoken the people hitherto with the earthquake and tempest and flame;- thy battle hitherto has been that of the warrior, with confused noise and garments rolled [177] in blood. These august demonstrations may for the moment awe Jezebel's priests, and inspire the apostate nation with a salutary dread. But I wish with living power to speak to my covenant Israel. I wish to induce them to seek me in penitence and tears. This can only be effected by the ministry of love - the still small voice!'

Elijah bowed in reverence!

The gentle, silent symbol has opened to him a new volume. It is as a Being of Love that "**The Lord liveth.**"

It invests His old motto with a new meaning. GOD has taught him that weak things can confound the things that are mighty. This vision and parable of Horeb might thus be translated into inspired words - "**Not by might nor by power, but my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.**"

But leaving the primary object of the manifestation in its reference to Elijah, let us regard it in its practical bearings, as an Old Testament parable of GOD's method of dealing with individual believers in every age.

First unfolding to them the terrors of the law,- convincing of sin;- then this heraldry of vengeance, followed by the gracious offer of Gospel mercy, the "**still small voice**" of Redeeming love.

He takes first to Sinai; displays its thunders and lightnings and curses - manifests Himself as "**the consuming fire,**" "**that will by no means clear the guilty.**"

Then as "**God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself,**" - desiring not the death of the sinner,- "**waiting to be gracious.**"

Cannot many, in a spiritual sense, endorse from their own experience, the truth of this great Parable of nature? Do you remember the time when GOD laid you on a bed of sickness,- broke up, in a moment, your dream of earthly happiness,- [178] brought you to the brink of the tomb,- and you felt that, all unmeet and unprepared to die, you were standing on the verge of eternity?

As you lay tossing on that fevered couch,

- the dim lamp of life burning to its socket;
- your mind filled with blank despair;
- the past, with its ghostly visions of unrepented, unforgiven sin, rising up behind and before you in terrible memorial;

- do you remember how conscience became to you a Horeb?

GOD's Righteousness, and Justice, and Holiness, like the tempest and earthquake and fire, swept by you in terrible procession,- apparently heralding with trumpet voice, "**vengeance and fiery indignation.**"

But He spared you - in mercy spared you!

And, as the ebbing pulses of life began to quicken, and the gleam of glad hope irradiated your silent chamber;- do you remember that gracious ray of peace,- that "**still small voice**" which whispered the glad, never-to-be-forgotten accents in your ear, "**Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee life!**"

What wonders does that simple, sublime disclosure of the love of GOD in CHRIST effect, when once it breaks through the thick blinding darkness of the soul!

How it sweeps every barrier down; and brings the maddened maniac - who snapped his fetters and chains like tow, and whom no other power could bind - to sit in lamb-like gentleness at the feet of his Divine Saviour!

When did Elijah wrap his face in his mantle and come forth from the cave?

Not when the hurricane was sweeping by, or the earthquake heaving, or the fire lighting up the wilderness with lurid grandeur. It was when he listened to "**the still small voice.**"

So it is with all who have experienced the transforming power of Gospel truth. [179]

It is not the overawing majesty, but the goodness of GOD, that leads to repentance: not all the thunders of Sinai, not all the curses of Ebal, can melt and overpower and constrain like the believing sight of the Saviour of Calvary.

Here is the Gospel's great principle of gravitation,- **"I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."**

As the sun of Heaven with his silent heat can bend and deflect the iron which defies the power of hammer and anvil, so with the Sun of Righteousness: He can bend and subdue, when every other moral appliance fails,- when all other moral dynamics are powerless.

Miracles, in themselves, will never convince. The most stupendous array of supernatural wonders will never melt the obdurate heart.

- Pentecostal marvels failed to do so;
- the resurrection of Lazarus and Lazarus's Lord failed to do so;
- just as the terrific manifestations of fire and tempest and earthquake now failed to bring the moping Prophet from his cave.

But **"the still small voice"** was omnipotent.

Yes, we need not mourn, in this age of the Church, the absence of miraculous teaching and miraculous symbols; the heavens above us no longer break silence;- the earthquake and storm are no longer employed as evangelists to teach us as they taught Elijah.

But we have still, what taught him better far, the sweet tones of this Gospel voice,- "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth."

And as it is the Gospel's **"still small voice"** that whispers peace and hope to the individual believer, so is it this same silent agency, which is to form the mightiest lever in the world's regeneration.

- Power was the symbol of old imperial Rome.
- Her military emblem was the eagle - the bird of [180] prey - with keen eye and strong talons.

The empire of the Caesars rose in vision to the Prophet of Babylon, as **"a beast dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; having great iron teeth which devoured and brake in pieces."**

But what has Rome, with her sister kingdom, Greece,- the two old-world representatives of power, alike physical and intellectual, what have they done in solving the urgent problems of aching humanity? Nothing.

Even in the higher domain of intellect, they only give, in one awful sense, the demonstration of

knowledge being "power;" by shewing how mere intellectual greatness may be allied with moral weakness, mental capacity with spiritual degradation.

Christianity introduced a new element of power, after tempest, earthquake, and fire had proved insufficient.

"Caesar and Alexander," said one of the skeptic great ones of modern ages, "conquered by arms,- JESUS CHRIST conquered by love."

In the Roman catacombs, above which had thundered the tramp of these same victorious armies of martial Rome, there is carved, here and there, an image of the good Shepherd, carrying in His loving embrace the sheep that had wandered: underneath is the Latin inscription,- *"By this I conquer!"*

The legions just referred to and their garlanded victors have left behind them no movement of enduring goodness;- nothing did they, to dry the tears, or soothe the sorrows, or tame and curb the passions of mankind. But the Gospel of that good Shepherd **"who gave His life for the sheep,"** has not uttered thus in vain its blessed words of peace and good will to men.

There is no speech nor language where that silent voice has not been heard; its line has gone through all the earth, and its words unto the end of the world;- purifying, soothing, comforting, [181] elevating, regenerating, wherever its blessed principles have been diffused, and its healing influences have penetrated;- the true panacea for the evils of fevered, sin-stricken humanity;- the winged messenger of mercy, carrying the olive-branch of peace around the globe!

That day shall come, blessed be GOD, to our earth:- the din of earthquake - war and whirlwind - passion is not to last for ever.

The fitful moanings of the night-blast are the precursors of a brighter morning than has ever yet arisen upon the nations. And, what is dearer to us, as members of the Church of CHRIST, all her fierce contentions and fiery trials shall yet issue in rest and deliverance.

Emblem after emblem of trouble and wrath and vengeance passed before the eye of the Prophet.

At length came the whisperings of the voice of peace! He was thereby taught, that though manifold troubles were coming upon the Israelitish nation, there should be deliverance at last. So shall it also be with the Church in her militant state,- now rocked in storms, cradled in tempests, cast into a 'furnace of fire;- there is a day of tranquillity at hand. Her Lord is soon to let His voice of love be heard; then these elements of wrath shall be hushed for ever, and **"the days of her mourning shall be ended."**

While the scene in this passage of Elijah's life is full of lessons to the believer, are there no lessons of admonition and warning for the sinner? Yes, GOD is thereby telling each one, who may now be resisting Him, how manifold are the means He employs to bring to Himself:

- the terrors of the law,
- the sweet and melting tones of the Gospel;

- rousing providences,
- startling dispensations,
- sick-beds and death-beds. [182]

The King of terrors in tempest-form passes by, sweeping down the treasured memory of years, and leaving behind him a blighted and blackened wilderness.

At other times, the Lord speaks by the gentle voice of prosperity;

- by the blessings He pours into your cup,
- by the tender voice of His own Word and Spirit,
- calling upon you as weary and heavy laden to come and find rest for your souls.

What could He have done more for you than He has done?

Look back on the past!

Is not the picture presented, in this passage of the Prophet's life, the expressive symbol of the many ways Elijah's GOD has taken to arrest your souls and lead you to repentance?

Can it be that all have failed?

That judgments and warnings, love and mercy, have all been powerless to bring you to the Tishbite's place, with the mantle of humility around you, owning the combined greatness, and glory, and tenderness of a forbearing GOD?

Solemn is the word in these text; ponder it and remember it,- "**The Lord passed by!**"

GOD is "passing;" soon He will be "passed" altogether; your means and privileges at an end, the day of grace fled, and fled for ever.

It is an awful thought, that there is a time coming, when this wondrous appliance of power, and warning, and love, with some, will be irrecoverably gone; and they - self-destroyers and self-destroyed - left to brood over lost and forfeited opportunities, in the dark, gloomy Horeb-cave of irremediable despair!

"**What doest thou here!**" is the question GOD puts to every careless sinner.

"**What doest thou here!**" - still in thy sins, still unawakened, unconverted, unsanctified, unsaved.

He hath "**passed by**" thee again and again;- awaking earnest thoughts of repentance; but where are they?

Fugitive impressions; like the voice of [183] the retiring thunder, growing fainter and fainter; or, like the wake of the vessel, leaving no trace behind it of its course.

"Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord!" Go! remembering that **"there is forgiveness with Him, that He may be feared."** **"With the Lord there is mercy and plenteous redemption!"**

Go! remembering that but for the bleeding, dying love of the great Surety, there could have been nothing for you, but the earthquake and tempest and fire,- the winged symbols of vengeance. **"For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest . . . But ye are come . . . to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."**

Blessed be GOD for this secure refuge-cave;- this glorious **"shelter,"** - where we can flee from the sweep of the descending storm! Wrapping ourselves in the mantle of Redeeming righteousness, we can gaze on the symbols of blended power and mercy, of terror and love. Yes, safe in our trust on the Rock of Ages, we can go forth and **'stand on the mount'** - exulting in the sublime assurance,- **"A Man shall be as an hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of waters in a dry place, and as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."** [184] [page 185 left blank]

¹ *"The scene of the address to Elijah is now localized in the secluded plain immediately below the highest point of Gebel-Mousa, marked by the broken chapel, and by the solitary cypress. There, or at Serbal, may equally be found 'the cave;' the only indication by which the sacred narrative identifies the spot. There, or at Serbal, equally may have passed before him the vision in which the wind rent the granite mountains, and broke in pieces the cliffs." the "word," observes the same writer, "rendered rocks, is 'Sela,' not 'Tzur.' It may be difficult to determine the relative meaning of the two words. But it is almost certain, that, of the two, 'Sela,' like our word 'cliff,' is the grander and more abrupt feature." "The name 'Sela,' is the same as that by which, in later times, the place now called Petra was designated." - Sinai and Palestine, pp. 47, 94.*

"One or two chapels I passed at different halting places. Then came the fine hollow or basin more than half way up the hill, in the midst of which stands the old cypress, called Elijah's tree; hard by which there is a well or circular pond containing a little water. The chapel of that prophet is also shown here. It is out of this mountain wady that the rugged top of Jebel-Mousa rises like a cone out of the hollow of some vast crater . . . We saw the 'great and terrible wilderness' around us . . . No green spot, no tree, no flower, no rill, no lake, but dark-brown ridges, red peaks, like pyramids of solid fire. No rounded hillocks or soft mountain curves such as one sees even in the ruggedest of home-scenes - but monstrous and misshapen cliffs, rising tier above tier, and surmounted here and there by some spire - like summits, serrated for miles into rugged grandeur, and grooved from head to foot by the winter torrents that had swept down like bursting waterspouts, tearing their naked loins, and cutting into the very veins and sinews of the fiery rock - 'a land of darkness, as darkness itself; and of the shadow of death without any order, and where the light is as darkness.' "-Bonar's Desert of Sinai.

² Hambleton.

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