

ELIJAH, THE PROPHET OF FIRE

By

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Chapter 17

AHAZIAH AND THE GOD OF EKRON

"And Ahaziah fell down through a lattice in his upper chamber that was in Samaria, and was sick: and he sent messengers, and said unto them, Go, enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron whether I shall recover of this disease. But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say unto them, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that ye go to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron? Now therefore thus saith the LORD, Thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die. And Elijah departed. And when the messengers turned back unto him, he said unto them, Why are ye now turned back? And they said unto him, There came a man up to meet us, and said unto us, Go, turn again unto the king that sent you, and say unto him, Thus saith the LORD, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that thou sendest to enquire of Baalzebub the god of Ekron? therefore thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die. And he said unto them, What manner of man was he which came up to meet you, and told you these words? And they answered him, He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said, It is Elijah the Tishbite." (II Kings 1:2-8)

"SHALL THE AXE BOAST ITSELF AGAINST HIM THAT HEWETH THEREWITH? OR SHALL THE SAW MAGNIFY ITSELF AGAINST HIM THAT SHAKETH IT? AS IF THE ROD SHOULD SHAKE ITSELF AGAINST THEM THAT LIFT IT UP, OR AS IF THE STAFF SHOULD LIFT UP ITSELF, AS IF IT WERE NO WOOD. THEREFORE SHALL THE LORD, THE LORD OF HOSTS, SEND AMONG HIS FAT ONES LEANNESS; AND UNDER HIS GLORY HE SHALL KINDLE A BURNING LIKE THE BURNING OF FIRE. AND THE LIGHT OF ISRAEL SHALL BE FOR A FIRE, AND HIS HOLY ONE FOR A FLAME: AND IT SHALL BURN AND DEVOUR HIS THORNS AND HIS BRIERS IN ONE DAY." (Isaiah 10:15-17. [252])

THE events which are to occupy our attention in this chapter have a peculiar interest, connected as they are with the last exercise of Elijah's prophetic office. As he had begun, so he terminates his career, - the messenger of wrath - the rebuker of iniquity- "*The Prophet of Fire*." Three or four years have elapsed since last we followed his lightning-track, - traced his fiery footsteps in Naboth's vineyard, speaking GOD's word before kings, and not being moved. We are again to find him standing by a kingly couch, - bold as a lion; - discharging the last arrows in his quiver at the same presumptuous idolatries against which he had uttered a life-long testimony.

Ahaziah, (son and successor of Ahab,) had inherited the heathen vices and followed the

idolatrous practices of his parents. Iniquity and irreligion are not always hereditary. But yet how often, by a righteous principle in the divine administration, are moral delinquency and impiety, with their bitter fruits, transmitted to children's children, - penalties of that great natural and divine law enforced and exemplified - **"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."**

Troubled was the two years' reign of this unworthy king of Israel, and unhappy and inglorious his sudden and premature death. From the brief passing notice in [253] the historical narrative, we are not warranted perhaps to stigmatize him as a coward. But we are led to surmise that dread of a violent death similar to his father's, had led him to shrink from the perils and calamities of war, - suffering as he did, a daring revolt of long subject Moab to pass without an effort to repair the disaster. Exemption, however, from the dangers of battle could not purchase immunity from the smaller ills of life. He had now shown him that GOD has other, and less glorious instruments of death than **"the spears of the mighty,"** and that, after all, the post of duty (not that of coward self-preservation) is the real post of safety.

Let us pause for a moment, and read, from the case of Ahaziah, the impressive lesson, that all our care, forethought, and caution, cannot ward off accident, calamity, and inexorable death. He who escaped the Syrian's venturous aim, was laid low by an accidental fall from the flat roof of his palace in Samaria. He had probably been leaning against the screen or balustrade cornman on the tops of Eastern dwellings:- when, overbalancing himself, the slender rail or lattice-work had given way. He fell on the tessellated pavement below, stunned and mangled, and he was carried to a couch from which he was never to rise.

Age, character, rank, position, station can afford no exemption from such casualties, and from the last terminating event of all, the universal doom of dust.

These royal robes encircled a body perishable as that of the meanest subject of his realm. The hand grasping that ivory sceptre, as well as the brawny arm of the strongest menial in his palace, must moulder to decay. **"Trust not in princes, nor in the son of [254] man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth. He returneth to his earth. In that very day his thoughts perish."**

Poor and rich - the beggar and the prince - the slave and his master, - Dives with his purple and gold, and Lazarus with his crumbs and rags, are on a level here. The path of glory and royalty, of greatness and power, **"leads but to the grave."**

- The lattice on which the strong man leans - the iron balustrade of full health and unbroken energy - may in a moment give way.
- Sudden accident or fever may in a few hours write Ichabod on a giant's strength.
- The touch of the old slave in the conqueror's triumphal car is never more needful than when we are moving through life charioted in comforts - wreathed with garlands - regaled with music.

"Remember thou art mortal!" None dare boast presumptuously of strong arm, and healthy cheek, and undimmed eye. It is by the mercy of GOD each one of us is preserved from the **"terror that flieth by night, and the arrow that flieth by day, from the pestilence that walketh in darkness, and from the destruction that wasteth at noonday!"**

And when accident or evil does overtake, it is our comfort to know that it is by His permission.

- It is He who puts the arrow on the bowman's string.
- It is He who loosens the balustrade in its sockets.
- It is He who makes the lightning leap from the clouds on its mortal errand.
- It is He who commissions the coral builders to rear the fatal reef.
- It is He who guides the roll of that destroying billow, that has swept a loved one from the deck into a watery grave.
- It is He who says, (and who can gainsay?) "**Thou shalt die, and not live.**"

"As thy soul liveth, verily there may be but a step between thee and death." [255]

Saddest of all is it, when accident and "sudden death" overtake, without due preparation for the great change.

Ah, yes, it is easy for us in health,

- when the world goes well;
- when life's cup is brimming,
- when the white sails are gleaming on its summer seas, and the music of its high holiday is resounding in our ears,

it is easy then to repress from thought the urgency of more solemn verities.

But wait till the pillow of pain receives the aching, recumbent head,

- wait till the curtains are drawn, and the room darkened, and that music is exchanged for the muffled bell, and the suppressed whisper, and noiseless footfall,
- wait till the solemn apprehension for the first time steals over the spirit, that the sand-glass is running out, life's grains diminishing, and that awful hour which we have evaded, dreaded, tampered with, shrunk from, has come at last;

How solemn the mockery to try then to give to GOD the dregs and remnants of a worn existence and a withered love! How sad then to begin for the first time to utter the lamentation, "**He weakened my strength in the way; He shortened my days. I said, O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days!**"

How much nobler, wiser, happier - to anticipate the necessities of that inevitable hour, that whether our summons shall come by the fall from the lattice, or the gradual sinking and wasting of strength, whether by sudden accident, or by the gradual crumbling of the earthly framework, - we may be ready, in calm composure, to breathe the saying of the dying patriarch, "**I have waited for thy salvation, O God.**"

Ahaziah was thus suddenly prostrated in the very midst of life - while manhood was yet in its glory. We are not [256] indeed led to infer from the narrative, that there were at first any dangerous symptoms in his illness. It was sent and intended as a timeous warning - a seasonable remonstrance.

Had he listened to the Divine voice, - or, like Manasseh in his affliction, had he "**besought the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers,**" - or, like Hezekiah in his sore sickness, turned his face toward the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, - he might have been raised up to prove for years a blessing to his people, and a monument of saving mercy.

We almost expect and hope, indeed, in reading the opening words of the story, to find a royal penitent, in the extremity of his mental anguish, recognizing the chastisement of the GOD he had long despised, sending messengers to summon the great Tishbite prophet to his sick-bed, that he might put forth on his behalf his "**effectual, fervent prayers.**"

Elijah's name and person and achievements must have been thoroughly familiar to him when he was yet a boy in the palace of Jezreel. He could not fail often and again to have seen, or, at all events, to have heard of that wild, rugged, stern Seer; nor, despite of his parents' hatred and scorn, could he be unimpressed with the story of his startling miracles and hero-deeds,

- how he had restored a poor woman's son at Zarephath - brought him back, not from sickness, but from the chambers of death,
- how, on the heights of that very Carmel on which he had gazed from his youth, he had brought down fire from Heaven, and discomfited the Baal-priests,
- and, last of all, he could not have forgotten how awfully verified had been the uttered judgments of this Herald of omnipotence regarding his own hapless father!

Every time his [257] eye fell on the now blighted and cursed vineyard of Naboth, would not the figure and mien of the Tishbite be before him, - his trumpet-voice sounding in his ears the solemn lesson, "**Who hath hardened himself against God, and prospered?**" Alas! how difficult it is, even in the midst of weightiest judgment, to overcome unbelief and prejudice!

Nursed in the abominable idolatries of Jezebel, he clings to the last to the lie of heathenism.

Messengers are summoned to his bed-side, with instructions to speed them to a well-known temple of Baal, to ascertain the issue of his trouble, whether he should recover of his disease.

This oracle was situated in Ekron, the most northerly of five cities of Philistia. The Sidonian god was here, under one of his manifold forms, worshipped as Baal-zebub - literally, "*The God of Flies*;" the supposed averter of the plague, common in the east, of swarming insects or gnats ¹

This temple at Ekron was the great rendezvous of heathen devotees. It was the Delphic oracle, or the Mecca of the Baal-worshippers.

Thousands from the surrounding provinces and countries congregated at the shrine of the tutelary god, to get cured of diseases, otherwise supposed to be incurable. He was the Phoenician AEsculapius, - the god of medicine, - reputed to have power over demoniacs as well as bodily diseases. Hence the reference in the Pharisees' accusation regarding CHRIST, "**He casteth out devils by Beelzebub.**"

In a literal sense, the parallel to Ahaziah's folly can in vain be sought now, in the changed aspects of the Church and the world.

The heathen oracles are dumb. The prince of darkness, who seems in former ages to have wielded, by [258] means of these incantations, a mysterious power, has now changed his ground. But yet how many, in another form, have their Ekrons still? - in life as well as in death trusting to some miserable, false confidences; instead of reposing in simple faith on the Lord GOD of Elijah, and on the work finished and consummated on the cross of Calvary.

Is it asked, What are these?

There is the Ekron of self-righteousness; - the pride of what they themselves have done, grounding their peace and confidence, alike for a living and a dying hour, on some miserable fragmentary virtues of their own - their charities and alms-deeds and moral lives, - the beggar proud of wearing some tinsel on his rags, the bankrupt proud of paying by farthings a debt which is accumulating by pounds and talents.

There is the Ekron of proud reason. Men will not trust the simple word of the living GOD. The Bible doctrines, or, it may be, subordinate facts, do not square with their predilections and prepossessions, - their preconceived opinions and prejudices, - and they send their imperious intellectual messengers to this haughty oracle.

Instead of coming to the divinely-authenticated page with the humble spirit of inquiry, "**How readest thou?**" - "**What saith the Scripture?**" their preliminary question is - 'Science, what thinkest thou? Philosophy, what thinkest thou?'

They come to the well of Sychar, not with the question, "**Give me to drink;**" but they must subject the water to chemical analysis; they must cast the Bible into their own earthly crucible, and subject it to their own earthly tests.

Happy they who stoop down like the beggar at the running stream and quench their thirst; asking no vain questions; feeling nothing, and caring for nothing, but the precious adaptation [259] of the water of life to their panting, needy souls.

Happy they, who, spiritually enlightened, are not curious to know the process of cautery or cure, but who, gazing on the glorious uncurtained beauties of the moral world, before hidden from their view, can tell, in the utterance of a simple faith, "**This one thing I know, that whereas once I was blind, now I see,**"

Moreover, are there not many who make shipwreck of their peace and comfort by involving themselves needlessly in speculative questions, - profound transcendental doctrinal enigmas - with which they have no concern?

As Ahaziah seems not to inquire how he was to recover, but if he was to recover, so how many there are who, like him, perplex themselves with the same question, in a spiritual sense;

- Am I ordained to be raised from the death of trespasses and sins?

- Am I among the number of the elect?
- Has God, by a predestined decree, placed me among the saved?
- Have I His seal on my forehead?

Vain dreamers! seeking to penetrate into the arcana of Heaven - "**the secret things which belong only to the Lord our God**" - instead of giving themselves to the great practical work of applying the sovereign remedy of the Gospel, already provided and already in their offer.

But to return to the narrative.

The messengers of Ahaziah are now on their way - speeding along the plain of Esdraelon - charged to hasten with fleet foot to relieve the feverish anxieties of their lord.

Laden, doubtless, with golden bribes and offerings, they expect, to retrace their steps with a propitious response from the flattering oracle. But who is this, when the king's message demands such haste, [260] that dares to thwart them in their mission, and to cross their path?

What living oracle can this be, who seems to arrest in a moment that band of royal delegates, and send them back trembling and panic - stricken to the couch of their dying king? At that couch they stand: - and the monarch, with startled looks, seeing probably their trepidation, interrogates them as to the cause of this strange and speedy return.

With the old smouldering passion kindling up in his languid eye, he demands, as if half guessing the dreaded truth, "**Why are ye now turned back!**"

The reason was soon told: a wild, strange, unearthly being,- with hairy cloak, ² and flowing beard, and leathern girdle, had stood in their way; and, with a voice of thunder, in the name of Jehovah, had exclaimed: "**Go, turn again unto the king that sent you, and say unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Is it not because there is not a God in Israel, that thou sendest to inquire of Baal-zebub the god of Ekron? Therefore thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die.**"

We gather from the narrative, that these stranger Phoenician servants had either never personally seen 'the evil genius' of Ahab's house; or, at all events, they had not recognized the Prophet-messenger of the GOD of Israel, in that singular personage, who had met them on their way, like a lion from the dens of Carmel.

But the king does not for a moment hesitate in recognizing their description. He exclaims, "**It is Elijah the Tishbite!**" In [261] his inmost soul, though he may try to conceal his guilty fears, we almost hear him echoing his father's words, "**Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?**"

It is yet another of the Prophet's sudden appearances.

He comes upon them like a flash of lightning; utters with thrilling brevity his solemn message, and then retires; for the description of the dramatic scene closes with the words, "**And he departed.**"

Bold, brave man! Here he was once more, "**jealous for the Lord of hosts.**"

Deeper affront could not have been offered to the Jehovah before whom he stood, than was perpetrated by the reigning monarch, - in ignoring the GOD of the Hebrew nation in the eyes of the heathen, - going down to Egypt for help.

It was a base violation of the fundamental law of the theocracy, "**Thou shalt have no other gods before me.**" "**In Judah is God known; his name is great in Israel. In Salem also is his tabernacle, and his dwelling place in Zion.**" "**Confounded be all they that worship graven images.**"

As certainly as Saul's wild, heathenish, debasing mission to the cave of the enchantress at Endor sealed his doom, so does this impious insult of the son of Ahab seal his - it was doing guilty homage to an idol-god, in the face of almost unparalleled proofs of Jehovah's supremacy.

Never, since the epoch of the exodus, had wonders and miracles been more profusely displayed than now, through the instrumentality of Elijah; and yet this apostate from the faith of his fathers, who had witnessed GOD's arm thus made bare, sends, in the very hour of righteous judgment and rebuke, the officers of his court to consult in his behalf with the miserable fly-god of Ekron, in Philistia. "**Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of [262] Askelon, lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph.**" "**If we have forgotten the name of our God, or stretched out our hands to a strange god, shall not God search this out?**"

There is yet one other incident worthy of note in this passage, ere we close the present chapter.

It is the appearance of the august messenger - One mightier than Elijah - "Stronger" than" THE STRONG" - who sends him to meet the servants of the king of Samaria. He is called here "**the Angel of the Lord,**" or rather, "the Angel, THE LORD;" "the Angel Jehovah."

None other can he be than the Lord JESUS CHRIST Himself, - the great covenant Angel; the same Divine Personage, who, anticipating as it were the period of His incarnation, had appeared to Abraham at Mamre, to Jacob at Peniel, and to Gideon at Ophrah.

This idolatrous king of covenant Israel was sending to solicit the intercessions of heathen Baal - defiling his throne, - desecrating his country's altars, - like Nadab and Abihu, seeking to offer strange fire. The great future Intercessor of His Church arrests the messengers on their insulting errand; and shows, that if He be rejected as strong to save, He will manifest, in righteous severity, that He is strong to smite!

Terrible thought! to forfeit, by our own incorrigible sins, the intercessions of Him who alone can save us, - to have His rejected blood pleading, not for us, but against us - oh, whilst we see the life of Israel's monarch fast ebbing, as he lies on his royal couch at Samaria, - when we think, moreover, of his own daring impiety, as that which sealed his doom and hurried him to an early grave,- how solemnly do we seem to listen to the words of that insulted covenant Angel: "**Their [263] sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god. Their drink-offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips.**"

Yet, may we not, too, in this very sentence of death uttered by the angel Jehovah, derive a comforting reflection?

Is it no solace to think that life and death are in the hands of that Angel-God; that what appears to us to be the most wayward and capricious of occurrences - the departure of a human being from this world - is directly under His sovereign control; that He gives the lease of life; and, when He sees meet, revokes the grant?

He speaks indeed, in the case of Ahaziah, in righteous wrath; but, to each of His own people, as the divine Saviour - the Brother-man, He says, not in anger or judgment, but in love and faithfulness - "**Thou shalt not come down from that bed on which thou art gone up, but shalt surely die.**"

Death has no terrors when it comes thus as a message from death's great Conqueror. As He sent Elijah - the minister of flaming fire - with the tidings of doom to the chamber of the wicked; so does He send angels - glorious beings, who delight to do His pleasure - to the death-beds of His saints, to bear their disembodied spirits upward on wings of light and love to heavenly mansions. "**Father, I will,**" (is His last and closing intercessory prayer in behalf of every member of the Church on earth,) "**that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory.**" [264] [Page 265 left blank]

¹ See *Kiel*, in loco.

² *Kiel* throws out the remark, that the hairy garment of the Prophet was worn also "as a symbol of sorrow for the sins of the people, and the divine judgments thereby incurred."

~ end of chapter 17 ~
