

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 5

LIGHTS AND SHADOWS

"And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him. And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee. O thou man of GOD! art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son! And he said unto her, Give me thy son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into a loft where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. And he cried unto the Lord, and said, O Lord my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son! And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the Lord, and said, O Lord my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again. And the Lord heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, See, thy son liveth. And the woman said to Elijah, Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth." (I Kings 17:17-24.

"BEHOLD, I HAVE REFINED THEE, BUT NOT WITH SILVER; I HAVE CHOSEN THEE IN THE FURNACE OF AFFLICTION." (Isaiah 48:10) [70]

IN our last chapter we left Elijah under the roof of the widow of Zarephath. The famine was still raging amid the thousands around. But as each morning's sun rose on the inmates of this tranquil home, lo, the barrel and the cruse which the evening meal seemed to have exhausted were again replenished. GOD's mercies were **"new to them every morning, and His faithfulness every night."**

We can only venture to surmise how the Prophet's hours, in this secluded dwelling, would be spent.

We can follow him in thought, as betimes, perchance, he wandered up the rocky ridges which flanked the town, gazing now on the everlasting snows of Hermon, now on the wood-crowned top of Tabor; thus beholding both **"Tabor and Hermon" "rejoicing in God's name."** Or, as at other times, he would wander along the shores of "the great and wide sea," in adoring contemplation of Him who taketh up the waters in the hollow of His hand, and who **"giveth the sea His decree."**

Yet again, when the barrel had yielded its evening supply, and the lamp had been lighted from

the unfailing oil-cruse, we can picture him unfolding to these two children of Pagan Phoenicia, the name and works and divine character of the GOD of Israel;- dwelling on the glorious promise spoken to the fathers, but in the blessings of which all the families of the earth were to participate.

We can picture him narrating [71] to them the eventful scenes in his national annals:

- Egypt
- the exodus
- the wilderness
- the conquest of Canaan
- the wonders of the old prophetic age
- the splendour of the reigns of David and Solomon.

We can think, perhaps, of Prophet and widow and child joining their voices together in the psalms of the great Hebrew minstrel,- many of them so applicable to their own circumstances and experience: "**Happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God; which made Heaven and earth, the sea, and all that therein is; which keepeth truth for ever; which executeth judgment for the oppressed; which giveth food to the hungry . . . The Lord preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widow.**"

Or, more appropriate still in that heathen Tyrian home:- "**And the daughter of Tyre shall be there with a gift; even the rich among the people shall entreat thy favour. Instead of thy fathers shall be thy children, whom thou mayest make princes in all the earth. I will make thy name to be remembered in all generations: therefore shall the people praise thee for ever and ever!**"

We have every reason to believe that these two heathen-born Phoenicians - mother and child - would, under the training of the Hebrew stranger, be brought to a saving knowledge of divine truth. Whilst led to see that Baal was a dumb, insensate idol, they would be taught also to love and reverence that GOD who had vouchsafed deliverance in the hour of their extremity, and for soul as well as body, learn to offer the prayer- "**Give us this day our daily bread.**"

Moreover, "**that church in the house**" forms a significant incident in sacred story, prefigurative of Gospel times. Suggestive surely was [72] the fact of a messenger of Heaven, a seer of Israel, being sent to a home in distant Phoenicia to unfold to heathen hearts the way of salvation.

In this sense **Elijah occupies the illustrious position of a first missionary to the Gentiles**; - bequeathing by his example to the Church of the future - the Church of our own age - a lesson of the duty which we owe to our benighted brethren in pagan lands, when, in obedience to the commission of its Great Head, the heralds of the cross go forth into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.

But a dark season is at hand for that lowly home at Zarephath.

Perhaps it was with this widow, as with many among us still:- in her state of comparative prosperity,- of exemption, at all events, from the pressure of famine so severely felt all around,-

she may have been beginning to forget the hand which was filling her empty cupboard, and warding off want from her dwelling.

Miraculously fed from day to day - seeing the barrel and the cruse each morning recruited with the needed supply,- she may have begun to feel too confidently secure;- that her "**mountain was standing strong**;" - and that she might safely calculate on a permanent immunity from the inroads of trial.

How apt are we, after a season of long-continued blessing - unbroken prosperity,- to indulge in this spirit of boastful independence: taking our daily comforts - food - health - friends - children, as matters of course. We may see in the case of others,- these strong pillars - those "beautiful rods," - bowed and broken;- but our inmost thought and feeling is, "I am all secure - I need not fear!" So may have meditated the Sarepta widow.

And the last trial she would ever [73] have anticipated, would probably be the very one that was in store for her.

With appalling suddenness, the little life, the light of her dwelling,- is extinguished! "**There is no breath left in him.**" Since this loved and only child had been given back to her from the gates of famine and death, we may imagine her heart-strings had twined more tenderly than ever around him; he was every day growing up more of a companion and solace to her,- a pledge of unspeakable blessing in her latter years - when his arms would toil for her, and his prayers would comfort her, and his hands at last would close her eyes in death.

Sad, indeed, that that one lone star which twinkled in her firmament should be quenched.

Better it had been if, two years ago, his sun had gone down in opening day, than have so mournful a setting now. His being spared only to be taken, seemed a cruel mocking of her grief and tears. All her hopes and joys perished in that hour of woe.

- she could bear to see the barrel of meal yielding a diminished supply,
- she could endure to look on an empty, unrefilled cruse
- but to gaze on that withered flower, lying cold and lifeless in her bosom,
- to lose HIM, this was death indeed!

We cannot, perhaps, wonder that for a time, faith, and patience, and submission, were tempted to give way.

In the bitterness of her bereft soul, she thus upbraids the Prophet, "**What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? Art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son!**" The words were a cutting reflection on Elijah, as well as an insinuation against Elijah's GOD. It was as if she had said, "What have I done to provoke at thy hands so terrible a calamity? Is this thy recompense and requital [74] for sheltering thy defenseless head? In pity, I gave thee welcome to my humble roof. Have these been thine answered prayers for thy benefactress? Has thy GOD come, in this fearful retributive sense, to be the 'Judge of the widow?' Hast thou come, a wolf in sheep's clothing, to slay my son!"

How striking is the contrast between this agony of her impassioned grief and the calm composure manifested when she first met Elijah. Then, her child's death was equally imminent, and threatened, too, under a more terrible form. Her words on that occasion, in speaking of partaking with him of her last morsel, were these, "**That we may eat it and die.**"

She had familiarized herself with the approach of the last enemy: it was the passive, silent, submission of blank despair. Now, however, it was "sudden death," - death unexpected - death when she was handling the full cup.

It was her gourd withering, not by a process of slow, gradual decay - drooping leaf by leaf; but it was, as with Jonah, the luxuriant plant - coiled fresh and beauteous round her evening bower - becoming, in a night, a mass of blighted, withered leaves.

In the words of the patriarch of Ur, "**The morning was even as the shadow of death.**"

Nor can we fail to admire Elijah's conduct in the trying circumstances. We know to what course his natural character would have impelled him. Hurt at the unkind and unjust reflection - his fiery nature might have prompted him to retaliate.

He might, with an angry word, have answered the ungenerous suspicion breathed by that broken heart. But there is no syllable of recrimination or resentment.

He says nothing (as he might have done) about the blessing he had been, and brought, to her household.

He [75] makes no reference to the barrel and the cruse beside them, the silent witnesses of GOD's mercy and goodness.

Deeply touched at the impressive sight of death - and, perhaps, with a tender love for the youthful victim - he makes kind allowance for the anguish of the childless widow. Saying, "**Give me thy son,**" he takes the cold marble, the dead body, in his arms, and carries it to his own couch.

In Eastern dwellings in these times, - as at the present day, - there was generally a room higher than the rest of the building, called "*alliyeh*", or, as it is here translated, "**loft**," where strangers and guests were accommodated.

In the better class of houses, it was regarded as the place of honour.

To this upper room, Elijah bears the lifeless child. That quiet chamber echoes to the voice of impassioned prayer. The Prophet, though he had dissembled and controlled his feelings before the sorrowing mother, evidently felt keenly the severity of the blow. He dreaded lest the dealings of his GOD might be misjudged by that crushed mourner, and "**he cried unto the Lord, and said, O Lord my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son!**"

Laying the corpse upon the bed, he stretched himself upon it, - not for the purpose of imparting,

as some have thought, natural warmth to revive and quicken the dormant physical energies - but rather, it would seem, to communicate the quickening power of GOD. ¹

He knew that He who had "**brought the evil**" could alone remove it.

Three times, as he overlaid the dead body, did the importunate cry ascend, "O Lord, my God, I pray thee let this child's soul come into him again!"

- The prayer is heard;
- the limbs begin to move;
- the eye [76] dilates;
- the pulse beats.
- Back comes the departed spirit.

"The Prophet of Fire" has rekindled the cold ashes on this desolated hearth; and carrying in his arms the living trophy of GOD's goodness, he hushes the sobs of the mother with the joyful announcement-- "**See, thy son liveth!**"

Her tears are dried. Her murmurings cease. Her faith in Israel's Jehovah is confirmed. "**Now**" - is the utterance of her bounding heart- "**by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth.**"

From this touching and suggestive episode in the Prophet's history, we may gather, as one out of many practical lessons, *that bereavement is not necessarily a Divine judgment on account of any special sin*. The widow, in the first moments of her grief, as she sat with her dead son upon her lap - the hot tears coursing down her cheek - was led to form the hasty conclusion, that GOD had sent her this heavy chastisement as a rebuke and retribution for some previous transgression. "**Art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance?**"

Many, we know, in the season of bereavement are apt to draw a similar unwarranted deduction;- saying to themselves what Job's unfeeling friends reproachfully addressed to him, as they pointed to the miserable bed of dust and ashes on which he lay- "**Such, surely, are the dwellings of the wicked; and this is the place of him that knoweth not God.**"

But we may thus often misinterpret the reason and motive of the Divine procedure. Our Lord, in one of His great miracles - curing the blind man at the temple gate - declared emphatically, in opposition to the false and gratuitous assumption of the Pharisees, that it was in consequence of no sin either of [77] the sufferer or his parents that he had been doomed to grope his way in darkness at noontide, but "**that the works of God might be made manifest in him.**"

Let us not, therefore, hastily surmise when GOD at times sees meet to empty the chairs and hush the loved voices of our households, that some specific sin must have evoked that special judgment and drawn forth the arrow from the Almighty's quiver. At the very moment when the darkness of death was shadowing the home of Bethany, "**Jesus,**" we read, "**loved Martha, Mary, and Lazarus.**"

We may farther learn from the incident we have been considering, *that no amount of good*

works, or of active service in the cause of GOD, will exempt us from trial.

This widow had rendered the greatest benefit which the Church of Christ at that age could receive, by affording shelter to its most valued servant and defender, the great Prophet of Heaven. Yet she was smitten.

Her generous pity and kindness to GOD's vice-regent could not shield her from the assaults of trial!

It becomes us, whatever be the Divine dealings, never to ask with the voice of complaint and querulous upbraiding, "**If the Lord be with us, why hath all this befallen us?**" No good deeds or lofty virtues, or self-denying services, will purchase for us immunity from His righteous ordination, that through much tribulation we must enter into the kingdom. Whatever be our lot or portion, be it ours to "**rejoice with trembling.**"

The vessel best manned and equipped may strike on the sunken rock, as well as the meanest and most unseaworthy craft. Nay, GOD's most favoured saints are often put in the foremost ranks of chastisement. Upon the most fruit-bearing trees of His [78] garden He often uses His pruning-knife.

Trial, in its varied forms, has ever been employed by Him as a powerful means of leading to deeper convictions of sin, as well as a salutary quickener of spiritual graces.

He knows what discipline is best fitted to draw the soul to Himself; and often does He shew that none is so effectual as that which was employed in this home at Zarephath - snapping the ties which bind us to the creature - disuniting us from earthly to bind us to heavenly things.

How many can tell - "I date my first deep sense of sin,- my first lively apprehension of CHRIST and of Divine realities,- to the hour when my dwelling was rifled of its cherished treasures. I should have been to this moment sunk in the sleep of death, had He not roused me from my perilous dream, and taken husband or wife, brother or sister or child!"

This, however, reminds us of *the deep mystery there is in many of GOD's providential dispensations*. Amid all the homes of that region, who would have expected that the one to be so terribly smitten, was that which had, for two years, kindly screened the head of the expatriated Prophet of Israel.

Surely, we might think, if there be one dwelling more than another secure from the assaults of the dread invader, it will be that of the widow of Sarepta, and of the hope and solace of her declining years, who, if spared, might be spared to be an honoured instrument in the defence and maintenance of the true religion. ²

And yet, behold, the desire of her eyes and the delight of her heart taken away by a stroke![79]

- How often are we baffled and confounded by similar dealings;- useless lives spared, and useful lives taken.

- Decayed scaffoldings, crumbling props remaining, and the strong and vigorous, the virtuous

and useful, swept down in a moment!

There is no key now to these dark dispensations. Many a weeping eye cannot read them through blinding tears. But the day is coming when we shall read them;- when they shall be luminous with love.

Earth may not, as in the case of the widow of Phoenicia, give us back our dead;- no prophet's voice can reanimate the silent ashes,- no anguish of prayer recall the winged spirit. But we joyfully believe the day is coming when we shall write under every mystic providence, "**He hath done all things well.**"

Yes, bereaved ones, ye shall no more weep over early graves, when ye yourselves pass upwards to the realms of glory, and hear from your loved ones as they are waiting to greet you. at the door of Heaven, that by an early death they were "**taken away from the evil to come.**"

Meanwhile let us rejoice, like Elijah, in the assurance, that "**the Lord reigneth;**" - that all bereavements and chastisements are His appointments;- "**Thou**" (the Prophet says, addressing his GOD in prayer)- "**THOU**" (the living Jehovah) "**hast brought this evil.**"

Oh comforting thought! enough to dry all tears and silence all murmurings - "Is there evil in the city," in the cottage, in the palace,- is there evil which blights some unknown poor man's dwelling,- is there evil which clothes a nation in mourning, "**and the Lord hath not done it?**"

The narrative farther exhibits, what we have already had occasion to note in the Prophet's life, and to which we shall [80] have frequent cause to revert,- the energy and power of prayer.

Not when he supplicates that Heaven should seal up its rains and dews from a whole nation,- not when on Carmel, as we shall find him ere long, invoking discomfiture on Baal and his priests,- is his prayer more earnest than now, in this lowly dwelling, when not the lives of thousands, but the life of one little child, is the subject of his intercession.

He seems, indeed, to have felt personally deeply moved under this sudden bereavement.

The strong, heroic, brave man could bear with equanimity any ills affecting himself, but he was stung to the quick under the imputation of his benefactress. He could not brook the allegation of bringing evil on the home of one who had opened her door to a friendless stranger. His prayer is an urgent appeal to GOD - (we had almost said a bold remonstrance) - as a just and merciful and righteous Being. "It cannot be, Lord," he seems to say; "Thou canst not suffer this reproach to descend on me and on Thy great Name! Thou, who hast made the widow's cause Thine own, oh, recompense not thus her kindness to me! Let not this heathen woman say, as she points to her childless home and buried treasure, "**Where is now thy God?**"

We can imagine the Tishbite pacing up and down his little chamber in importunate, impassioned prayer,- but yet with no doubt as to the result of his intercession. It was a mighty demand, indeed, for a mortal to make,- a request that had no previous parallel in praying lips. It was nothing short of this,- that unassailable Death be stormed in his own strongholds;- that the iron crown be plucked from the head of the King of terrors.

When Elijah does manifest faith, it is always of the noblest type. He would doubtless now revert [81] his life-motto,- the first utterance of his prophetic mission - "**the LORD liveth.**"

Confiding in the "**El Shaddai,**" he feels confident that He who gave him his brook at Cherith, will restore this more sacred living brook which had been so suddenly dried in its earthly channel. Strong in faith, giving glory to GOD, he proceeds to the couch where the lifeless child lay, and to the act of awakening. Once more he stands before us as delineated by James, "the righteous man" bearing the glorious testimony as to the "**availing,**" "**much availing power**" - of "**effectual fervent prayer!**"

Finally, we have here a glimpse given us of the doctrine of the Resurrection.

This was a truth dimly unfolded in Old Testament times. Its full revelation was reserved for Him who, under a more glorious economy, "**abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light.**" As the gladdening words sounded in the mother's ears, "**See, thy son liveth!**"

Not only was that widow herself taught that the GOD of Elijah had a power which no Baal ever had, in imparting life the still ashes,- reanimating the cold clay, and putting it into the rayless eyes; but it was a parable to the Jewish Church of that great Gospel disclosure, that there is a day coming "when all that are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live."

Nay, more; from the fact which is expressly recorded in the inspired narrative, that Elijah brought down the living child from the upper chamber into the house, "and delivered him to his mother," we have the precious thought suggested, under a significant figure, that in that glorious resurrection-morning friends will be reunited to friends;- there will be undying reunions of the departed in the [82] Church of the glorified;- mothers restored to the embrace of children, and lost little ones given back to their parents!

How will the happiness of that day of complete triumph be augmented and enhanced, as death-divided relatives, relinked in bonds of purified earthly affection and love, will be able to exclaim to one another, See, my son! my parent! my brother! my long-lost one!- see, HE LIVETH?[83]

¹ See Keil, *in loco*.

² According to a Jewish tradition, as quoted by Jerome, this boy became the servant who afterwards accompanied Elijah, and finally became the Prophet Jonah. - See Smith's Dictionary of The Bible.

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