

ELIJAH THE TISHBITE

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY

THE HOLY EMBASSY

“And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him. Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias” (Matthew 17:3-4).

Thus we stand again upon the holy mount around a solemn silence—before us the King in his beauty. We gladly yield up our minds to the contemplation of his glory, when, lo! a new appearance attracts our notice. There are three subjects which at present claim our attention:

- I. The heavenly embassy;
- II. Their converse with the Saviour;
- III. Simon Peter’s request.

I. The disciples stand in adoring astonishment, and in a kind of beatified contemplation of their glorified Master

But, all at once, new amazement overtakes them, for they behold two other personages beside the Lord Jesus; and who are they? The Saviour converses with these venerable strangers.

The disciples listen and find the one to be Moses, the other Elijah, possibly from hearing Jesus call them by their names. But how must this information have increased their astonishment!

They must have felt almost as if the earth had retreated from beneath their feet, and as if eternity had overtaken them unawares; for now they are certain that they behold, face to face, two happy citizens of the invisible world. One of them was now fifteen hundred years old, and yet fair and flourishing as a green palm tree in eternal youth. It is Moses himself that here stands before us, he that was king in Jeshurun, the man who esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he had respect to the recompense of the reward.

And as for the other, it is Elijah! Who, nearly a thousand years before ascended to heaven in the fiery chariot on the other side Jordan. Behold, he suddenly appears again in bodily form, in the country of his ancient conflicts; but, O, in what a different condition! How full of praise and raptured adoration within; how encircled with glory without! If he now called to mind the scenes of his former sufferings, how must they have appeared as the dreams of a night long fled!

Moses and Elias! How wonderful! For centuries they had been admitted into the more immediate presence of God; for centuries had the sabbatic peace of the upper world been their element. Through their hearts whole streams of bliss had already flowed, of which only scanty drops bedew this earth. What might not those messengers from heaven have told us! What new information might they have given us, respecting the invisible world.

But they are silent; probably for the same reason which obliged Paul also to withhold from us the description of “**the third heaven,**” into which was caught up, II Corinthians 12:2, &c. The strangely broken expressions which the apostle uses, when speaking upon this subject, show how much his heart was moved by the recollection of it. He seems struggling to express something, which he counts amongst the highest and holiest things that had ever been disclosed to him. He knows it was no dream, no play of imagination, but a real translation into paradise.

Where was he then, for he was away from the earth? Was it only in some blissful planet or star, from whence, like Moses upon Mount Nebo, he could “**behold the land that is very far off?**” (Isaiah 33:17) No; he had been in the very heart of that land: he had been in “**the third heaven.**” But as he gives us no description of that blissful place, so it may safely be said that his silence, implying his inability to describe what he had witnessed and experienced, is for us at present the best description of the glory of the third heaven.

Every attempt at description would entirely fail, both on account of the poverty of earthly language, and on account of the weakness of human capacity, and our want of powers of conception for such things. Indeed, to attempt to describe them, it would be necessary to dip the pencil in something that is terrestrial, however beautiful; and this would be to dip it only in gloomy shades.

Another circumstance, which may serve also to give us some idea of the glory which he saw in the realms above, is the ardent desire with which we afterwards behold him longing after those mansions of light. His conversation is henceforth in heaven. His hopes, his desires, his thoughts reside there, and the morning and evening song of his heart is, “**I have a desire to depart, and to be with Christ.**”

Death seems to him the most blessed messenger that could arrive; yes, death even in its most dreadful form; for he knows that when absent from the body he is present with the Lord. How joyfully does he now receive the cup of afflictions; “**For I reckon,**” he exultingly exclaims, “**that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.**”

- “**To me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.**”

- “**I count not my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my course with joy.**”

Thus, my brethren, has the apostle, who heard “**unspeakable words,**” animated us with expectations of paradise, which, the more strongly excite our longings after home, the less they are capable of being uttered in human language.

It is in this indirect manner also that the two heavenly persons on Tabor afford us cheering information being themselves a living epistle of the things of the world to come. How sweetly does their very appearance address itself to that faith which still trembles, weak and uncertain, over the tomb. What a satisfying evidence is it of our personal and perceptible identity in another state of existence!

And then the glory in which they now appear who were once so tempest-tossed; what a blessed testimony does this bear to us of complete **“victory”** over death, “through our Lord Jesus Christ!” (I Corinthians 15: 57) It is indeed true, that we have a greater witness of the other world than Moses and Elias. But as God has granted us these subordinate witnesses, let us thankfully receive them as the apostles of Christ.

Since the gate of Paradise was closed, heaven had scarcely ever visited earth in such a manner as here on the holy mount. What an assembly! The Son of eternal love clothed in majesty: before him the two dignified ambassadors from the city of God; beside them, Peter, James, and John, the pillars of the New Testament church; about them, doubtless, the holy angelic hosts; and within hearing; the voice of the Eternal Father, whom no eye hath seen nor can see.

Where on earth was ever such a gathering together as this? There had hitherto been wanting, even in the Paradise of these triumphant saints, the delight of saluting the King of all kings as a Brother and a Kinsman. Oh, to behold him now, whose day they had so long looked for! Him, by virtue of whose sufferings they had worn the crown so long beforehand! Him, the Lamb of God, whose sacrificial blood, so long before it was offered up, had blotted out their sins!

Surely a new heaven would disclose itself, even to them, in such a contemplation of their Messiah!

II. Here also is a striking representation of the and unity between the economy of the Old Testament and that of the New

Moses appears as the representative of the law; Elias, as the representative of the prophets. As such they humbly and adoringly draw near to Jesus.

The Law and the Prophets give witness to the Son of Mary. Such is the important meaning which we behold in this scene.

- **“Judah, indeed thou art he whom thy brethren shall praise.”**
- **“Thou art he,”** exclaims the Law, **“unto whom I as a schoolmaster would bring every man.”**
- **“Thou art he,”** say the Prophets, **“who wast the burden of our inspired song.”**

And when both Moses and Elias disappear in the radiance of the **“fairest of the children of men,”** that great truth stands embodied before us, that **“Christ is the end of the law, as well as of prophecy.”** Prophecy finds in him its fulfillment, for he is the substance of all the shadows.

The Law ceases from all its judgments, threatenings, and condemnations, as soon as it finds the sinner in Christ.

Moses and Elias, we read, conversed with the Lord. Attend a little! What kind of discourse was it which they carried on with him? Did they announce to him that a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, stood ready to carry him away from the gloomy scene of earthly conflict to his Father's house? No; the conversation is concerning a cross and a crown of thorns; an altar and its consuming flame.

“They spake of his decease, which he should accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31).

As envoys from the Eternal Majesty they audibly confirmed that it was the will of the Father, that of his own precious blood he should make atonement for sin; **“for without the shedding of blood there was no remission.”**

They impressed, in God's name, a new seal upon the ancient and eternal truth, that the partition wall which sinners had raised, could be broken down by no other means than by the power of his sufferings; that He, as the good Shepherd, could only ransom his sheep with the price of his own life. Such was the substance of the conversation on the holy mount.

We might almost imagine these blessed messengers trembling for the first time during a thousand years, at having to converse on such things with the Son of God. But they call his sufferings and death a decease; or exit, as if to comfort him with this expression; and they speak of the ACCOMPLISHMENT of this decease, or exit, as if they would present to his mind the prospect of his succeeding glory and joy.

III. The sublime interview between the Lord and the heavenly embassy is concluded

The glorified messengers are about to take their departure. But the three disciples, and especially Peter, naturally wished to have it otherwise; and, giving to his feelings, he exclaimed, for himself and his brethren, **“Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias.”**

Peter has been severely censured, in various ways, by some writers, for this exclamation. Of such censures we shall take no notice, for we regard him as free from all such imputations. His request appears to have proceeded, confused as he was, from right and holy motives. Was it not really good to be there? Did not the most spiritual joy flow there? And was not the King in his beauty there?

The unveiled face of Immanuel was there; in beholding which, even the inhabitants of heaven find their supreme delight. Their Lord's unspeakable condescension to sinners had never been displayed to them so clearly before. The glory of the Son of man had never been seen by them as now; neither had the love of the Father been so experienced as now. They felt themselves abundantly satisfied in the contemplation of all this.

They could have forgotten this earth altogether for the sake of it.

They wished to lengthen this incomparable moment, **“Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee!”**

“Lord, it is good to be here.” For where indeed is heaven? Is it not to be with Christ? Where he reveals himself fully to the soul. So then, our knowledge of him here **“in part,”** is indeed a part of heaven. What a lonely place in itself was this solitary mountain! But as soon as the disciples saw his glory, when he **“was transfigured before them,”** they might well say, **“It is good for us to be here.”**

There are some who are concerned to inquire what sort of an abode heaven is. But what need is there of such inquiries if we only can be present with the Lord? How much more needful, then, is it for us to inquire, whether He is ours, and we are his? He is verily our real heaven, and his nearness to us is our highest bliss.

How comfortable are words, **“It is good to be here!”** Whereas, under the old dispensation, it was said, **“How dreadful is this place!”** Genesis 28:17; and **“We shall surely die, because we have seen God.”** Judges, 13:22

“It is good to be here,” said Peter. How seldom is this expression heard among thousands, who, nevertheless, profess to belong to the New Testament church! Alas! but few know the true element of peace and joy, and fewer still endeavor to breathe perpetually in it.

“Lord, if thou wilt,” continues Peter, (which is the language, not of forwardness, but of submission,) **“let us make here three tabernacles;”** for whom? **“one for thee, and one for Moses, one for Elias.”**

He would have had then two these citizens of heaven to delay at least their return to Paradise. This was a hard thing to ask. Yet he seems to have taken it for granted that Moses and Elias would willingly tarry forever where Jesus was. It seems expressive of humility that the disciples do not think of building four only six, but of three; as much as to say, “We are willing to stand at a distance and listen;” for the question, Who should sit at Christ’s right hand, and who should sit at his left, in his kingdom? is not thought upon here. When we have a clear sight of the glory of Christ, our own pride lies in the dust. But perhaps their thought was to abide in the tabernacle intended for Jesus, for they would venture to enter there rather than into the others.

And how truly do the hearts of God’s children respond to this! A faithful man of God, well known to many of my hearers, said, in his last moments, the thought of having to pass, in the other world, through all the radiant ranks of angels and glorified saints, almost made him afraid; but upon recollecting that he should immediately behold his Saviour, his heart was at ease again, and he could depart with joy.

No tabernacles, however, were actually built upon the mount. The thick cloud soon hid Moses and Elias from their sight, and Jesus was left alone. The corn of wheat was first to fall into the ground and die, before it could bring forth fruit, John 12:24. They were to remember the vision for their own comfort, but to tell it to no man till after the Son of man should be risen from the dead.

Spiritually speaking, the tabernacle for whose delightful shelter Peter thus longed, could only be erected above the cross. The sacred pavilion, however, is now really erected in this vale of tears—a wondrous, glorious, and incomparable temple. Its pillars embrace a world. Its upper story reaches to the stars. Its walls are invincible as omnipotence. Though heaven and earth be shaken, yet its foundations shall stand and remain unmoved. The natural eye cannot see this temple. This wondrous building is visible only to the eye of faith. The light falls into this temple from above. There, no longer groping in the dark, we walk in the light of the seven-branched candlestick. It is no longer inquired in this temple, “**Wherewith shall I come before the Lord?**”

- Here we know of an offering that justifies the ungodly. There is no longer any room for the saying of Cain, “**My iniquity is greater than that I can bear**”, or, that it may be forgiven.”
- Here it is said, “**Where sin abounded, grace hath much more abounded.**”
- Here there is no longer any occasion for the exclamation, “**Let not God speak with us, lest we die!**”
- Here we learn exultingly to cry, “**Abba, Father!**” and to cast our cares, like children, on the Eternal God who careth for us.
- The robe, with which everyone here is clothed, is a robe of righteousness.
- The bread that is here broken to us, is the bread of that peace which passeth all understanding.
- The cup of blessing, of which we here partake, is a portion which no one taketh from us.
- The air which is breathed here, is the air of Paradise.
- The censer of prayer and intercession, kindled here, ascends as a sweet savor to the Lord.
- The songs which resound here, have for their burden, “I have obtained mercy!”
- The Preacher’s instructions this temple are, “**Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people.**”

If there be a happy abode under the sun, it is within this spiritual tabernacle. Happy are they that are in such a case, however poorly they may live as it respects the body! They need not envy kings upon their thrones, or the renowned of earth under their pavilions of honor. Verily, they are the happy ones who thus abide under the shadow of the Almighty, who are hidden in this pavilion, and in the secret of this dwelling-place, founded on the Rock of ages!

In other words, thou they may have to pass through great troubles, and to encounter great adversities in this life, they know whither their way conducts them. Verily, there is a reward for the righteous; there remaineth a rest for the people of God.

Who introduces us into this mansion of peace? One only who bears the key of David; He on whose worth the house is founded as on an eternal rock. He still stands at the gate ready to open it. O, supplicate his mercy! Rise not up from his feet until he has opened the door of his kingdom unto thee, and until thou also canst rejoice in him, as “**He that openeth, and no man shutteth; and that shutteth, and no man openeth.**” Amen.

~ end of chapter 30 ~

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