

# ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

F. W. Krummacher, D. D.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### GROWTH IN GRACE

We know how much depends upon the hands into which a new-born infant comes, and how greatly its health and vigor in afterlife is influenced by the treatment it receives in its tenderest age. This is true also of new-born babes in a spiritual sense. It is no unimportant consideration to whose superintendence they are entrusted. How many go haltingly all their days through being placed under perverted guidance!

A religious party exists in the midst of us, which, because it does not comprehend the doctrine of sin and atonement in the apostolic sense, has no part in the blessed privilege of serving the Lord in gathering and bringing home the sheep of his fold. No icy heart melts under their teaching; no resurrection of the dry bones takes place under their ministry; yet is that party remarkable for its zeal to extend and increase itself, although it can only do so by building its wood, hay, and stubble on another man's foundation.

The important work of awakening, and of conversion, it leaves to others. It does not begin its labors amongst the dry bones, but only where the stream of new life has already found its way; neither can it exculpate itself, with Paul, from the charge of entering upon other men's labors. II Corinthians 10:15. Under its withering influence many a tender plant has pined away, and many a young and hopeful tree has been blasted.

In connection with this subject, we intend, in the course of our present meditation, to notice the character of genuine practical Christianity.

**“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 2:16-18).**

**I. Elisha now finds himself among the sons of the prophets, doubtless with his heart deeply affected by what he had witnessed and experienced beyond Jordan, as well as in crossing it the second time**

Endued with a double portion of Elijah's spirit, and destined to do even greater works than his predecessor, his character appears, nevertheless, not to have been immediately comprehended by the mourning sons of the prophets, however sincerely they venerated and loved him, and submitted themselves to him as their new teacher.

They could not, all at once, consider their departed master as fully replaced by Elisha; much less that in the husbandman from Abelmeholah, an Elijah, even of a superior order, was presented to them by the Lord! Nor was this to be wondered at, seeing it was perfectly natural that the dazzling powers of Elijah should affect them more than the less imposing appearance of an unassuming brotherly Elisha.

The abstracted gravity of the Tishbite seems to have corresponded far more with the natural ideas of human greatness than the condescending affability of his humble successor. Elisha appeared rather as an instance of the glory of man through Divine endowment; whereas the appearance of Elisha seemed to commend the greatness of God's grace in human weakness. Hence we wonder not that the sons of the prophets did not at once duly appreciate Elijah's invaluable substitute.

From similar causes the disciples of John the Baptist were slow to perceive that Jesus was greater than his precursor clothed with camel's hair in the wilderness, who seemed to them to carry with him more of the appearance of an ambassador from heaven than the gentle and affable Friend of publicans and sinners. The ministry of the Baptist would, also, at a superficial view, commend itself to those whose minds were not entirely freed from a legal disposition to establish their own righteousness; they would naturally regard it as the most attractive form of piety, and as most suited to their own 'necessities.

The Baptist himself would appear to such persons as a sort of perfect man entirely abstracted from the fashion of this world; and the works of reformation which he enjoined would be numbered up in a tangible sum total. But Jesus, on the contrary, appearing in the greatest simplicity, not withdrawing from the customary forms of life, describing his kingdom as not, coming with observation; and insisting, first of all, on secret submission of the heart; promising, moreover, nothing of human glory to his disciples, and enjoining upon them the despised and neglected virtues of humility and love—was in the eyes of the careless world in general, and of the self-righteous in particular, "**without form or comeliness,**" and there was "**No beauty in him**" to them, "**that they should desire him.**"

That the hearts of the sons of the prophets were principally with their departed master, is evident enough from the urgent request they made to their new teacher as soon as he had arrived at Jericho. "**Behold,**" said they unto him, perhaps with tears, "**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, of into some valley.**"

There is something ambiguous in these words. What did these worthy persons mean? Did they not know, by Divine communication, that he was that day to be taken from them? Certainly they knew it; but it is evident that the manner of his removal had not been revealed to them. They might, therefore, suppose either that God had removed Elijah to some solitary place, in order afterwards to take him to himself, or that he was received into Paradise only as it regarded his soul, but that his lifeless corpse might still be lying exposed in the wilderness. Perhaps they thought of the death of Moses, who, in the same region, on the top of Pisgah, was taken away in a mysterious, distinguished and blissful manner, but whose body was secretly buried by the Lord.

But whatever were their thoughts, their intention manifested ardent love which could hardly believe he was really gone. It is also evident, from the urgency of their request, that they regarded the loss of their master as irreparable, and with all the high esteem they cherished for his successor, were far from believing that he could fill up the enormous breach.

It would have been easy for Elisha, to whom such thoughts and feelings of theirs could not well be unperceived, to have taught them something different. He could have said to them, "I am come to you with messages and information, such as you have never heard from the lips of Elijah. I have facts to relate to you concerning the love of God to man, which have been hitherto unknown to the world at large, and will fill you with adoring wonder." But Elisha does not appear at this time to have taken a single step towards securing to himself such estimation.

He was above those sensibilities, which, upon the slightest appearance of disregard, are apt to affect us like the sting of a scorpion! Doubtless it was with sincere satisfaction that he witnessed the love and veneration with which the sons of the prophets adhered to their departed father; and was not vain enough to prefer his own honor in their esteem to the wisdom which dictated his silence, for the present, as to what he had witnessed beyond Jordan, and which suggested a more convenient season for his strange and delightful communications.

Though we cannot fully explain why Elisha withheld from the sons of the prophets the account of Elijah's miraculous ascension, we cannot doubt that he had the wisest and best reasons for so doing. As a prudent steward of God's mysteries, he appears to have considered the capacities and wants of those whom he had to deal with, and to have reserved such matters for their proper occasion. Hence, though the sons of the prophets were increasingly urgent to obtain his consent to the sending out of fifty brethren in search of their departed master, all this did not induce him to disclose the secret.

Their urgency was at length so great that he was ashamed at their importunity, that is, he was embarrassed and at a loss what to say to them. But he preferred yielding to their ill-advised purpose, and letting them go, rather than betray his precious secret before the time. It could do them no harm to convince themselves that neither their master nor his mortal remains were to be found any longer upon earth. By this means they would be the more disposed afterwards to credit the intelligence of his corporeal ascension. So they went forth, and searched for three days together through the wilderness country. But their journey proved a fruitless toil, and they returned to Jericho downcast and weary.

The only benefit they obtained by their laborious search, was the gentle but cutting, and we may hope salutary reproof of their master, **“Did I not say unto you, Go not!” “Give instruction to a wise man and he will be yet wiser”** (Proverbs 9:9).

Sometimes we see it necessary to comply with the foolish wishes of wayward but beloved children that they may learn, perhaps, by painful experience. And this is even exemplified, to our sorrow, in spiritual as well as temporal matters. Thus, how difficult it is to persuade some, that the righteousness which avails in the sight of God is quite near to them—that Jesus Christ is nigh unto them, with all his righteousness to bestow on them, if they only give themselves up entirely to him; and yet will they still forget and undervalue him, and all the while think well of themselves, and thus virtually seek justification before God in their own persons, instead of seeking it heartily in Christ. What then remains for us at last, but to say, **“Well, then, go to your own broken cisterns!”**

They may thus, for a while, torment themselves with the righteousness of the law, which only worketh wrath; and thus may learn by experience that they have chosen a path of peril, bankruptcy and ruin—where there is no life, no progress, to reward their pains. They may then return to us with a trembling conscience, and welcome the confounding inquiry, “Did we not say unto you, Go not?” and thus Christ r become precious to them, and the Gospel glad dings indeed!

## **II. Elisha did not consider the sons of the prophets to be yet in a state of preparation to receive his wonderful communications**

This reminds us here, to say a few words concerning GROWTH IN THE GRACE AND KNOWLEDGE OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST.

Paul, in his epistle to the Philippians, the third chapter, and the twelfth and following verses, says, **“Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”**

This is the way in which the true Christian will think of himself: **“Not as though I had already attained;”** consequently, he will, with the apostle, follow after an increasing conformity to Christ; and he will never forget that this is the object for which he has been apprehended by Christ Jesus.

Let us notice, then, that wherever there is real spiritual life there is progress in that life, from one state of knowledge and improvement to another. **“Be ye therefore renewed in the spirit of your minds,”** is the language of Scripture; and the fact in real Christians corresponds to it; for they can say, **“Though our outward man perish, yet our inward man is renewed day by day.”**

Think, moreover, how the truth of this statement is confirmed by such a man as the apostle Paul, saying, **“Not as though I had already attained.”**

Remember that this was the language of one who could also say, **“I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me”** (Galatians 2:20); who could also say, **“Who shall separate me from the love of Christ?”** (Romans 8:35); who could say, **“Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample”** (Philippians 3:17).

Here then is one who, at the very time that he was, with respect to the church militant, one of the brightest stars in Christ’s right hand, Revelation 1:20, freely and openly confesses that he had not already attained; and even repeats it with greater emphasis again, **“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended.”**

It is true, he is not speaking of what he is in point of justification before God, through faith in the righteousness of Christ; for he plainly teaches that the righteousness of Christ, laid hold of by faith, fully justifies us; and hence he could say, **“Being justified by faith, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ;”** **“It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth?”**

And in another place, **“Christ by his one offering hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”** But the apostle, in the passages we have been noticing, is desirous continually to see the life of his faith in Christ more and more manifested in the improved state of his heart and life. To appear, therefore, self-complacent and self-satisfied with our attainments, betrays ignorance of Christ, and want of faith.

But, alas! How many are there among us who appear to suppose that they have **“already attained.”**

Let us take as an instance, *spiritual knowledge*. There are many who are well acquainted with the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel, and are perhaps able to defend them by argument, and have their minds and memories stored with no small number of texts of Scripture, and pious psalms and hymns; we converse with such persons, and are glad to see them thus furnished.

But a year afterwards we converse with them again, and find them just the same. Two years elapse, and we come into contact with them again, but still no progress can be perceived—till at length the sight of them reminds us of a piece of woodwork, carved in the form of a tree, rather than a living production of nature, for there are no fresh shoots nor any foliage to be seen; on the contrary, the very same modes of speech, the same limited views and sentiments upon every point—no enlarged expansion of the inward horizon, not a single addition to the treasury of Christian knowledge.

“But,” say you, “what need we know more than we do know? Ah, there it is! You have completed the circle of your knowledge; and in this respect, as you suppose, you are already perfect, and have already attained.

But this is an indication of spiritual sickness. For if your souls were in health, and prospering, you would say with Paul, **“Not that I have already attained:”** you would be sensible of the imperfection of your knowledge.

You would believe that thousands of precious things still lay hidden from you in the Scriptures; you would investigate the holy writings with increasing interest; you would continually find new glories whilst perusing the Testament of your Mediator; and when we see you from time to time, we should hear you exclaim, "O what precious things I have afresh discovered in my Bible! What a new and precious light has been given to me upon this or that subject! What new and delightful views have I obtained of the glory and excellency of my blessed Redeemer!"

And the more you thus grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the more valuable will the Scriptures become to you, and the more sensibly will you be convinced that you might continue to search in this mine all your life, without exhausting it of the half of its treasures; and the more decidedly will you say with Paul, "**Not that I have already attained;**" but will give so much the more diligence to search further and further into the inexhaustible riches of Christ.

Worse than self-satisfaction in Christian knowledge, is that stagnation of spiritual life which some betray by saying, "My sins were forgiven me; at such and such a time I received the assurance of it; and I know that the gifts and calling of God are without repentance!"

The individual leads henceforth what is called a Christian life, performs his daily devotions, and supposes that everything is done, and that he has reached his aim. But was not Paul fully assured of his forgiveness and election? And yet he says, "**Not as though I had already attained.**"

We cannot too carefully remember, that wherever spiritual health is enjoyed, the inward life is in continual progress. The child of heaven, the new creature, endeavors after the stature of a man, after "**the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.**" There is, then, no end to its improvement. The life of faith in Christ is an increasing abiding in him as its element. Hence there is less narrowness of mind, more love, and humility, more circumspection, more uniform zeal.

One word more upon our "**Not having yet attained.**" For Paul says, "**I count all thing but loss, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is by the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.**"

Here, then we perceive that the righteousness of faith ought to be continually the aim and prize to which as believers we are to "**reach forth;**" I say, continually, and not merely at the commencement of our Christian course. And why are we to reach

Surely in order to enjoy it, to appropriate it, and to be invigorated, by the belief of it, to active love for Christ and for all his brethren; and consequently to walk as He walked, and in perpetually doing good to men, both temporally and spiritually. And this requires perpetual self-denial and exertion on our part. It requires what the apostle calls "**reaching forth unto the things which are before.**" For surely, we cannot be ignorant, that there are many hindrances to our attainment of this vigorous state of personal Christianity. To name only that single hindrance, our natural reluctance to rely simply on the merits and strength of our Divine Surety: is not this enough to awaken a holy jealousy against ourselves, and a vigilant spirit of prayer and diligence?

We are prone so to forget the freeness of the grace of justification before God, through the merits of the Redeemer, as to fall back in some degree upon the covenant of works. We are apt to imagine that some particular degree of holiness must first be attained, before we can presume to rejoice in the free forgiveness of all our sins, and our reinstatement in the divine favor; whereas, it is entirely through our Lord Jesus Christ that God justifieth the ungodly. Forasmuch, then, as our whole peace, comfort, and strength depend primarily on our heartfelt belief of what we are and have in Christ Jesus, surely we have need of constantly directing our endeavors after a full apprehension and heartfelt experience of the inestimable worth of Christ to our souls. For this is the only way to obtain complete victory over indwelling sin; and it is the main motive to adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things.

Faith in the word of God concerning Christ our Saviour, is the healthful element in which a Christian spirit thrives. And how good is it always to remember, that while are endeavoring to apprehend the Word of God, are thus giving a proof that **“we are apprehended of Christ Jesus,”** as Paul speaks. What a blessing is it always to feel that every desire after him is owing to his own previous love toward us, and to his gracious interposition on our behalf: and that each Christian should speak and think of him for himself, as the Saviour who loved me, and gave himself for me!

Ever then let the wish and prayer of Moses, more and more, be ours: **“I beseech thee, show me thy glory!”**

Paul being thus apprehended of Christ, follows after, **“that he may apprehend that for which also he is apprehended”** of him. And what is this which he so desires; but that, with every increasing experience that in the Lord Jesus he has all righteousness and strength, he may become more and more like him, by keeping his words, and conforming to his precepts and example; by entering more feelingly every into the spirit and meaning of all his gracious will and intentions. For his sake this holy apostle had thrown everything overboard which he once had counted gain.

All such things he had learned to account as loss for Christ, regarding them but as dung, **“that he might win Christ, and be found in him.”** He therefore forgets himself with respect to all that he is by nature and by birth, and all that he had acquired by his own efforts. He has nailed to the cross the image of his whole former man, and cast away his specious advantages as an offscouring from his sight.

He is willing to be nothing in his own eyes—nothing but a poor needy sinner: he is not afraid to behold his own natural condition, for he knows that grace excels and repairs it a thousand times; he is much more afraid of the insinuating fancies of his own virtues and good works, because he is, once for all, resolved never more to admit any other consolation into his heart than that Divine one, that he is justified and complete in Christ. Nay, he goes still further in forgetting self. For even that which he had already enjoyed and acquired, in his intercourse with the Lord, he regards among **“the things that are behind.”**

Many have been tempted to spiritual pride, or else to spiritual depression, by the thoughts of their past experience in a life of grace.

Some are very apt to indulge in melancholy recollections of a past and better state than that which they now enjoy. They laud the golden days of their espousals, the blessedness they knew when first they tasted that the Lord was gracious; and thus they stand like superannuated old men who have left the fairest periods of their life behind them, and having no definite hopes for the future, only occasionally begin again to warm a little when the past presents itself to their minds, and sends some sunny rays into their present wintry existence.

O how different does Paul appear in this respect! Still brighter attainments of the confidence and joy of faith are the objects he keeps perpetually in view. He presses forward towards the mark of the prize of our high calling in Christ Jesus. He cannot be satisfied with beholding only a few glimmering rays of the divine glory; or with anything short of being “**changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord**” (II Corinthians 3:18).

He saw the fairest days of His spiritual life lying not behind him but before him. Compared with what was yet to come, all the past was to him only as a foretaste; “**an earnest of the inheritance**” (Ephesians 1:14).

And now is not here a pattern for us that may well awaken our desire to grow in grace? What remains, then, but that we be found living and walking in the same spirit and in the same steps, that we may realize the same blessing, the same enjoyments? Put away, brethren, from yourself whatever hinders the free and joyful development of spiritual life within you.

But as this can only be done by the principles we have here endeavored to bring forward—as the love of Christ is the main stem, and faith in Christ is the root of all—keep these principles, beloved brethren, dearer to you than life itself.

May the God of peace and of all grace transplant every one of us from the sterile soil of a false legality and self-righteousness, to the fruitful and well-watered soil of his own Gospel; and under the breathing of his life-giving Spirit cause us to flourish, that we may be perfect in love, and “**grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ!**” Amen.

~ end of chapter 27 ~

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